

# **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**

Ms Pam Ahern, Director, Edgar's Mission.

**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, Pam, I ask you to state your name for the Hansard record. It is my understanding you are going to show us a video and you want to add something to it?

**Ms AHERN:** That is correct.

**The CHAIR:** You have got about 10 minutes, something like that, and then allow us some time to ask you questions. Welcome.

**Ms AHERN:** Thank you. My name is Pam Ahern. I am the founder and director of Edgar's Mission. Before I start, I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting here today on land traditionally held by the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I would like to extend my thanks to the Committee for inviting me here today to take part in what I consider a very, very important inquiry.

I would like to tell you a little bit about myself and how Edgar's Mission came to be, as I think it gives a bit of an insight into the position from which I speak. I grew up in suburbia, an animal lover from a very young age. Despite our family's very small backyard and even more limited income, I wanted a pony. It took many years for that to happen, but it did. And I went on to become what many would consider a very, very successful equestrian, beyond anything I could ever have imagined. I won the Garryowen trophy at the Royal Melbourne Show on two separate occasions and countless awards around Australia.

What I considered, though, my crowning achievements were the relationships and bonds I formed with my horses. Travelling around the country and going to horse shows and agricultural events I got my first taste of farmed animals beyond the little farm animals I used to play with as a kid, and I was hooked. The more I got to know them, the more I came to realise that despite those outward appearances they were really no different than my beloved pets. That was when I started to research a bit deeper into the treatment of farmed animals.

In 2003 a dramatic turn happened in my life. The code of practice for pig farming was up for review. I have learned many things on my trajectory from animal lover to animal advocate. Like most people, I took great comfort that our animal protection laws protected animals from acts of cruelty by way of the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*. After all, our society had signed off on it, not just animal lovers. Our society at large said that animals can suffer; we had enshrined it in law.

For generations we were hypnotised with the idea that our animal protection legislation affords all animals protection from cruelty. But I have come to learn that it does not. We have been guilty of playing favourites, treating animals not on their ability to suffer, to experience the world and all of her magic or even hang with their friends. Rather, the form an animal has taken, our relationship with them and the intended use we have of them has shaped our perception and in turn the laws or lack thereof they are afforded. This has happened through codes of practice, codes that circumvent not only our animal protection legislation but our ethical thought as well.

So in 2003 the code of practice for pig farming was up for review. This represented a golden opportunity to shine a spotlight on this flawed animal protection legislation, and a golden opportunity was presented to us because James Cromwell, who many of you would readily recognise from the hit movie *Babe*, was in the country at the time. What a media opportunity. We needed a pig for a photo shoot. And that was when Edgar Alan Pig trotted into my heart and my home, and neither of our lives were ever going to be the same again. The photo shoot went so well that we decided to do an action right here on the steps of Parliament House, where James would stride up those steps with the company of Edgar Alan Pig and call on our then agriculture minister

to get a better deal for pigs. Before that could happen, my task was to accompany this little piglet that had come from a pig farm, to teach him to walk on a lead and be used to be around humans. That was when I went down to our local park. I had my little dog on one side and I had my pig on the other side. People came from everywhere to marvel at Edgar and his unique brand of pigginess. He was the most adorable pig. They would rub his tummy and go, 'Coo, coo, coo, coo'. He would wobble up and down, he would flop on his side. 'He's like my dog' people would say. It got me thinking that the best ambassadors, the very best ambassadors for changing the way people think about these animals who are farmed for food and fibre, are the animals themselves.

So Edgar's Mission was created for Edgar to live out his days and for other rescued animals to live as well. It became a place for people to come and visit and to learn about farmed animals. At Edgar's Mission we do not accept stolen animals and we do not encourage people to buy animals in order to rescue them. Sadly, on a daily basis we find that we are not able to take in all of the animals people contact us about. These animals are generally owned animals that people can no longer care for. It is for this reason that Edgar's Mission has set up a Facebook rehoming page where we assist people in the process of finding homes for their animals. We do that at no cost to the community or anyone.

Since its inception we have been talking to countless people, from individuals, school groups, Probus clubs and those who visit the sanctuary, about the plight of farmed animals, in particular telling the stories of individual farmed animals who have escaped the system. Over and over so many people are surprised to learn that these animals do not receive the same protection that the animals who share their hearts and homes do. Moreover, they are so touched when they meet these individual animals themselves. After all, who better to argue the case for pigs than a pig themselves? At this point I would actually like to invite the Committee to come to Edgar's Mission and to meet the animals and to see what the sanctuary does. I have some brochures, if I am allowed to hand them around. If you have time, I would love to invite you to the sanctuary to see firsthand the work that we do there.

I recall when I was learning about the plight of farmed animals how hidden not only they were but their suffering. I remember how I struggled to grasp the fact that every male chick born to the egg-laying industry was killed at a day old. If these animals were male puppies or male kittens and they were killed on the first day—it would never happen. It would never happen. But if you think for one moment that a rooster is any less worthy of your compassion and kindness or is any less endearing or quirky, you have honestly got to meet my Red Baron. It was whistleblower footage taken in Australia in 2016 that showed the brutal final moments of these hapless chicks to the world.

Edgar's Mission expresses great concern there exists a huge conflict of interest where the protection of farmed animals sits with the very body that protects the interests of farmers and the profitability of animal-based industries. This suggests to me an urgent need for an independent office of animal welfare to prevent the time and again failure of the regulatory system for farmed animals. I understand we are here today to discuss new legislation and the need for reform. However, we have existing laws for trespass, theft, inciting others to break the law, as well as biosecurity regulations. But what we do not have are just and fair laws for farmed animals.

There is no doubt that we live in an animal-loving nation, and the public has a right to know how the largest number of animals in human care, those who are farmed for food and fibre, are treated. After all, these are the people who are determining how these animals live and die by the very choice that they make. Each time a whistleblower unearths yet another instance of animal cruelty within the farming sector, further public confidence is eroded in these industries. The Futureye report speaks very well to that. I am sure you are aware of that report.

While the actions of those to expose animal cruelty and suffering are considered radical by some, we believe that these people are passionate individuals who have become informed, people who are frustrated with a system that routinely fails farmed animals. We believe the proposed legislation will not fix the problem that has been identified. Rather it will further veil in secrecy what is happening to farmed animals. The answer lies in fixing our unjust animal protection laws, replacing them with meaningful laws that reflect both the growing body of science around animal sentience and the public expectations of good animal welfare. In doing so it will remove the need for people to seek greater transparency in animal agriculture.

On this point I would actually like to show you this incredible, incredible video. This is a rescue that we undertook several years ago. It was part of a larger rescue.

**Video shown.**

**Ms AHERN:** We rescued several thousand battery hens from the egg industry after a farmer had a change of heart. He was walking through his sheds one day and he stopped and he looked into the eyes of one of his hens and there, for the first time in his life, he saw before him a living, breathing, feeling being who deserved none of what was being afforded to her. He decided right then and there that he was going to exit the industry. But before he could he wanted to find a safe home for every one of his hens, and this is the operation that we did. We actually noticed when we were in the sheds that these cages were undersized, which raises the question: how often are inspections made of these facilities to ensure that they are conforming to standards and guidelines?

This is really interesting and quite telling. One of the things we found when we were rescuing these hens from the cages and putting them in the vehicles is that the chickens were unsteady on their feet. I said to the guys, 'Guys, you've got to be gentle with these hens. They've got brittle bones. They're very fragile'. They said, 'We are, Pam, we really are'. And then we thought about it. These chickens have been standing and lying in those wire cages that have a slope in them so the eggs would roll to the front of the cage, so this was the first time in these birds' lives that they were actually standing on a level surface.

They love scratching around in the soil. We had several people helping tend to these hens and so many would come and tell me that, 'The chicken is having a stroke' and, 'She is having a heart attack, come quick'—but she was not. She was dust bathing and enjoying the sun for the first time in her life. And build a nest they did—the places these girls would go and the great lengths that they would go to lay their eggs in private. These chickens have been bred down from the Asian junglefowl, and although we have taken the chicken out of the jungle, we can never take the jungle out of the chicken. They love to build a nest. She has got a lot of eggs there.

