
Inquiry Name: Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Submission for the Inquiry into the impact of animal rights activism on Victorian agriculture Sarah Mathias

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SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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While the shock, inconvenience, embarrassment and nervousness that farmers/business owners must feel at having their farm/business practices exposed, I cannot see that the creation of specific laws to target whistle blowers/animal rescuers is a democratic option (we do already have laws for trespass and theft).

I live in rural Victoria (on a small property) surrounded by larger working farms. Not one of these properties have had any interaction with rescuers/whistle blowers. What we have had is stock theft on a larger scale that the police have no ability to assist with. Both sheep and cattle have been taken by 'cattle rustlers'. That all this fuss is being made over people removing one or two animals, giving them care and attention (and from what I have seen from footage) vet care is a sad indictment on our community and society.

Undercover surveillance is a key tool when it comes to monitoring and enforcing animal protection laws because it exposes incidents that would not otherwise come to the attention of authorities. Surveillance footage – even when collected illegally – has the potential to be used in criminal prosecutions against individuals or corporations charged with animal cruelty. The enforcement of animal cruelty laws could be easily improved through the installation of compulsory CCTV cameras in all commercial animal facilities which would allow authorities to monitor and investigate all incidents of cruelty in farms and slaughterhouses. Also, an increase in government funding to regulatory authorities to monitor and enforce animal protection laws is needed.

Farms, individuals or corporations, found in violation of animal protection laws should not be permitted to hide behind a claim of invasion of privacy to avoid culpability.

According to the federal Department of Agriculture and Water Resources own 2019 report, the majority of Australians care about animal welfare. This very report found 95% of respondents were concerned about farm animal welfare and 91% wanted reforms addressing it. Perhaps we shouldn't be attempting to hone laws for specific groups and begin addressing the distressing facts these group s/individuals are uncovering.

Considering the disproportionate reporting of rescuers/whistle blowers actions on farms/businesses via our media, it isn't surprising to read that farmers are nervous. However, few seem to have bothered to consider the type of farms/businesses these rescuers/whistle blowers have targeted. They aren't small holdings who care for the animals, nor large well run farms with an understanding of animal husbandry and they aren't alternative market gardens who utilize/work with animals in a respectful manner. They are farms/businesses who practice obscene cruelty (which is often legal practice). Many farmers who claim to be fearful of rescuers/whistle blowers seem to be (willfully?) ignorant of the fact that many of these actions will have been organized after more traditional avenues of animal welfare reporting have been exhausted. They are farms/businesses that I keep reading the 'good' farmers claim to call out, (which considering the oft claimed 'few and far between', 'rouge' and 'illegal' practice justification by these same 'good' farmers makes me think they know very little of their own industry. Perhaps if they really did begin policing their own industry other people wouldn't feel the need to act).

No one really pays any attention to well run, high animal welfare farms. These actions by rescuers/whistle blowers are all aimed at these farms/businesses that other farmers claim to distance themselves from.

4. the civil or criminal liability of individuals and organizations who promote or organize participation in unauthorized animal activism activities;

I find this term of reference particularly concerning – it reads as 'Ag-gag'. That individuals or organizations would be prohibited in publishing (participating) the outcomes of 'unauthorized activities can only have negative consequences on our democratic and constitutional right to free political communication - a threat to public debate and the potential to underline our democracy.

'Ag-gag' laws in any form, under any guise, are concerning. I, as a consumer, WANT to know the reality of how my food and fiber was produced (and I don't just mean products coming from animals but also the working conditions of farm workers, to know that appropriate wage are being paid across the agricultural sector). I WANT to be able to make that informed, deliberate consumer choice. Until there is genuine transparency within the agricultural industry, discussing the gagging of whistle blowers and the agencies who assist in getting any information out to the public, is a dangerous area. Also, this term 'unauthorized'. Australia has a long and proud tradition of protest...of 'unauthorized actions. The freedoms we do enjoy are a direct result of this history. Within this history 'unauthorized actions took place out of necessity. As seems to be the case now. If there was nothing to expose, these events and actions would not be taking place. They would have no traction.

Do we all remember what the deputy prime minister and Nationals leader, Michael McCormack, said to Australian students considering protesting with The Climate Change Strike? “The children should be in school. They should be learning about Australian history...” if the students did research Australia’s protest history, they would learn that protest has been critical to so many social advances that we often now take for granted.

Protest shouldn't be pretty and it shouldn't (always) be sanctioned by the authorises. Whistle blowing is form of protest. It is holding up the mirror to the ugliest part of ourselves.

Protest is vital for our democracy. Australia has a proud protest history which has traveled along with a history of governments trying to suppress protest.

Our democracy exists beyond election day. Its enduring success rests on vital foundations like press freedom, the ability of charities and community groups to advocate freely, the rule of law and the right to protest. When governments chip away at our protest rights, they erode our democracy.

If Australia had transparency in our agricultural sector, truth in labeling legislation, CCTV in all slaughterhouses, if farm animals were covered by the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, (and perhaps the complete removal of factory farming) we as consumers could be making truly informed choices. That there seems to be such resistance from the agricultural industry supported by governments is disappointing. If we had an animal agricultural industry that was actually run with animal welfare as a high priority, we wouldn't be seeing rescues, whistle blowing or distressing (but vital) exposés. We also wouldn't be discussing the segmenting of our legal system with the idea of specific laws for a specific part of our

community (laws that already exist).

Thank you for reading and all the best

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File1:

File2:

File3: