
Establishing an independent Office of Animal Welfare is long overdue.

It is long overdue from the point of view of improving the welfare of animals, obviously.

It is also a long overdue promise from Labor.

While the animal rights movement has been working hard to improve animal welfare for decades in Australia, the call for an Office of Animal Welfare became very loud following the 2011 live export scandal.

As Former High Court Judge and patron of Voiceless, The Hon Michael Kirby recounts:

“On the ABC’s Four Corners program in May 2011, we collectively learned the uncomfortable truth about live export to Indonesia. More than 500,000 Australian cattle are sent to Indonesian slaughterhouses each year, and many face brutal treatment. We watched these animals have their eyes gouged, tendons cut and tails broken, and we heard the guttural bellowing of intense pain.

Confronted by this disturbing reality, the Australian public demanded change from their political representatives.

In November 2011, two and a half years ago now, the ALP National Conference baulked at a motion calling for an end to live exports.

This no doubt disappointed the millions of Australians who are concerned about animal welfare and were appalled by the exposure of the cruelty involved in the live export trade.

What instead gained the support of the ALP National Conference at that time was a motion calling for the establishment of an Independent Office of Animal Welfare.
As a result, in November a year later, the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party Caucus endorsed the Caucus Live Animal Export Working Group to develop a model for an Office of Animal Welfare. Its functions were proposed to include developing and reviewing domestic animal welfare standards, harmonising domestic laws and monitoring and reporting on surveillance and enforcement of domestic and live animal export regulation.

The Working Party was directed to report back to caucus by the end of February 2013, with a model for an independent office.

In March 2013 the Agriculture Minister Mr Joe Ludwig informed Greens Leader Christine Milne during question time in the Senate that he had received the report from the Working Party. But what has happened since that time, and where is the political will to deliver on the wishes of Labor’s National Conference? That is anyone’s guess.

Minister Ludwig employed the time honoured tool of buck-passing to the states in his response to Senator Milne. His lack of enthusiasm was palpable when he said:

“I recognise that there is work to be done in this area but the primary responsibility for animal welfare issues does remain with the state and territories”.

There are indeed complex constitutional issues involved when it comes to jurisdiction over animal welfare issues, but this bill shows they can be accommodated.

A handful of Labor backbenchers, including Kelvin Thomson and Melissa Parkes, have been strong advocates for an Office of Animal Welfare.

Yet they appear to be voices in the Labor wilderness.

On May 15 Labor and the Coalition voted down a motion, put by my colleague Australian Greens animal welfare spokesperson Senator Lee Rhiannon in the Senate, calling on
Minister Ludwig to immediately report to Parliament on what progress had been made to set up the Office. The motion also asked the Minister to commit to legislation to establish the Office before the September 2013 election.

The failure to move on the ALP National Conference’s resolution has disappointed many. Particularly as costing from the Parliamentary Budget Office obtained by the Greens show its establishment would be virtually cost neutral - $0.5 million in 2013/2014.

There is nothing stopping the Government from acting now to establish the Office except political will.

It is interesting to compare the inaction of the Gillard government in establishing an Office of Animal Welfare to its response in May 2011 after the Indonesian live export scandal broke.

In the face of massive public dismay at the animal cruelty that had been exposed in the live export industry it took a mere five months for the government to announce a new regulatory scheme for live exports, the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System or ESCAS scheme.

Yet we have seen two and a half years of feet-dragging by Minister Ludwig when it comes to the relatively simple job of establishing an independent Office of Animal Welfare.

In recent months Animals Australia have done more outstanding work to expose the cruel practices in many overseas abattoirs where livestock from Australia are slaughtered.

These tragic developments are a further reminder why we need the Office of Animal Welfare.

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The Greens back an end to live exports. An end to this cruel trade can deliver a win win – we can lift animal welfare standards and increase the number of jobs in regional Australia by processing the meat here.

The Gillard Government likes to trumpet its new ESCAS system as transformative when it comes to protecting the welfare of live animals exported overseas, claiming that “Australia is the only country to introduce reforms that require specific animal welfare conditions for its exported livestock”.

