

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of animal rights activism on Victorian agriculture

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 2019

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WITNESS

Associate Professor Carrie Freeman, Georgia State University (*via teleconference*).

The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. The Committee is hearing evidence today in relation to the Inquiry into the impact of animal rights activism on Victorian agriculture and the evidence is being recorded. I would just like to remind members of the public: please do not take any photos, and mobile phones should be on silent. Of course the media are welcome to take any photos.

Welcome to the public hearings of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

Before you start, Professor, I would like to ask you to say your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask you questions. Good morning from here and good evening to you. You are welcome.

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: I am Carrie Packwood Freeman. Would you like me to share my comments first and then you will ask me questions?

The CHAIR: Correct.

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Well, first of all I want to say you cannot see me, but I am wearing my Australia T-shirt; it has a flag on it. I have been fortunate to visit Australia twice, and I plan to go back for the Minding Animals conference at the University of Sydney in 2021, so I am pleased to give testimony today.

From what I understand, this all started because your Government was thinking of enacting what we call over here in the United States ag-gag laws, which further punish those who try to investigate activism practices and share evidence with the public, evidence that companies will not share. The ag-gag laws also punish those who are trying to help animals who are suffering in these agribusiness facilities. I think that is a misuse of government and that government should not be further enriching the powerful but rather protecting the vulnerable and defenceless—in this case, animals, although I do not really think animals are naturally vulnerable and defenceless; it is just that legally we put them in that vulnerable, precarious position. The government should be protecting animals from harm and suffering and really also seeing the public, the Australian public, as their number one stakeholder. Governments really should not be spending their time shielding for-profit companies that already have the law on their side, who have the legal right to do almost anything to make money off these sentient beings, because these individual animals who are stuck on farms do not have the same rights as you or I or even our dog or cat.

There are laws already that tend to favour agribusiness, companies in general and property owners—like, trespassing is already illegal, taking quote-unquote property is already illegal, and these animal individuals are belittled by being considered property and ultimately economic objects and commodities when really they have the same inherent value as any other living being, in my opinion.

We started off in the wrong direction in the USA, with some states instituting these ag-gag laws and our federal government even two years ago passed what they called an Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, so instead of stopping animal exploitation they call these industries enterprises, and then they demonise people trying to protect all animals and put them in the terrorism category. I think that is embarrassing.

It is also embarrassing for the agribusiness industry to do these ag-gag laws, because they are admitting that they have things to hide at a time when the trend in business and government ethics is for more openness, more transparency, more disclosure. And honestly, in the digital age, with WikiLeaks, there should not be an expectation that you can keep secrets anyway. I think it is also embarrassing for our politicians in the United States to show that there are unfair and undemocratic influences in industry lobbying over public sentiment, because public sentiment is overwhelmingly for animal welfare.

In the 21st century, which is an era of climate change, and the mass extinction of species, and given we know so much more about animal sentience and intelligence, I think it is shameful for governments to help further entrench factory farming conditions rather than using their power to promote socially and ecologically responsible practices that are progressive, not regressive. I think there is a lot of evidence that the world is moving towards sustainable, organic farming and a plant-based diet and even possibly cellular-based or what they call 'clean' meat. We need to move in this direction for ecological and even spiritual reasons. So government can help animal agribusiness transition into other business ventures and adapt to a new economy, find ways to make a living to make use of their land and their talents in ways that are ecological and healthy and non-violent.

I hope that Australia will do better than we are doing in the US. You could enact policies that ensure there are independent auditors who can assess and uphold mandatory standards for farmed animal welfare, which of course would not include intensive confinement and painful procedures. I think your department of agriculture might have some similarities to ours in the United States, where the department both promotes and polices agribusiness, which is obviously a conflict of interest that does not really make sense. So both of our countries really need an independent government agency that enforces federal animal welfare standards. And federal or nationwide animal welfare standards are good also because otherwise the part of the country that has the weakest provincial welfare laws will just end up with all the farms, then all the animals will still be miserable, the public will still be misled and your nation's reputation and self-image as a humane country will not be legitimate.

