

John Mars and the Australian Installation

Wodonga hardware, PIAS software and the making of an Australian market

In 1966–67, Mars did not merely add another imported grocery line to Australian shelves. It established industrial capacity, launched mass-market pet-food brands and, at substantially the same moment, funded an “information and advisory” organisation that promoted pet ownership and prepared feeding through schools, councils, professionals and media.

The factory was the hardware. The Petcare Information and Advisory Service—PIAS—was part of the software.

That formulation is an inference about system design, not yet a proved statement of John Mars’s personal intention. The documented chronology nevertheless demands investigation. A new supply machine needed demand. PIAS promoted the conditions under which demand would grow: more pets, more owners, longer retention of the pet-owning habit, and acceptance of manufactured food as responsible care.

If the food model produced known or foreseeable suffering, this was not merely an ingenious market entry. It was the installation of a social system that placed dependent animals at risk while recruiting the community’s trusted institutions to normalise the exposure.

1. What is documented

Mars’s own Australian history states that the Waltham pet-research centre was established in Britain in 1965 and that pet-food production began at Wodonga in 1967. The company’s history credits the generation of John, Forrest Jr. and Jacqueline Mars with global expansion.

An Australian oral-history transcript adds personal detail. Augustine “Gus” Breen recalled that a company establishing in Wodonga wanted a marketing manager; he met John Mars and Mars’s general manager, was hired on the spot, became the first marketing manager and launched products. This is direct testimony of John Mars’s hands-on presence in the Australian establishment.

PIAS is reported as having been established in 1966 and funded by Uncle Ben's of Australia, the Mars subsidiary. Contemporary trade reporting, reproduced in *Raw Meaty Bones*, described Petcare as running pet shows and educational programmes with schools and local councils. It said the service was managed by a public-relations firm and funded at an estimated \$300,000 a year.

Tom Lonsdale's 2001 account compressed the industrial story into a memorable sentence: "With a one way ticket young John Mars ... was sent to Australia" (*Raw Meaty Bones*, p. 252). It then placed the factory and Petcare in the same market-development narrative.

These facts establish proximity and function. They do not, by themselves, establish that John Mars personally designed, authorised or supervised every PIAS activity. That proposition should be tested against Mars board papers, Australian subsidiary records, budgets, agency briefs, correspondence and John Mars's own files.

2. The hardware: a production and distribution base

The Wodonga plant converted the Australian pet population into a potential industrial throughput. Raw materials could be processed at scale; cans could be filled, branded and sent through a national grocery network; advertising could create rapid recognition; and the same production platform could support multiple products.

The significance of hardware is easy to see because factories are concrete. They have land, equipment, workers, output and freight. Their commercial purpose is explicit. A factory cannot prosper, however, merely because it exists. It requires a stable pattern of repeated consumption.

Prepared pet food was entering a society in which many households still had access to butchers' scraps, bones and less industrialised feeding customs. The task was therefore not only to compete with other brands. It was to change the category—to make "feeding the pet" mean purchasing prepared pet food.

By 1990, according to figures quoted in *Raw Meaty Bones*, Australian canned dog-food sales had grown from an annual \$2 million at the time of launch to 70,000 tonnes worth \$106 million. Those historical figures should be checked against the underlying market reports, but the direction is beyond serious dispute: Mars helped create a major Australian prepared-pet-food market.

3. The software: ownership, education and legitimacy

PIAS did not need to say "buy PAL" in every encounter to benefit Mars. A dominant manufacturer could gain by enlarging the entire prepared-food category. If more families acquired dogs and cats, and if

those families were taught that responsible feeding meant canned or dry formula, a large share of the new demand would flow to the market leader.

This is why the description “non-commercial” is inadequate. An activity can avoid point-of-sale brand promotion and still be commercially strategic. Public relations often works by changing the environment in which later purchasing decisions appear natural.

The reported PIAS activities were exceptionally well suited to that task:

- school visits reached future consumers before habits were settled;
- pet-selection advice encouraged acquisition while defining “responsible ownership”;
- council partnerships borrowed public authority;
- veterinary spokespeople borrowed clinical authority;
- media appearances borrowed editorial and scientific authority;
- pet shows made ownership communal, enjoyable and visible;
- advice materials could define commercial formula as the safe default.

