

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

Mr David Leyden.

The CHAIR: 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, can you state your name for the Hansard record please, and allow us some time to ask you questions. Welcome.

Mr LEYDEN: Thank you. My name is David Leyden. I thought I would just begin by telling you about myself. I come from Queensland. I have lived in Victoria for about five years. I grew up in rural Queensland near a small country town of about 200 people, and all my friends at school were farmers' kids. As a teenager I would often visit farms, spend time on farms, even help with the farm chores—cleaning the pigs and feeding the pigs.

I made my submission as a concerned citizen and activist. I am regularly involved in outreach activities where we screen the *Dominion* documentary on portable televisions in the city. My activism is non-violent and conversational. We just show the video and engage the public in discussion about the routine nature of the cruelty detailed and the consequences it has for our health and for our environment.

For the record, I would also like to add that I have stable, permanent, full-time employment and that I am not paid by any organisation for the activist work that I undertake. In my past I have also been involved in a covert investigation of an RSPCA-approved barn-laying egg facility, and I was involved in the action carried out at the Tyabb broiler farm last year.

In my submission I said that there are two types of animal rights activism involving trespass onto farms. There are the covert investigations and the overt demonstrations. By their nature the covert investigations are not distressing to farmers or their families because they do not actually know that they happen. If they did, then the activists would be charged with trespass and other criminal offences, so they take great care not to be discovered.

I would like to point out that the farmers targeted by these investigations are the ones running concentrated animal feeding operations where there is a high likelihood that the mistreatment or abuse of animals will be discovered. In some cases the abuse is so severe that other activists are motivated to invade the facilities in a public demonstration to call attention to that abuse, as has happened several times in recent years, and I think that that is part of the reason why this has become a topic of conversation and why farmers are demanding ag-gag laws. I can understand that to have your property invaded in that way could feel distressing, and perhaps they should have a reasonable expectation to be protected from that sort of activity.

I would like to add that activists are not interested in farmers themselves, their families, their children or their private houses. We are not invading their privacy except for their right to abuse animals in secret, which is afforded to them under existing legislation. The cruelty practised against these animals is legal and the animals are not protected by the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*.

If the farmers had evidence that their privacy had been breached, the Parliament might consider legislating that activists would not approach the residences of farmers or their families. Perhaps it might be similar to the way that AVOs work but in this case providing general protection for farmers against activists. However, I do not think that is the real problem, and what farmers really want is protection against their mistreatment of animals being made public. That obviously has a detrimental effect on their ability to sell the product, and obviously it affects our reputation as a humane and just society. I do not think making activists into political prisoners is going to enhance our reputation as a humane and just society either.

I submit that the Parliament should instead legislate for the industry to be made transparent, for an independent office of animal welfare to ensure that all animals enjoy the five basic freedoms recommended by the RSPCA,

for CCTV to be installed in all concentrated animal feeding operations and abattoirs and for those recordings to be made freely available to the public.

In the last 70 years the nature of animal agriculture has significantly changed. We now have an industrialised system consisting of factory farms. This is a very different style of farming to that of yesteryear, when cows were milked by hand and chickens really did live in barns. Now egg-laying hens and broiler chickens are crowded into sheds 100 000 at a time. Pigs live their entire lives in miserable conditions, in their own excrement, never seeing the light of day, only to be taken to slaughter. The scale of cruelty is hard to imagine. If vegan activists are considered extreme, I submit that it is a reaction to the extreme cruelty routinely practised by this industry against animals.

I also submit that we should aspire to be better than this as a nation. That industry takes a psychological toll on the workers at all stages. It is a fact that domestic violence is statistically higher in rural communities, and I suggest that this may be in part due to the way in which people are desensitised to violence against animals. It is, after all, well established that there is a link between violence against animals and violence against people. It is also known that workers in abattoirs suffer physically and psychologically through the nature of their work. It is certainly not a job that I would wish for any of my children.