But overall I am impressed with Australia and New Zealand for their vibrant animal rights movement, including the animal rights scholars and academics. I think you have some of the best in the world, and it shows that people in Australia really do care about being kind to fellow animals and being a world leader. Public sentiment seems to be increasingly headed towards concern for ecological and animal protection issues as well as human rights issues. I definitely see it in the younger generation that I teach on college campuses. They are just shocked and upset when they see what goes on behind the curtains, because farming, or really any injustice that they see, is very upsetting to them.

One of the key places where environmental issues and human rights issues and animal protection issues come together is around animal agribusiness and fishing, so my next book proposes that social movements for human rights and animal rights and environmentalism all should work together to phase out factory farming and factory fishing and promote organic, plant-based food.

So in conclusion I want to say that activists and all types of social movements moving forward will continue to want to push this issue—it is not going away. They will likely continue to go undercover to get truthful information about the reality of these awful conditions where we are mass-producing and mass-killing animals. They are going to share that with the public in the news and via social media and documentaries. But if it was mandatory that CCTV cameras live streamed slaughterhouses and stockyards and the farming warehouses, then there would be less need for activists or journalists to go undercover in the first place; along with active government-enforcement of welfare laws. If all those things were in place, transparency would be greatly improved, and that ultimately would protect the workers too and ensure that no-one was breaking the law. It would also promote public dialogue and debate about whether the way we now raise and slaughter animals really reflects who we are and who we want to be as a nation and as a society. The philosopher Jacques Derrida predicted that factory farming will eventually get phased out because ultimately we will not be able to stand what it says about us as humans, how badly it reflects on our society and our self-image to mass-produce and mass-slaughter other sentient beings.

So this is the direction the world is headed—towards plant-based and non-violence and animal rights and human rights, and I hope that Australia will be a leader in the protection of the environment and humans and fellow animals. So that was the prepared comment that I have for you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor. I would like to ask members before they ask questions to state their name as well so that Professor Freeman knows who she is talking to. Professor, I know you mentioned the CCTV and other policies that government or industry could put in place to better enable community members to address their animal welfare concerns.

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Are there any other policies you recommend?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Well I think the main things were that there should be mandatory laws at a federal level related to standards, and these could be discussed among people in your nation for what they expect. There are all kinds of things on the books already like the five freedoms, and different organisations even in the UK talk about welfare standard benchmarks. And things that the public expect are already being done in farming, or what they would like to see, and there could even be rankings of—well that is more of a voluntary thing than a mandatory thing—but ranking where different farms stand in moving towards those standards, because I know sometimes you are going to need a few years to phase out some of the worst practices and the worst confinement and move towards something better. And then the CCTV for more transparency, there could even be stricter laws in terms of advertising and public relations in terms of the corporate communication about these issues so that they are not misleading to the public.

Mr FINN: Bernie Finn is my name, Professor. I am just wondering about the ultimate that you are after here. You have made some comments that have led us in a certain direction. Would you like to see the removal of animals altogether from the farming process, eventually? Would that be your ultimate goal?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Yes. I am certainly not a very powerful world leader, so I do not think you need to be scared of me, but yes—and I do not hide that as some kind of agenda that I should be ashamed of or anything, but I know I am unpopular from an economic standpoint—I do not feel we are entitled to use other sentient beings and enslave them for our own purposes and exploit them. And I think that is the direction that the world is going to go in. It may not be in my lifetime, but that is where our morality will eventually lead us. So do we want to be moving in that direction away from using and exploiting animals, or do we want to be further entrenching our society economically and relying on the exploitation of these other animals? I think we want to be moving towards freeing other animals and having a more nonviolent society.

Mr FINN: Is that the spiritual aspect that you refer to?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Yes I think so. I feel like what is happening is that when people see what is going on with the farming a lot of them start crying or they are outraged and they are disgusted. They want to eat the kinds of things their mum made—the kinds of things they are used to eating—but they do not want to kill anybody and they do not want it to be so disgusting and so gross and so violent. So I feel like the plant-based protein alternatives that are out there, if we make them more accessible then that is the kind of direction that most people are going to want to go to so that they feel kind of physically and mentally better about themselves. As well as the trend towards the cellular meats, some people call them clean meat, where they are going to be harvesting animal cells to grow meat in the future. There has been a lot of advances in that, and we are probably going to be moving away from growing flesh on animals—animals who have to have all kinds of inputs of food and then they have outputs of all kinds of urine and manure and they need all the slaughter. The whole thing does not make sense. It is cruel and it is a misuse of the resources. Obviously Australia does not have a lot of fresh water and so continuing to grow land animals really is not a good use of your precious water resources also.

