

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Impact of Animal Rights Activism on Victorian Agriculture

Warrnambool—Tuesday, 17 September 2019

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WITNESS

Mr Simon Ramsay.

The CHAIR: I know, Mr Ramsay, you are a former Member, but I still have to read this to you. 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. Again, please state your name for the Hansard record and allow us some time to ask you questions.

Mr RAMSAY: Thank you, Chair. My name is Simon Ramsay. I have already provided a submission to the parliamentary Inquiry into Animal Activism, and I am happy to take questions with respect to that written submission. However, I do have an opening 3-minute statement I would like to present to the Committee for the record, if I may, and then I am happy to take questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mr RAMSAY: I thank the Victorian Parliament and this Committee for the opportunity to both present a written submission and appear as a witness in this regional hearing in Warrnambool today. I am a third-generation food producer farmer that received my training as a jackaroo at Hexham. I was a stockman for the live sheep export trade and did six trips to the Persian Gulf, to both Iran and Bahrain. I worked in a food-processing plant in Fremantle, Western Australia. I am a graduate of Glenormiston Agricultural College.

I am an owner and manager of a pastoral company that produces meat, wool and grain. I am a part owner and director of a food company that processes lamb for Coles supermarkets, employs 400 people and generates about \$30 million for the local economy here in western Victoria. I was Chair of the Victorian Farmers Federation wool committee, President of the livestock group, Vice-President of WoolProducers Australia, President of the Victorian Farmers Federation, Board Director of the National Farmers' Federation, industry representative to Animal Health Australia and the Australian Animal Health Laboratory. I was also an industry representative to the AHA emergency animal disease task force that oversaw biosecurity and emergency animal disease plans for Australia, particularly with respect to, as mentioned previously by another witness, the FMD outbreak in the UK back in 2000. I have worked closely with the RSPCA, particularly Hugh Wirth at the time when he was President, and also with Victoria's CVO at the time, Hugh Millar and later Charles Milne. I make the points that it is very important that industry and the Government have a strong, close relationship and that industry bodies have representation with respect to animal welfare.

I have worked both in and on the growth and protection of the animal, plant and fibre industries over my lifetime and am extremely concerned that an industry that produces over \$8 billion of product, employs over 90 000 workers, sustains over 30 000 fragile farming families and provides a GNP to Victoria of over \$14 billion would be put at risk by small group of vegans that represent less than 1 per cent of our food-eating population pursuing a philosophical ideal of ridding Australia of animal production and replacing it with plant production.

The vegan movement is doing this by stealth under the cover of animal activists and the more righteous and idealistic political parties like Animal Justice, who have the same agendas but who use political lobbying tools rather than activism tools, which have more traction with the policy setting of the Victorian government, which we are currently seeing at the moment. And I am here to say enough is enough, Mr Chair. This is not about animal welfare. I have just provided you with an extensive CV on the record not for my personal gain but for you to understand I have considerable experience both as a producer-processor and dealing with industry and government bodies with respect to animal welfare standards and codes that are either regulated by the industry itself or by the government.

From my point of view this is a systematic, coordinated push by philosophical idealists to get rid of animal production and animal farming, and the vegan movement, aka animal activists, are prepared to break the law, as we have seen on many occasions across many, many decades. In fact my submission makes note of an incident I was involved in when I was Chair of the livestock group of the VFF. I am forgetting how far back we go now. I think it was in 2003 with respect to an animal activist that poisoned a feedlot, down here in fact, in Portland,

with respect to sheep going into a Muslim country, whereby those sheep could not be exported because the animal activist broke not only the law through the *Summary Offences Act* in trespass but also the criminal law in Victoria with respect to feeding meal into a feedlot that he would have known would have ramifications—in fact about \$1.4 million of damage and loss to that feedlot operator with respect to his actions. So I am quite familiar with some of the strategies that animal activists use to try and stop certain trades.

I think, as has been indicated by other witnesses, the actions of the animal activists threaten the livelihood of businesses and invade the homes of farming families, and quite often the homes of farming families are also their businesses. They are much more at risk, much more susceptible to harm by the animal activists' trespass acts. It puts at risk the biosecurity of animal production—and I have given you a good indication of my work in biosecurity in previous roles—and it is all-important, the spreading of infectious disease. Mr Meddick raised the issue about whether in fact the animal activists' activities and behaviour are actually impacting or influencing a potential risk of infectious diseases. Certainly anyone involved in the foot-and-mouth disease in the UK would know that part of the problem of the spread of that disease was actually people movement—by people trespassing on other people's properties or moving around, spreading disease.

Mr Meddick interjected.

Mr RAMSAY: You were not there, Andy, so you can nod your head, but I was there; you were not. And I know, with a close association with industry, that is how much of the disease was spread—by people and traffic.

The role of this Committee—and it is an important role—is to, like other states in the Commonwealth, send a loud and clear message: if you trespass on private property, cause economic loss, threaten farming families in their homes, compromise biosecurity of a business or force your philosophical rhetoric onto others by unlawful sabotage, then there will be serious consequences to your actions. Currently we do have laws in the *Summary Offences Act*. The federal Parliament have just introduced new laws under their criminal code in respect to the Aussie Farms mapping, which has significantly increased and threatened many farming families that are listed on that map. In fact I believe it has compromised their role as a charity under the *Charities Act*, because they are there to prevent cruelty, not to actually incite trespass and breaking the law by different individuals that threatens the livelihoods of those people listed on the map.

It is very clear where my position sits. I see two issues here, Chair, and I will finish on this. You have the animal welfare issues, which the industry is well aware of and continues to improve. As I said, the association with industry bodies like the RSPCA and others, I think, is far more helpful than having animal activists trespass, break the law and want to bring to the attention of the public certain animal welfare standards that they believe are undermining or compromising the current codes that we have here not only in Victoria but also in Australia.

It is very important. As I said, the farming communities are fragile. I have dealt with many of them that are suffering from drought and floods. They are feeling under pressure the whole time for a whole range of reasons, whether economic or social. They are the social fabric of our communities, like here in Warrnambool. We do lead the world with respect to improving welfare standards. Our trading partners we actually invest in in respect to improving the animal welfare standards in the processing of meat across the world. To take and strip all of that away because of a philosophical ideal in respect to moving from animal production to plant production would have a significant social and economic impact on Victoria and Australia as a whole.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Simon, for actually clearly enunciating the real agenda here: it is not actually about animal welfare, it is about ending animal-based production in the industry. You have had extensive experience in Australia and overseas. What is the rest of the world thinking about this? Is Australia a clean, green place that can produce products for export, or are we cruel to our animals and therefore we should not be exporting anything? Is the rest of the world going to close down animal-based production also, and what does that mean for this country?

Mr RAMSAY: Thank you, Mrs MacArthur, for your question. I actually think the world is envious of our position. We are an island. We are protected from infectious emergency animal diseases. We work very hard to have that protection in place, our biosecurity protection, and you have heard other witnesses raise concerns

around the compromise of those biosecurity issues if in fact we allowed animal activists or others to continue to trespass and break the law. We do provide clean—I do not like the word green, because you associate green with mould on many occasions, but we provide a very clean—low-cost, safe food, and we do not want to see that compromised.

We are recognised as being highly efficient. We are not subsidised like most of our European partners. We have China as one of our largest trading partners. We want to keep the opportunities. I think we export now around about 82 per cent of total food product to our trading partners globally. We do not want to compromise that. Our welfare standards are some of the highest in the world, recognised by our trading partners, and we continue to improve on that. So I think we are in a fantastic position here in Australia. We have a reasonably good climate—having said that, if you live anywhere other than here, in the north, you would not think so, but we do—and we are very efficient in producing very good, clean, safe, nutritious food. We do not want to compromise that.

Ms BATH: Thank you, Simon. I will not call you Mr Ramsay because I know you. Simon, in your submission you talked about that the Committee should consider allowing law enforcers to issue on-the-spot fines on private properties for biosecurity plan breaches. I just want to overlay that with a question in relation to policing and biosecurity. We have heard from people in this Inquiry so far to date that animal activists do not come in the white garb with the boots, with the covered shoes et cetera—and we have heard it in terms of the Yarragon on-farm invasion, with Caldermeade, with the Tyabb chicken, the meat industry, the eggs today we just heard, and indeed abattoirs as well—they come onto the property certainly without those biosecurity measures. I am interested in the police resourcing from your point of view, from your experience. Often we also hear that police are frustrated with the numbers, the quantity of people, and in effect they just want to get them off the property sometimes and secure the farmers. So in relation to the on-the-spot fines, do you think that they can be issued as they are now—if we introduce them—or do you need more policing? Some comments around that.