I could also speak about the ways in which this industry jeopardises our health. Superbugs caused by the overuse of antibiotics, diseases like swine flu and avian flu, heart disease that kills more people in Australia than all cancers combined and how the World Health Organization categorised red meat and processed meats as carcinogens. I could speak about the link between deforestation, water security and the loss of biodiversity in our country and about the catastrophic effect that this industry has had on our environment and how it is the most significant driver of climate change. I could speak about how animals are just like us in their capacity to feel, to have fun, to know fear and to suffer. I have been asked to keep this talk under 5 minutes, so that is where I will leave it.

The CHAIR: You have done well. Any questions?

Ms TERPSTRA: Thanks, David, for your presentation and for your submission. Just on the one aspect of the animal activists and reporting of suspected cruelty, do you think that activists should be treated more like whistleblowers in these circumstances?

Mr LEYDEN: Yes, I think that activists are whistleblowers in these circumstances, that they are covertly investigating the operations and discover the mistreatment and abuse of animals and then release the evidence of that abuse to the public. It is the same thing.

The CHAIR: Just to follow-up on this, I know in your submission there is a recommendation for the Government, but are there any other policies you would like to see from the Government?

Mr LEYDEN: Yes. I think that the Government should impose a tax on meat products, particularly because animal agriculture is the leading cause of deforestation and the number one driver of climate change, and climate change is going to impact us all sooner rather than later. I note that the Australian Medical Association has declared climate change to be a medical emergency. I think eventually we will be left with little choice. The methane emissions from this industry, as well as the carbon dioxide emissions, will have to be contained if we are going to meet the challenge of climate change, and one of the ways that we might meet that challenge is by imposing a tax on meat products.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Mr Leyden, for your testimony here this afternoon. We have heard from a number of other witnesses about how biosecurity has been a concern, or breaches of biosecurity, and we have had a number of those witnesses completely debunk those theories. Why do you consider that animal agriculture, as stated here in your submission, presents on its own a significant biosecurity threat to Australia?

Mr LEYDEN: That is for two reasons. There is the issue of antibiotic resistance, which is caused by the continuous use of antibiotics in the system, which is required because the animals are kept in such high concentrations in their own excrement they are obviously going to contract and spread diseases amongst themselves. It was discovered in the 1940s I think that by continually giving animals antibiotics it increased their growth rate, so they are routinely fed low doses of antibiotics anyway. This is the perfect breeding ground

for superbugs. From the way that these bugs evolve, the antibiotics kill off the bugs that are not resistant and leave behind the bugs that are resistant to them. Those then make their way into our food supply, are shipped to supermarkets and then purchased by consumers, and eventually we end up with people with these infections in hospitals where there are superbugs that are now impossible to treat with antibiotics. So that is in itself a significant biosecurity risk.

Then there is also the issue of viruses. For instance, pigs can contract all three viruses—they can contract avian flu, swine flu and human flu—and when they do in one of these facilities within one to two days the entire population of pigs will become infected. The virus strains are able to swap genes in these circumstances and we end up with endemics of swine flu in the human population.

Mr MEDDICK: Just following on from that, it says also in your submission here that an estimated more than 80 per cent of all antibiotics used in Australia are used in animal agriculture. Just keeping that in context, where did you get that figure from? Is that from the CSIRO? Is that from any other Australian government organisation? Also, to your knowledge has there been any information disseminated by other statutory bodies such as the AMA about this concern that you have about the lack of ability of antibiotics to continue to battle the diseases and microbacterial problems that we may have occurring in our population going forward?

Mr LEYDEN: I would say that that is general knowledge that I have picked up in the course of conversations that I have had, but I believe it to be a fact and I am sure that that could be confirmed by an expert witness in that area. Sorry, what was the rest of the question?

Mr MEDDICK: Well, I am just wondering. I seem to remember reading articles in Australia's largest daily newspapers, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Age*, the *Herald Sun* here in Victoria, for instance, that the AMA shares these concerns that the effect of antibiotics has been greatly diminished.