Mr BARTON: Professor Freeman, Rod Barton here. Just from your experience in the US could you tell me about CCTVs in abattoirs and yards throughout the US? Is that the norm? Is it widely practised?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: It is not the norm, but if you did that, you would be forward thinking. You can get away with not doing it by saying, 'Oh, other people aren't doing it, so we don't have to do it either', or you can be a leader and say, 'You know, we're instituting this and then other countries are going to also follow'. So it is just something that I propose and I think makes sense. Certainly there are a lot of human rights abuses that go on in slaughterhouses, and they are also very dangerous places for people to work—and they are not a good place for women to work because of sexual harassment. There are just so many reasons actually to have cameras in there. But right now it is not mandated, and so that is why activists in Australia and the United States and all around the world are going undercover to be employed there or going in at night and trespassing with a camera and taking pictures. And every time they come out, they come out with stuff that the public is grossed out by. I guess it is only natural that the process of mass producing sentient beings and then mass slaughtering them is not pretty.

Mr LIMBRICK: My name is David Limbrick. Thank you, Professor Freeman, for your testimony. I would like to follow on from one of the questions from one of the other members earlier about the elimination of animals for agricultural purposes. Is this something that you believe should be done through the choices of consumers, or is this something that requires government to intervene in and eventually prohibit?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: That is a good question. When I was going into academia and was trying to figure out which discipline I would go into—should I teach law? Should I teach philosophy?—I decided to teach media because I really like examining activism from the pop cultural realm and the news and information realm. So my feeling about social change is that the more informed people are through the media about what is happening in the world and the injustices that are taking place, and the more people talk about it and we reframe and re-evaluate what are values are—prioritise our values in society—then we will kind of get together and naturally start changing our shopping habits and start pressuring our political leaders to make these changes.

I do think that if some of it comes first culturally and then it starts changing, which it already obviously has—our consumer purchases—and then it also becomes a little bit more economically feasible to phase out some of these things as people are demanding other types of products, and that might open up a space where politicians feel brave enough to make some of these changes and that they have got enough backing from the public.

But one of the challenges, and probably you face it in Australia—I know we face it here—is that the government often does not do what the public really wants; it does what corporations want because of the whole election process and how you go about funding elections. It is hard to beat the industry lobby. So as much as the public demands that they do not like what is going on with factory farming, it seems like the government continues to do nothing about it. Something is going to give in that process, because that is not right and that is not democratic. It is showing the weakness of our so-called democratic institutions, with too much money in politics, unfortunately.

Mr LIMBRICK: So Professor Freeman, if we look at that in terms of the state prohibiting some of these activities, or all of them, in Australia, as in America and throughout the world, we have lots of cultures in our society. We are a multicultural society, and food is an intrinsic part of many cultures' beliefs. In fact in some cultures it is part of their religious beliefs. If the state prohibits these activities, should the state also prohibit these cultures, or should there be exemptions?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Because all of this will happen slowly—it is not going to happen dramatically—some of that will get worked out. But I am somebody who is not a moral relativist 100 per cent, so I do not think that just because it is a cultural practice of somebody or some religion—if it is harming somebody else who is innocent, who does not have a choice, then that is wrong. But other types of cultural practices that are not harmful to anybody—sure, go ahead and do them. But I think that as a nation and as a world we really have to have standards about not letting somebody use their culture as an excuse to discriminate against somebody and use them. But some of those differences will work out because all of this will kind of get phased out realistically over time. And one of the ways it starts, I think, is with the public just at least knowing more about the way we are raising animals and demanding at the very least that we get the animals out of cages and that we do not have all these painful procedures without anaesthesia. Maybe we kill fewer animals and raise fewer animals to begin with because we start taxing the meat and dairy products. Or maybe we make those products actually reflect the cost of their harm to society—all the environmental damage and all the resources and the greenhouse gases and all these things—so that the prices of the products go up and people do not buy them as much and they move towards plenty of other plant-based foods or plant-based meat alternatives.