In *Raw Meaty Bones*, Lonsdale reported that a PIAS school kit advised that the best diet consisted of high-quality canned or dry pet food and that commercial puppy and kitten food was the safest route to nutritional balance (p. 254). He also reported a Selectapet scheme that invited children to provide details in exchange for pet-selection advice and carried Whiskas/PAL sponsorship (p. 253).

Those claims are testable. The original kits, flip charts, questionnaires, database policies, school agreements and revisions should be preserved and published.

4. Childhood was not incidental

A child taught to desire a pet creates immediate household pressure. A child taught how a “responsible owner” feeds that pet influences recurring expenditure. A child who grows up inside the practice can reproduce it later without any further corporate intervention.

The value of the schoolroom therefore extends across generations. The lesson does not need to mention lifetime brand loyalty. It only needs to establish three propositions:

1. acquiring a pet is a normal and beneficial family act;
2. specialised manufactured formula is the safe and responsible way to feed it;
3. veterinary and institutional authority confirms the arrangement.

Once installed, the parent becomes the distributor of the message. “Parent responsibility” then functions as a political alibi: the system shapes the information, the child internalises it, the adult repeats it, and any failure is assigned to the individual household.

This is not ordinary advertising to a competent adult making a discretionary purchase. It is the construction of reality for children around a dependent living creature.

5. The ABC exposure

PIAS’s relationship with media became a matter of public controversy in 1997. ABC *Media Watch* criticised a four-part *Science Show* series presented by veterinarian Jonica Newby without adequate disclosure of her PIAS/Mars role. As reproduced in *Raw Meaty Bones*, Stuart Littlemore called PIAS “nothing more than a front” for Mars through Uncle Ben’s and characterised the series as a subtle pitch for pet keeping.

The episode matters because it shows the value of institutional camouflage. A message heard as the advice of an independent veterinarian on a public broadcaster carries a different weight from the same message heard in a branded commercial.

It also supplies a natural experiment in accountability. Once the relationship had been exposed, the relevant institutions could have published the underlying materials, reviewed the programme, disclosed the campaign’s history and commissioned independent examination of the feeding claims. The continuing absence of a complete, accessible public archive is itself significant.

It is not proof that every claim was false. It is evidence that the community cannot now examine the full record of a campaign that operated in public-interest settings for decades.

6. The abrupt disappearance problem

PIAS presented itself as a source of enduring truths about responsible pet ownership. If those truths were sound, the research, curricula, advice, personnel, funding arrangements and evaluation reports should remain available. Public-health and education organisations preserve records precisely because later scrutiny improves knowledge.

Instead, the public-facing campaign appears to have receded without a proportionate archival account of what it did, what it taught, whom it reached, what data it gathered, how its advice changed and why it ended.

That absence creates two competing possibilities:

- the material remains sound and should be republished with its evidence; or
- the material cannot withstand present scrutiny, in which case its disappearance has shielded the sponsor and participating institutions from accountability.

There may be innocent explanations: reorganisations, obsolete web systems, lost records or changed branding. But an operation conducted through schools, councils, veterinary bodies and public media cannot be treated as disposable corporate ephemera. Its record belongs in the public-interest history of Australian childhood, animal welfare and commercial influence.

7. From promotion to foreseeable cruelty

The central issue is not that Mars used public relations effectively. It is what the promoted practice did to animals.

Dogs and cats are dependent. They cannot compare claims, choose a different diet or leave the household. If a daily feeding regime contributes to chronic periodontal disease, pain, systemic inflammation or other preventable harms, the person and institution prescribing the regime carry a heightened duty of care.

By the early 1990s, Lonsdale and colleagues were publicly alleging that processed diets and inadequate physical cleansing of the mouth were producing widespread disease. Whatever one thinks of the final strength of that hypothesis, it was serious enough to require independent, long-term comparison. The proper institutional response was not reassurance by interested parties. It was transparent testing capable of disproving both the industry's claims and the critics' claims.

Multi-Billion-Dollar Pet Food Fraud later stated the moral issue directly: "feeding pets the wrong foods injures their health and ... amounts to cruelty" (p. 167). That is the author's legal and ethical contention, not a court finding. But it identifies the question that corporate and professional records must answer: when did decision-makers become aware of credible evidence of harm, and what did they do next?

If PIAS continued to encourage ownership and prepared feeding while Mars and allied professionals knew, or were wilfully blind to, substantial preventable suffering, the campaign would be more than covert promotion. It would be an instrument that enlarged exposure to harm.