Mr LEYDEN: Well, in Australia the problem is not really well understood as it is in other countries because we do not really have effective ways of monitoring superbugs or how many people die as a result of infections. What we do know is that in Australia 5000 people die of sepsis every year, and probably a large number of those are because their infections are not responding to antibiotic treatment. In the United States over 25 000 people die of infections that they do know are related to these superbugs.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you very much, Mr Leyden, for your presentation. Just a couple of points you have raised: you have said the large-scale clearing of forest and trees and so on is for animal meat production, correct?

Mr LEYDEN: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Would you agree it is actually for large-scale cropping production?

Mr LEYDEN: No. In Australia on the east coast in the 240 years since settlement 90 per cent of all the forest that was here when we landed has been cleared, and most of that has been cleared to make space for the grazing of animals.

Mrs McARTHUR: You also said that animal meat production is the number one driver of climate change.

Mr LEYDEN: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: Now you are telling us that coal is no longer evil, that the fossil fuel industry is no longer a problem, that cows have replaced coal as the evil determinant of climate change?

Mr LEYDEN: No. I did not say that.

Mrs McARTHUR: You did say that the animals were the number one driver of climate change?

Mr LEYDEN: Yes, that is right.

Mrs McARTHUR: So if they are the number one driver, clearly fossil fuels are not?

Mr LEYDEN: No, they are not the number one driver; deforestation that is the result of animal agriculture is the most significant contributing factor to climate change. Also, the animal agriculture industry accounts for about 14.5 per cent of all of our carbon dioxide emissions, and I note that that is more than our entire transportation sector. To put that in perspective, if we were to say that everybody should not drive cars or trucks or use buses or use planes, that would be considered extreme, whereas we can all make a simple change to our diet every day and actually achieve a greater reduction in greenhouse gas emissions than by such an extreme action as not driving cars or using trucks—that is, simply by moving towards a plant-based diet.

Mrs McARTHUR: So should we also replant all the area of land that has been cleared that is now used for cropping?

Mr LEYDEN: Because of the superior efficiency of plant-based foods, I would say that we could produce the same amount of kilojoules and protein that humans need with about 25 per cent of the land that we currently use if we were to move to a system of plant-based agriculture, and then that land could be used for a variety of purposes. Much of it could be allowed to return to wilderness; some of it could be used, perhaps, to grow crops for biofuels or replacement textiles. There are very many ways that that land could be put to better use.

Mrs McARTHUR: Would you like to comment on Mike Archer, professor in the faculty of science at the University of New South Wales, who has said that roughly 25 times more sentient beings die to produce a kilo of protein from wheat than a kilo of protein from beef.

The CHAIR: You do not have to if you do not want to. You can take it on notice.

Mr LEYDEN: No, I would not.

Mr BARTON: David, if you take the view that we are going to let the market decide to move over to a plant-based diet, that is going to take some time—and I think it would be generations—for that to happen—

Mr LEYDEN: Yes.

Mr BARTON: if we accept that is going to happen. What I would like to ask you is: what do you want to see from the Government in terms of the regulatory requirements of how we manage our stock and animal cruelty?

Mr LEYDEN: I would like to see the Government assist farmers in the transition. I think farmers are the victims as much as the animals are in our current system. It is not really that profitable—

Mr BARTON: Some are.

Mr LEYDEN: Yes, well, you know in our rural communities we have high rates of suicide. We have higher rates of domestic abuse and high rates of substance abuse as well. All of these things come down to the communities are not—there are high rates of poverty in some of these communities.

Mr BARTON: That is a given, but what would you like to see happen?

Mr LEYDEN: I would like to see the Government assist farmers' transition to more ethical systems of food production and for the Government to invest in R and D for plant-based meat substitutes and things that people would like to eat in place of animals.

Mr BARTON: That is a philosophical view, that that is where you want to head and absolutely that is your position. But right now we are still going to process animals. What do you want us to do?

Mr LEYDEN: I would like for the Government to provide transparency so that consumers can make informed choices.

The CHAIR: Further questions? If not, in a few weeks you will receive a copy of the transcript for your proofreading. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank you for your time and contribution.

Witness withdrew.