Thank you so much for watching that video. I really appreciate it.

To that I would just like to actually add a comment by Emeritus Professor Donald Broom from Cambridge University, who stated that:

Any breeding that can be predicted to result in poor welfare should be illegal.

Sadly, little Cinderella is no longer with us. It is something that we see over and over again for laying hens that are rescued from the battery hen industry—that they succumb to illnesses way before their bodies really should. Their bodies become worn out from producing over 300 eggs a year—way beyond what nature intended. Their bones become brittle from leaching calcium to make all those eggshells, they suffer respiratory diseases, they suffer musculoskeletal diseases, tumours, reproductive problems, all because of the selective breeding pressure we have placed upon them. Meat chickens suffer health issues as a result of the rapid growth that has been imposed upon them. These are issues that we need to think about as a compassionate, caring community. This irrevocably changes the lives of these animals from those of their wild cousins.

I would just like to leave you with one final thought, and that is: if we could live happy and healthy lives without causing harm to those we share the planet with, what compelling reason can we possibly have for not doing so? Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Pam, and I believe that in your submission the solution was the installation of CCTV. If cameras were to become mandatory, who would you like to see monitor the footage for animal welfare?

**Ms AHERN:** The independent office of animal welfare.

**Mr BARTON:** Do you see any value having them open to the public, for instance, as has been put forward today?

**Ms AHERN:** It would have value, opening to the public, though biosecurity regulations need to be observed. Certainly having the public be able to see how these animals are treated would be very, very worthwhile.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Thank you, Pam, for that presentation today. What are the laws that are applicable to farm animals?

**Ms AHERN:** These are the laws that apply to domestic animals in the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1986*, but farmed animals are being specifically exempted by way of the codes of practice. Now the codes of practice exist for every animal that is farmed for food and fibre. They are not necessarily tied to legislation. There are standards and guidelines. Guidelines are very poor and often unenforced, which leaves this industry to basically be self-regulated, which causes lots of problems, as we are seeing.

**Mr MEDDICK:** Hence your call for an independent office?

**Ms AHERN:** Yes, absolutely. An independent office is absolutely needed.

**Mr FINN:** Do you hold all farmers guilty of the sorts of things that you describe?

**Ms AHERN:** No. In our submission we actually say that not all farmers and not all industries are doing these things.

**Mr FINN:** Okay, fine. Do you see any, I suppose, moral difference between an animal and a human?

**Ms AHERN:** Well, there are differences on the outside, but we all have the same need for food and water, shelter, kindness and compassion.

**Mr FINN:** But do you see a moral equivalence between humans and animals?

**Ms AHERN:** I see that we all have the same need for food and water, shelter and kindness.

**Mr FINN:** Okay. Thank you.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Ms Ahern, for the presentation and the video. Moving away from Government legislation for a minute, about what you are doing with Edgar's Mission, would I be right in saying that you are trying to influence public opinion by if people have pets, they feel affection for that pet and therefore do not want to see it as food? I can sort of sympathise with that. I have got rabbits, and I do not want to eat rabbit, but is that sort of what is going on?

**Ms AHERN:** I actually do not want people to do anything because Pam Ahern wants to do it—because if everyone lives in the world according to Pam Ahern, you are going to end up with, unfortunately, terrible dress sense, very little sleep and eating way too much chocolate—

*Interjections from gallery.*

**Ms AHERN:** And you did not have to laugh!

I really want people to listen to their hearts—to listen to their hearts, become informed and then make decisions that reflect those values. I know when I was growing up I went along the trajectory of what was around me. Forgive me for this, but I barrack for Collingwood—

*Interjections from gallery.*

**Ms AHERN:** It gets better. And the reason I barracked for Collingwood was that my Dad barracked for Collingwood, and dads are good guys and they know what they are doing. And I went on, and then I started to think about it—and Collingwood was not that good a team. I did not even like football. I would much rather be grabbing my scooter, ripping the wheels off, grabbing my mum's pantyhose and riding my imaginary horse around the kitchen. And when I think about that, it is so symbolic of so many things that we do in this world—they are values that we have inherited from other people and we have never really stopped and listened to our

hearts and what is important to us. So in answer to your question: I want to inspire people. I want to inform people to think about what is important to them and to live a world according to that.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Pam, for your presentation. I am just wondering: how much space have you got at Edgars Mission?

