

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Bairnsdale—Tuesday, 20 August 2019

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Mr David Limbrick

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WITNESS

Mr Geoff Gooch.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Geoff, to the public hearing 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 thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

So before you start can you state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time so we can ask you some questions. Welcome.

Mr GOOCH: Geoff Gooch. I am a farmer from Sale.

The CHAIR: Do you want to make a statement?

Mr GOOCH: I presume you have seen the original written piece.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr GOOCH: I have added a little piece on—a bit onto the end of that. I have not been impacted by the animal activism. But what I have been taught in my education is if something is happening to ask a reason why. What I see in what has happened with animal activism is, to me, there has been a gap in the regulations that have allowed bad practices to become public opinion or to be viewed by the public, and a small part of the public has taken this on. I believe if we are going to do anything about trying to slam the stable door—I think the horse might be pretty well down the track by now—to try and remedy that problem we have to look at why activism has got a grip and what we can do about loosening that grip.

Another thing that I believe is that a lot of the animal activism we see is not so much animal welfare concerns, but what they are trying to do is destroy an industry. Even in situations like we had with the Gippy Goat, where there was absolute 100 per cent transparency, they still closed the business down and said, ‘We want transparency’. Well, you have given them transparency and they abuse it. So are they really telling the truth? Are they fair dinkum? So my belief is that activists really all they are interested in is closing the industry down, rather than the protecting of the animal.

In the situation we had in Indonesia when that problem was a major concern, the woman who sort of created the stir, there was one clip of her in an abattoir in Indonesia walking totally dispassionately through the abattoir while animals were being brutalised either side of her and doing absolutely nothing about it. If the concern is for animal welfare, that was the point to take it, not to stop Australian animals. It is Australian animals we want to protect, but it is not—you know, animals are animals; it does not matter what nationality they are. If you are realistic and fair dinkum about wanting to protect the animal, you do it wherever the problem is. So I see them as their main aim in life is to destroy an industry rather than to be concerned for the welfare of the animals. I think it was in *Stock & Land* on 15 August that Chris Delforce said that all livestock industries, including those that comply with welfare standards, are inherently cruel, and unjust laws should and must be broken. That just made my skin crawl, because while you are trying to work with a person with that mentality we have got a problem. So that is why I think we have to go back to what has given the animal activists their foothold and address that problem.

Mr GEPP: Thanks, Geoff, for coming along. I am interested in that point you have just made about what has given the animal activists—and I am struggling with that, too, to be honest, because I do not understand quite what it means. But it is something that everybody is using, as part of this discussion. So you are saying that in your view—and I will continue to use the phrase ‘animal activists’—their motivation is to end the farming of livestock for consumption, that that is their primary objective in all of this?

Mr GOOCH: One of the objectives I have heard used is that they are against the ownership of sentient beings and they claim that livestock are sentient and they are against the ownership of sentient beings. So once again—

Mr GEPP: Well, it is going to be hard to find a middle ground if that is the case, isn't it?

Mr GOOCH: Yes, that is right. And just on the Gippy Goat situation and their claiming of a sentient being, if you remove a sentient being from its place of habitat and take it where you think it ought to be, what is the difference between that and kidnapping and that and the stolen generation? You know, you are removing a sentient being from its home to where you think it ought to be. So the hypocrisy of a lot of their attitudes is what sort of makes me feel that without pressure from a great height we are just not going to get anywhere.

Mr GEPP: Thanks for that. We have heard a lot of testimony this morning about animal welfare standards, but there has also been this grey area around, you know, what is a guideline, what is a regulation, what is actual best practice, 'I don't want to force my views on others'. Do you think there is a gap in the regulations, in the standards, that could be addressed as part of this process?

Mr GOOCH: I do not know if there is a gap in the standards. Administration of the standards is probably where the gap lies. A lot of these things are that animals have been—and I do not deny that within the animal industry there are people who are cruel to their animals, and they are not very hard to find. You know, there are lots of reports. But that cruelty and the administration of the regulations to overcome that cruelty people seem to turn a blind eye to. So I think the regulations are there but they are not being administered. On that, I think the role of the RSPCA in the administration of animal welfare leaves a lot to be desired because I believe that the role of the RSPCA, from what it originally started off to be—they have gone from a welfare organisation to an activist organisation, and I think that is breaking down the value of that administration.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Geoff. I feel like you should have been a cricketer once upon a time with a lovely surname like that. Geoff, it is concerning in relation to some of your comments in your submission. You talk about a right to a safe place of work, and that can operate in two ways. If someone identified that you were being unjust to your animals on your farm and you live in Sale or near Sale, what would be the ramifications? What would be the process by which you would be audited? Are you aware of what those sorts of processes are?