So there are a lot of other changes that will happen before we can kind of slam down animal rights as being just not friendly to multiculturalism. There needs to be a fair and democratic process in the way these things are happening. I think we are just not having as much of a national conversation because so much of the corporate advertising just kind of misleads people and a lot of times the news media is not covering these issues enough. And actually the only way that a lot of times you can get them to cover it is to go undercover in these places to then have video to put on the news to even start a conversation about how we treat animals in the first place, and even ask the question: should we even be using them? And that is in food and in research labs and in all the different ways that we are using them. I do think future generations will not just accept this mass tyranny over fellow animals and say, 'Oh well, that's the way we've always done it, so that's fine'. People of all cultures will

start to question these things and have more debates. And then the government needs to help facilitate those debates and be open to where those public discussions lead.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Professor, for your testimony here this morning. My name is Andy Meddick. You mentioned in your submission the difference between actual real conditions on animal farms and slaughterhouses—that they are so far removed from what the general public think farming is. I assume that they are very much the same regardless of whether it is in Australia or the United States and that you also believe that that could possibly constitute consumer fraud. What do you think would help to solve that particular problem?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Since I teach and study media ethics I like to think about these things. Certainly we need more honesty in advertising about these products that are taken from animals. You might be familiar with the food journalist Michael Pollan. He calls this genre of meat and dairy advertising ‘supermarket pastoral’, and it is just pretty much fake, where they misrepresent this pastoral landscape which is not the way we raise most animals anymore.

With another media professor I published these guidelines at animalsandmedia.org, and they are media style guidelines. There are guidelines for advertisers and PR practitioners to be more respectful and accurate about animal representation. One of the things I say is, ‘Don’t humane-wash’—in other words, green washing. Do not humane-wash and misrepresent how well the animals are treated if you are never admitting to the emotional and physical suffering that they do endure plenty of times in their life.

In advertising one way to go about it is just do not talk about the animal at all; just talk about how the product tastes or some supposed nutritional benefits or recipes or something—that is one thing. But if you are going to talk about the animals who produce the eggs and whose bodies you are selling, if you are showcasing their face or their body, then you should show individuals that are actually owned by that facility and actual employees that work there, not just kind of actors and idealised representations. And if the animals spend a lot of time indoors, then they should be shown indoors and not just in green pastures. If they are separated from their babies, they should not be shown with their babies, and so forth.

Now, I do think that a corporate website is maybe a little bit different from advertising. That is more public relations. That is where most transparency could happen, and there could be web pages that are on animal welfare issues and talking about how industries can improve—not just saying, ‘Oh, we do this and this and this’ and ignoring all the things that are painful and grotesque in what happens to the animals but actually talking about how you can improve.

And in social media these industries also could honestly answer consumer questions and concerns and not censor things on their websites. Let people actually say, ‘Oh, I heard you separate the mothers from the babies and the mothers are crying on a dairy farm. Is that true?’, or ‘I heard that you immediately grind up male chicks because they’re not useful in the egg industry, so they are immediately killed. Is that true?’. So they can go ahead and be honest about the things that are happening that are ugly realities.

In fact I have a book chapter coming out with a PR professor. It is going to be in a business ethics book and is on the corporate disclosure initiative for animal welfare. So it is under the guidelines of corporate social responsibility. So it will be a database, in this case a voluntary one, where corporations report on how animals are used or how even wild animals are impacted by their business practices. They can even report any lobbying efforts they do that are against animal welfare or environmental policy, because a lot of that is really hidden from the public; while corporations are acting like they care about animals, behind the scenes they are lobbying politicians to make sure that they do not have to take care of their animals.

So the aim is to practice ethical public relations where you are creating this dialogue with stakeholders and to show a willingness to listen and improve. And in the process they would be informing the public, both as citizens and consumers, and would promote the discussion and create clear benchmarking among businesses so that the industry as a whole is encouraged to improve animal welfare.