Mr RAMSAY: Well, I think if you asked most regional police commands they would say that they are underresourced, even now. Livestock theft is simply higher than what it was five years ago. The animal activists tend to work under the cover of darkness. Can you imagine a lonely farmhouse 20 miles from the nearest neighbour, a young family—wife, kids—by themselves and suddenly you have a convoy of animal activists charging across your family home and business and property taking photos, trespassing, breaking and entering into sheds and doing whatever they do? Can you imagine the emotional impact that would have if it was in fact a farmer, his family or a farmer's wife, who on many occasions are by themselves because the farmer is either working on the farm or away? It is an invasion of privacy. It is threatening. In my mind the animal activists themselves would be far better to provide another strategy to raise issues. I am not suggesting we are perfect in the industry. We need to improve the welfare standards of our businesses all the time, like any business always evolves in respect to producing a better product. But certainly the way that the animal activists behave in respect to trespass, break and enter and its terrorism activities under the cover of darkness, hiding in masks and scaring the hell out of farming families, who as I said are particularly fragile and isolated, to my mind is a criminal act and should be seen as such.

Mr BARTON: I think Mr Ramsay has articulated his view very well. Thank you.

Mr MEDDICK: How are you, Simon? Good to see you again.

Mr RAMSAY: Thanks, Andy. I do not know if you mean that.

Mr MEDDICK: It is always nice to come across you, and we have had many conversations which were quite convivial over the years. I have got a number of questions, but I will try and keep them down a bit if I can. Video evidence collected by animal activists over decades—so not just recently—has demonstrated that industry-enforced codes of practice repeatedly fail consumer expectations of animal welfare practices and that laws and standards are frequently breached. They have shown this on a number of occasions across different sections of the animal agriculture industry, be they slaughterhouses or other areas. Could you first of all explain to the Committee what you advise will resolve that dilemma? And secondly, under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*, with breaches of that Act it is considered a defence if those breaches occur against an animal that is identified as being a participant or part of animal agriculture. So things that the community would expect are

wrong for dogs and cats, for instance, have a defence if they are conducted against a farm animal. So given that the Act is up for review, or certain regulations of it are, if farm animals were to be then moved under the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act* and under those regulations in the future, would that solve community expectations of better standards of animal welfare and cruelty? Do you think that would be a good solution that would go a long way towards preventing animal activists going onto farms and trespassing?

Mr RAMSAY: My view is animal production is pretty well regulated now. We work—and I say ‘we’ as an animal producer—under significant regulatory regimes. There is a plethora of acts, and I think Mrs McArthur just named three of them I can remember, which I identified in my submission that we have to adhere to. If you want my honest opinion, I think we need to invest more in the RSPCA. I had a close relationship with the RSPCA, and I believe they do good work. Perhaps cats and dogs tend to be more of their membership’s concern, but nevertheless certainly back in the time that I worked closely with them in the live export industry, which you are very familiar with, there were significant improvements by industry and the RSPCA working together.

My view is if we are being serious about this and just homing in on the animal welfare issues, I strongly believe you yourself need to distance yourself from the more extreme, terrorist activity of the vegans, who basically are running the show under cover of animal rights or animal welfare, and actually work with industry. You will get a far better result than banging heads with primary producers, who are already battle weary in respect of a whole lot of other things, whether it is climate or economy, to improve standards. We have seen that in the live cattle exports, where there has been significant improvement over time. Some of the videos that you refer to are doctored; we know that. Some of them are so out of date—

Mr MEDDICK: They are not doctored—that has been proven.

Mr RAMSAY: Andy, Animals Australia spend half their funding doctoring videos.

Mr MEDDICK: That has been debunked, Simon. That claim has been debunked.

Mr RAMSAY: I am saying a better strategy to deal with the issue around animal welfare is working with those industries that have good reputations for improving and increasing animal welfare standards.