**Ms AHERN:** We have 153 acres.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Okay. I am just wondering how you will go if we close down the animal production industry. We have got 400 000 cows in Western Victoria Region. I am just trying to work out where they might all go. I am wondering: does your concern for animals, and it is greatly applauded, extend to all animals or just farm animals?

**Ms AHERN:** Okay. I love that you are thinking. That is really great. These are the conversations that we need to have. It is going to toss up curly questions and pose us ethical challenges. The reality is that the world is not going to stop consuming animal products overnight, but we are seeing over time, as we saw with our battery hen farmer, that farmers are transitioning away from animal-based agriculture. It is acknowledged too that in the production of many foods animals are killed. Much of the food produced in Australia does go to feeding farmed animals, as does our antibiotic use. I heard on the radio the other day about the huge concerns in Australia about antibiotic use, and most of that antibiotic use is actually going to animals. In turn we are finding antibiotic resistance coming through the food chain and those sorts of things. A lot of the reasons that antibiotics are fed to farmed animals are because the factory farm conditions these animals are housed in are really unhygienic. The animals are kept under stress, which lowers their immune system, which makes them more vulnerable to disease.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So how are we going—all animals or just farm animals that your concern extends to?

**Ms AHERN:** No, with life.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I beg your pardon?

**Ms AHERN:** With life. With respecting life.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** With life. So then you would be terribly concerned, I would have thought, about the number of animals that have been killed in the production of plant-based products, would you?

**Ms AHERN:** You raise a really good point, and again I commend your thinking. But again a lot of the plant-based products are raised and cropped to feed farmed animals, and it is a bit of a wasted resource filtering our protein that way. People who do eat meat also eat plants, so, yes, you raise a really great point, and it is something that we need to think about when we are producing our food and how we can do things more compassionately, kindly and sustainably.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I often hear about the amount of water that is wasted in this animal food production, but how much water is used in the production of plant-based products?

**Ms AHERN:** I would have to look that up for you. But again, a lot of plant-based products are going to animals as well.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So would that be of concern to you? The amount of water being used in plant-based products?

**Ms AHERN:** Of course. Our resources are of concern to everyone.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So how would you suggest we all live? We will get rid of all the pests and vermin that are prevalent in the plant-based production areas of wheat, rice, horticulture and fruit production. We will do away with using water in all these areas. How do you suggest we live?

**Ms AHERN:** Again, thank you for valuing my opinion so highly. But as I stated before, I do not want the world to live according to Pam Ahern; I want the world to live according to how we believe it should. That is

why this inquiry is just so valuable—that people can come and express their opinions and we can talk about these things and look at what we are doing with our food production systems.

I heard the other day on the radio that Lewis Hamilton has actually gone into plant-based agriculture. JBS is looking at investing in plant-based products. Lots of meat industries are actually looking and seeing the writing on the wall and transitioning to plant-based products.

I am not a scientist. I am not an agronomist. I am just someone who really cares and wants to inspire these conversations with our community, so thank you for your question.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Because you would accept that a large proportion of the land in Australia is not suitable for the production of anything much, but it is certainly not suitable for the production of plant-based products.

**Ms AHERN:** You raise a really great point, and a lot of the suffering of animals actually goes on there unseen. We have a duty to these animals; 10 000 years ago when we started domesticating animals we irrevocably changed their lives, and in doing so we have duties to these animals—to look after them, to provide them with care. One of the problems that we cite in our submission about the animal-based agriculture industry is looking after these animals that are raised over vast areas of the country.

**The CHAIR:** If there are no further questions, 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 contribution.

**Ms AHERN:** Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**