Mr MEDDICK: Very, very quickly, Professor Freeman, I guess where I am heading with that is that there has been a discussion in Australia around truth-in-labelling laws. I went down that line because I am thinking in

terms of if we are to go down that path, one of the examples that has been used here is that plant-based milk should not be able to call itself milk on supermarket shelves. And that is only one example. But if we are to go down that path, would you recommend then that all products that are animal derivatives should also then have truth in labelling as to exactly what it is they contain and how they were obtained?

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: I would love that. That seems like it would fit right in with the corporate disclosure initiative for animal welfare that I was talking about. And that would really help inform the consumer more, because even if it says ‘cage free’ on something like eggs, what does that mean and how much access to the outdoors do they actually have? Whenever we are selling a product that is taken from an animal—these animals do not even have any rights, or very few rights—what was their life like? How much time did they spend indoors? At what age are they killed? What portion of their lifespan is that? People need to have a better understanding when they are purchasing this what they are legitimising and what they are supporting.

I think there is just a lot of confusion out there, and a lot of times the companies are allowed to just throw out words like ‘humane’ or ‘welfare’ without really giving a firm backing behind that, so customers are thinking, ‘Oh, I’m picturing hens that are running around in a field’, and they are not even envisaging them ever being killed, when in actuality that is not what is happening. So that is the part that seems more fraudulent to me, especially if the images and the words on the labelling mislead people about the reality—the harsh reality, because it has to be harsh to mass-produce animals in a global consumer market. In a capitalist system it is just really harsh. And it is hard for the farmers. I mean, they kind of are put in a really bad position, and that is why they have had to end up with factory farms. That is the result of unchecked capitalism.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Professor Freeman. I am interested in your comments about truth in labelling and, given that you would like I guess the entire world to have a plant-based diet, you would also therefore be satisfied that all the pests that are involved in producing a plant-based diet would be listed as being exterminated in the process of producing a plant-based diet—given especially that to produce tomatoes, for example, there is an extraordinary level of vermin extermination. So could you please comment on the truth in labelling so that we could know in our plant-based diet all the animals that have had to be destroyed to produce our wheat and vegetables et cetera.

And also I am just wondering if you might comment on whether you think public choice has no part in society, given that consumer demand leads what people buy and eat and how they live.

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: I have not said that public choice does not have anything to do with it; in fact the whole point of increasing transparency is to increase public awareness, information and intelligence so we can make better choices. Some of those choices might result not only in different consumer choices being made but also in pressuring you all in Parliament to make different laws. So to me, in a democracy it is all about choice, but right now a lot of people do not have much information to make choices, and certainly the other animals do not have any choice in the matter.

In respect to insects and other animals—I do not like to refer to anybody as ‘vermin’ or ‘pest’, but those words are used for animals who are not welcome in different situations—I think it would be great if all the animals were listed no matter if it was on meat or tomatoes or any product. If we were actually estimating all the different individuals who were killed in the process, maybe some things, like harvesting apples, kill fewer animals than something that requires a tractor, like wheat. So I agree that we actually should have more exposure about every type of food that we are eating—the water resources that go into it, how much deforestation it takes, if there are other wild animals killed in the process. But one of the things that people overlook is that a lot of times these farmed animals are eating wheat and corn and soy, so you are not actually killing fewer animals by eating only plants. There is a much more efficient way for us to get our food because a lot of the crop land in the world is actually killing all these insects and wild animals, and that crop is then going to feed farmed animals—‘livestock’—and then people are eating those farmed animals and they are not even getting as much nutrition out of them as all the nutrition that was put into them. So then there are even more animals killed in the process.

So I think it would be great—and I think you have really struck on something here—to actually get a report on how detrimental every particular food item is to the ecology, to wildlife. Then I also think it would be useful to talk about the nutrient benefits that we get, because it does seem like in the future if resources are more

precious—like water and such and land—then we should also be giving more government subsidies to those nutrient-dense foods, like dark green leafy vegetables and things like that, rather than sugar and beef and dairy and refined grains and things that just are not as healthy. So there are lots of ways we can change our priorities around agribusiness and be more open about the cost to everybody, insects included, in the process of growing food.

The CHAIR: If there are no further questions, Professor, in a few weeks you will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading. On behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for your time and your contribution. Thank you very much, Professor.

Assoc. Prof. FREEMAN: Thank you for listening to animal activists; I really appreciate it.

Witness withdrew.