Mr MEDDICK: All right. I am heartened to hear that you want to involve the RSPCA more in animal agriculture. Isn’t that at odds, though, with so many in the animal agriculture industry and indeed with representations that have been made by the different farming federations? That they want the RSPCA out of animal agriculture and just dealing with dogs and cats.

Mr RAMSAY: The AVA has a slightly different view in respect to its role in, I guess, oversighting animal health issues around animal production. I am not suggesting we want more interference by the RSPCA. I am saying we want more resources to cull out the rogue operators. My view is that is where your concern is. Your underlying philosophical ideal is that you do not want animal production and animal farming—you have made that clear on many occasions publicly. You are at one extreme, whereas I am talking about actually moving to centre and just dealing with the animal welfare issues. I can say the industry at this time is very regulated in respect to its responsibilities in animal welfare.

In relation to another question about penalties, I have gone through what currently Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Commonwealth have. The issue was raised before. For the magistrates, even in the *Summary Offences Act*, to charge and apply a \$1 fine to a group of activists that caused economic loss in hundreds of thousands of dollars is a joke. The Minister for Agriculture should be out there saying as such. In fact she has a significant role in providing promotional material through the department of agriculture or whatever it is now in respect to animal welfare standards and the right of farmers to protect their livelihoods and businesses.

The CHAIR: Well, this Inquiry is about to report back to the Minister.

Mr RAMSAY: Great.

Mr GEPP: Nice to see you again, Mr Ramsay. I hope you are well. Just on that issue, we heard earlier—I think you might not have been here; it was before lunch—from some egg producers about an invasion that they suffered, and I asked the question about what sort of economic loss they had incurred in that circumstance. I think, from memory, they said something in the order of \$10 000 damage to property et cetera. If you are proposing to us, which you are, an increase in penalties, where should that money go? Should it go back into consolidated revenue?

Mr RAMSAY: Well, that is perhaps a discussion you might want to have with the Treasurer, but I think the intensive industries like the pig industry and the chicken industry have had significant issues in respect to animal activism, and they have a significant, serious biosecurity plan. They all have the plans; they are required to have the plans under their own industry codes. The on-the-spot fines that New South Wales adopted I think is a good approach in that it is related to their biosecurity act. So the requirement to have a biosecurity plan and for police to be able to provide on-the-spot fines I think will weed out some of these young academics that seem to enjoy their pastime trespassing. The threat of a \$1000 fine on the spot to a few of these uni students that obviously have a significant amount of time spare to involve themselves in any number of protests would probably make them think twice about the consequences of their actions if they want to trespass on other people's properties and impact the family, the business and their biosecurity.

As the Chair said, actually I thought your task under the reference was to review the current penalties associated with trespass under whatever act it is—the summaries act I think in Victoria—and make recommendations in respect to whether that was adequate or in fact whether the fines need to be increased.

Also if I may, Chair, maybe a recommendation might be to give magistrates and the courts some guidance with respect to providing an underpinning of the penalty—that is, no more \$1 fines, which is just absolutely ridiculous. I think my submission indicates somewhere around a \$5000 fine.

Mrs McARTHUR: Mr Ramsay, thank you so much again. Should Aussie Farms retain its charity status and therefore tax exemption status? I think when the chairman or executive officer or whatever he is came to our last hearing he did say that he would like an end to all animal production. So are they really there to protect animal welfare, and should they retain all that sort of benefit?

Mr RAMSAY: Thank you for the question. I understand the charities commissioner has looked at Aussie Farms under the *Charities Act*, and my understanding is that the act allows them to prevent or relieve the suffering of animals. I think that is the context on which they receive charitable status, and I think they received about \$11.4 million last year in charity funding. You would have to say that by mapping people's private addresses and listing them in the public domain to encourage or incite animal activists to trespass and break the law actually exceeds the terms of reference under which they get charitable status. So a bit like the federal Nationals Minister, David Littleproud, I would probably seek to remove their charitable status in fact if they continue that behaviour.

The CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, Mr Ramsay, I would like to thank you for your time and contribution. You will receive a copy of the transcript for proofreading.

Mr RAMSAY: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.