Mr GOOCH: To be quite honest, no. I am not in the habit of being cruel to animals, but I have neighbours who are a little bit doubtful, in which case I think with farm animals—and I have done it—it is suggest to the department of ag they go for a little drive down the road and have a look. In some cases I believe this has happened and quietly something has been done, but I think the enforcement of animal welfare regulations probably should come down to the Department of Agriculture, hopefully because they will have people within the organisation that understand livestock.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, Geoff, for coming in. Your honesty is extremely refreshing in this particular debate. I thank you. I only have two questions, but I just wanted to thank you for bringing it to our attention that bad practices do occur in the animal agriculture industry and that you admit that there are instances of cruelty, which seems to be something that a lot of people try and tend to say do not occur—that people do not understand. So here we are having a person involved in animal agriculture saying, 'Yes, there is a problem and something needs to be done about it', and you are saying there is a gap there. So I am trying to address that gap that you spoke about. By extension, would you believe that the non-mandatory codes of conduct or codes of practice that are currently in place should, in your opinion, be made mandatory to try and fill that gap?

Mr GOOCH: There is no point in making a law if you are not going to enforce it.

Mr MEDDICK: I accept that, so let us assume that something will be put in place by government, by enforcement agencies, to enforce that. Would that help?

Mr GOOCH: A definite maybe.

Mr MEDDICK: That is good. In terms of Indonesia, then—we will leave that one there—I believe we are talking about Lyn White from Animals Australia, yes?

Mr GOOCH: Yes.

Mr MEDDICK: Would you be prepared to concede that if she had acted upon what you are talking about—like, ‘Stop doing what you’re doing’—that would have actually prevented her gathering of that evidence to present?

Mr GOOCH: I think the evidence was already gathered by that stage. That brings me to another point, if I can just divert. With the gathering of information like that, if somebody collects information and proves that there is cruelty being done and they withhold that information until it reaches a politically correct stage where they can release it and the animals have been injured between the taking of that information and the time of its release, are they complicit in the cruelty that has occurred to those animals? They have the knowledge to do something about it, they have withheld that knowledge and the animal cruelty has continued. In my opinion a lot of the time they have taken illegal information and then withheld it, so they are as complicit as the person who is committing the cruelty.

Mr MEDDICK: Do you have any proof that they have held it for a period of time?

Mr GOOCH: Well, there have been a number of cases where three or four months after—

Mr MEDDICK: Can you cite those cases as proof?

Mr GOOCH: Not off the top of my head, no.

Mr MEDDICK: Okay, thanks for that.

Mr GOOCH: But they have been reported in the press. Sometimes later that information has been released.

Mr MEDDICK: Thank you, and as I say, I wanted to keep it short.

Mrs McARTHUR: Geoff, thank you very much for coming in. You do cite the instance of what happened in Indonesia, and you could go on and say what cruelty was delivered onto the animals that then could not be exported live to Indonesia because the trade was closed down and how that impacted on the welfare of many animals in northern Australia and the whole industry. But also I am interested in your comment about the millions we do spend on biosecurity in this country. After all, any of us that come through an airport have to declare if we have been on a farm, if we have got mud on our boots, whatever—we go to a lot of trouble to try to keep Australia clean in terms of how we produce our products for export in the animal and food area. And yet we have got a situation where trespassers can go onto farms that are subject to biosecurity—and most farms are, and some are EU accredited as well—and impact on that biosecurity. So while we spend millions making sure nothing comes in from overseas or on somebody’s pets flown in on a private jet that we heard about, we do not take the same level of action when it is actually occurring at our back door. Would you like to comment on that, and also on the fact that you are entitled to have your workplace be a safe place? For many farms their workplace is their home, so this invasion of your safe workplace, which is actually your home, is also an issue, if you like to comment on that.

Mr GOOCH: On the biosecurity thing—sorry, what was that?

Mrs McARTHUR: About the millions we spend on people coming into the country and yet people can come onto your farm without any security.

Mr GOOCH: That is a big problem. We have a sign on the gate saying, ‘Biosecurity. Please report to the management’, but without putting up a 6-foot chain mesh fence around it and an armed guard on the gate, it is almost impossible, so you are relying on the integrity of the people coming to your gate. I guess we have been lucky so far that we have not had an outbreak of some sort of disease. But even in the situation where we have got people coming in from overseas who may be carrying something like tuberculosis and not know about—to get that into a feedlot and then spread it through that, that is a disease that could be fairly catastrophic, having the nation supposedly free of TB in the cattle herd. That is something that could be fairly catastrophic to it. Someone can come in with a sandwich in their pocket or whatever and contaminate the feed. In the past sheep heading to the Middle East have been contaminated with ham in the feedlot. So it is not impossible to make a very major input on a biosecurity level there.

As far as the invasion of your house is concerned, one thing I cannot quite understand in the law is that somebody can come in and steal an animal from your property. What is the difference between that and aggravated burglary—someone coming into your house and pinching a TV? To me there is no difference. Once again, it gets back to this prosecution and that sort of thing. The law has left the farmers well and truly out on the end of a branch and is not particularly keen to touch that. That is another thing—in making new laws and mandatory regulations, a lot of the laws that we need to protect us are already there but they are just not being implemented.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. On behalf of the Committee, Geoff, I would like to thank you for your time and contribution. You will receive in a few weeks a copy of the transcript for your approval and reading. Thank you very much.

Mr GOOCH: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.