Yet the reality is that expose after expose shows that the system is failing animals.

It is clear that the shipment from Australia and the slaughter of livestock in overseas abattoirs cannot be controlled from a desk in Canberra.

The Australian Greens have a bill to end live exports, the Live Animal Export (Slaughter) Prohibition Bill 2012, currently being debated in the Senate.

This is the same bill my colleague Senator Rachel Siewert and I introduced in 2011 to then have voted down by the major parties.

I have also seconed the introduction of the Live Animal Export (Restriction and Prohibition) Bill 2013 by my colleague the Member for Denison.

Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon has also published a position paper identifying five key issues the government must address to end the live export trade, grow Australia’s meat processing and gain the benefits of creating jobs and expanding regional economies.
Processing animals in Australia protects them from inhumane treatment and ensures our laws and standards regarding animal welfare can be upheld.

Because of the failure of the Gillard government to act to transition away from live exports, a key function of the new Office of Animal Welfare is to review and monitor the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock and the Exporter Supply Chain Assurance System and to undertake inquiries and prepare reports on these matters.

Recommendations of the office arising from this function must be publicly responded to by the Minister.

Other key functions of the Office are to:

- establish it as a Centre of Excellence for the collection and dissemination of information about animal welfare issues that impact the Commonwealth

- undertake inquiries, commission research and prepare reports about issues including:
  - the effectiveness of Commonwealth laws that apply to the export of live animals
  - scientific and legal issues that arise in respect of the Commonwealth’s animal welfare policy and
  - the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy and the Model Codes of Practice for Animal Welfare.

The Office will seek to harmonise animal welfare laws of the Commonwealth, States and Territories and will be handed an oversight role examining the activities and effectiveness of the Live Export Advisory Group and the Australian Animal Welfare Advisory Committee.

The Office will scrutinise the Department of Agriculture’s activities in areas such as monitoring the effectiveness of the
Commonwealth’s animal welfare laws and the Department’s compliance with these laws.

The Office will also be charged with considering the effectiveness of the Department’s implementation of the Commonwealth’s animal welfare policy.

To assist the Office perform these duties to a high standard the CEO of the new Office of Animal Welfare will be guided by the advice of an Animal Welfare Advisory Committee. On this Committee will sit representatives of animal welfare organisations, consumer groups, scientists and ethicists specialising in animal welfare issues, the Department and commercial producers or purchasers of animals or animal products.

The Office’s key functions, including:

- reviewing and monitoring live export standards and the ESCAS system, and
- reviewing and reporting on mechanisms capable of improving animal welfare at Commonwealth, State and Territory levels

are supported by the ability of the CEO of the Office to report and make recommendations to Parliament which the Minister is required to publicly respond to.

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The abuse of animal welfare uncovered in the live exports trade is just one of many issues driving the Greens to establish an independent watchdog for animal welfare.

Cruel practices undertaken as part of factory farming are motivating many Australians to campaign for improved conditions for animals.

While animal welfare is the responsibility of Federal, state and territory agriculture departments, experience shows it is often
given short shrift.

Charging departments of agriculture with responsibility for animal welfare has proven to be a failure. Their focus has been on assisting the very industries which put profits before the humane treatment of animals.

This is clearly illustrated by the fact that it has been animal welfare groups which have acted as the watchdogs and champions of animal rights, not agriculture departments.

It has been Animals Australia and the RSPCA which have been so effective in exposing the string of scandals in the live export industry.

I would like to congratulate these organisations as well as tenacious bodes like Animal Liberation, the Humane Society International Australia and Voiceless, which have been relentlessly and strategically campaigning for the better treatment of animals in Australia.

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The Australian Greens believe creating an Independent Office of Animal Welfare would be another step towards improved animal welfare, protection and rights.

The establishment of this Office will help put animal welfare firmly on the federal government's agenda, at a time when big agribusiness and factory farming predominates.

I commend this bill to the House.

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