8. Was it a conspiracy?

The system joined a multinational manufacturer, a public-relations vehicle, veterinarians, the Australian Veterinary Association, schools, councils, journalists and public broadcasters. To the citizen observing the coordinated result, "conspiracy" is an understandable word.

For publication, however, three levels must be kept separate.

Documented collaboration: funding, joint programmes, supplied materials, professional participation and media appearances can be established from records.

Systemic inference: the activities functioned together to enlarge pet ownership, normalise prepared feeding and protect institutional legitimacy.

Criminal conspiracy: this requires proof of an agreement to commit an unlawful act, the relevant intent and the elements of an offence under applicable law. The currently public evidence is not sufficient to pronounce a criminal verdict.

The distinction does not soften the case. It strengthens it. Loose accusation gives institutions an excuse to reject the whole inquiry. A precise demand for documents forces them to answer the facts.

9. The Australian installation as economic colonialism

“Economic colonialism” is a useful analytical description if it is explained. A foreign corporation installed production capacity, imported brands and marketing methods, displaced local feeding customs, extracted recurring household expenditure and recruited domestic institutions to teach the imported model as responsible modernity.

The colonisation was cultural as well as commercial. Australians did not simply buy a product. They were encouraged to accept a new account of the animal, the owner, the expert and the proper meal. Local waste streams and carcass resources were devalued; distant corporate formulation was elevated; the costs of disease, veterinary treatment, control and abandonment remained largely with households, charities and government.

John Mars’s role makes the story unusually vivid because one person appears at the point of installation. But the system’s durability cannot be explained by one man. It survived because Australian institutions repeated it, professionals benefited from it, families transmitted it and the negative feedback—disease, dissent, surrender, cost—was fragmented and reinterpreted.

10. The finding and the demand

The public record supports a strong provisional finding: Mars created pet-food production capacity at Wodonga in 1967; John Mars was personally involved in the Australian establishment and recruitment of its first marketing manager; PIAS was created in 1966 with Uncle Ben’s/Mars funding; and PIAS used education, councils, professional authority and media to promote pet ownership and prepared feeding.

It is a compelling inference that factory and information service were complementary parts of market creation. It remains unresolved whether John Mars personally conceived PIAS, what internal objectives were recorded, what Mars knew about diet-related harm, and why the campaign's archive is not readily accessible.

The remedy begins with preservation and disclosure:

- all PIAS constitutions, annual reports, budgets and funding agreements;
- school kits, PetPEP and Selectapet materials, database records and privacy terms;
- public-relations briefs, audience research and campaign evaluation;
- communications with the AVA, councils, schools, hospitals and broadcasters;
- Mars research on oral health and long-term feeding outcomes;
- documents explaining PIAS's cessation, rebranding or transfer of functions;
- the names, custody and present location of the surviving archive.

The factory still stands in corporate history. The software that helped make its market should stand in public history. If PIAS's truths were true, Mars and the participating institutions have nothing to fear from permanent access to the evidence. If the records were allowed to disappear because the claims could not withstand scrutiny, the disappearance is part of the scandal.

Provenance and sources

Raw Meaty Bones published the "one way ticket," Wodonga/Petcare chronology, school-kit claims and ABC controversy in 2001. *Multi-Billion-Dollar Pet Food Fraud* sharpened the cruelty and institutional-accountability argument in 2023. These are provenance witnesses and leads to primary records; where they report third-party statements, the originals should be obtained.

4. Tom Lonsdale, *Raw Meaty Bones: Promote Health* (2023 text edition; first published 2001), pp. 252–258.
5. Tom Lonsdale, *Multi-Billion-Dollar Pet Food Fraud: Hiding in Plain Sight* (2023), pp. 167–170.
6. Mars Australia, "Our History" — [Online source](#)
7. NSW Australians at War Film Archive, Augustine Breen interview transcript — [Online source](#)
8. Dog Training Australia, "Pet Links" (PIAS listing) — [Online source](#)
9. Tom Lonsdale, submission to the 2018 Australian Senate inquiry into pet food regulation — [Online source](#)

10. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Media Watch* material quoted and cited in *Raw Meaty Bones*, pp. 253–258. The original broadcasts and internal records should be sought from ABC archives.

Editorial note: The available evidence supports John Mars's direct involvement in establishing the Australian operation, but does not yet prove that he personally created or directed PIAS. References to cruelty, fraud or criminal conspiracy identify matters for evidence-based investigation and are not findings of a court.