

Andrew Wilkie - live animal exports 18 Aug 11

In closing the debate for now Mr Speaker may I say that the shocking animal abuse shown on the ABC's Four Corners program threw up an opportunity for the Government, or equally the Opposition in this power sharing parliament, to finally do something about Australia's cruel and economically counter-productive live animal export trade.

But the Government didn't. Instead of immediately halting shipments of all cattle exports to Indonesia until proper animal welfare safeguards were put in place the Government dithered, then belatedly did stop the trade, then dithered some more before it eventually gave the go-ahead for the resumption of exports without proper safeguards and without the legislation to enshrine them.

What a shambles Mr Speaker. And what a breathtaking demonstration of the Government's disregard for animal welfare, as well as for the vast majority of people in the community who are deeply concerned with animal welfare and/or Australia's economic interests.

Not that the Opposition's any better when it comes to this issue Mr Speaker, the alternative government preferring instead to argue for no suspension of trade and ridiculing those who speak up for the animals.

The Opposition plumbed new depths recently when Liberal Senator Chris Back even went so far as to accuse Animals Australia of paying an Indonesian abattoir to torture a beast. This is an outrageous slur on the organisation and on the courageous investigator Lyn White in particular. Now I've got to know Senator Back through our work on the Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform and I think he's a decent man. But what on earth came over him to peddle such an offensive, unbelievable and misleading tale without revealing any hard evidence?

I call on the Opposition Leader to pull Senator Back into line because it's unacceptable for the alternative prime minister of this country to be tolerating, some would say encouraging, such bad behaviour by inaction. No wonder we have ugly sentiments circulating in some parts of the community right now given the poor example that's being set by some of the country's most influential political leaders.

And while he's disciplining his parties the Opposition Leader might also admonish the Member for Parkes, who had the temerity to describe the RSPCA as a "fringe animal activist group" simply because the Society dares to give voice to the millions of Australians outraged at the animal cruelty being experienced routinely within Australia's live animal export system. The RSPCA Mr Speaker, one of the most well respected organisations in Australia whose sin, it seems, is to do no more than speak truth to the powerful commercial interests pre-occupied with making as much money as possible from an industry more concerned with its commercial self-interest, than with doing the right thing.

Mr Speaker, I call again on all Members to put their support behind the *Live Animal Export Restriction and Prohibition Bill 2011*.

In essence this Bill would end all live animal exports from Australia by mid-2014, and in the interim mandate appropriate safeguards throughout the entire length of the supply chain, including stunning in foreign abattoirs processing Australian animals.

This Bill is endorsed by Animals Australia and the RSPCA, and supported by an enormous number of Australians who understand that the live animal export system is broken and beyond repair, and the arguments against shutting it down are baseless.

It escapes me how it is that neither the Government, nor the Opposition, seem set to support the Bill when the serious problems with the live animal export industry are so obvious to so many of our constituents.

Mr Speaker how much more evidence does the Government and the Opposition need to see before they agree to wind up the industry?

It's not like the Four Corners program is the only evidence we have here. For year after year, episode after episode, in country after country we've learned of the systemic cruelty being metered out to Australian live stock. Over the last eight years in the Middle East alone some eight countries have been shown to harbour serious abuse of Australian livestock.

Even in the short time since the Four Corners program we've seen compelling new evidence of continuing abuse, for instance the footage collected by Animals Australia of sheep being seriously mistreated in a Middle Eastern saleyard.

And just in the last week we've learned of the live export ship, the Al Messilah, which was loaded with 67,000 sheep about a week ago and which is still stuck in Adelaide having become unserviceable. Even if the vessel had got away successfully the animals aboard would have faced a two to three week voyage to the Middle East but this delay has already added at least another week to their torture.

As it was, thousands of the sheep aboard the Al Messilah were already condemned to a miserable death because of the atrocious conditions onboard, including absurdly dense loading like the three animals per square metre that's been witnessed on other live export ships. Add to that the effects of climate, for example the 45 degrees that can be experienced routinely in the Middle Eastern summer, and no wonder so many animals suffer so terribly. The lucky ones die early.

Mr Speaker the Al Messilah will not be the end of this shameful episode in Australian history, and in fact later today Animals Australia and the RSPCA will be revealing more footage, this time of the shocking cruelty being endured by Australian livestock in Turkey.

But regrettably any genuine reform to Australia's indefensible live animal export industry looks to be unlikely until the industry, and the governments which serve it, drop the disinformation and start to be more honest with the community.

As I've said before in this place, ending all live animal exports will not destroy our relationship with Indonesia simply because our ties with that country are stronger than critics give them credit for. They're certainly strong enough to survive any Australian decision to stop selling Indonesia just one form of one particular foodstuff.

Nor will Indonesians go hungry when we outlaw live animal exports because on average they consume just two kilograms of red meat each a year. In other words, even the complete removal from the Indonesian market of fresh Australian beef would make virtually no

difference whatsoever, except for the more affluent Indonesians who tend to eat Australian beef and who have the means to purchase and store boxed Australian meat processed by Australian workers in Australian abattoirs.

Significantly Mr Speaker, the Indonesian Government plans to be beef self-sufficient by as early as 2014 anyway. So rather than ramping up our live animal export trade with that country, common sense, not to mention good business practice, would see the Australian beef industry working now towards an alternative business model which doesn't rely on live beef exports to Indonesia.

The religious dimension of this matter has also been mischievously overcooked by the live animal export industry, because the fact is that the overwhelming number of relatively affluent Muslims who tend to consume Australian meat would have no objection to buying that meat so long as it's been processed in an Australian Halal certified abattoir.

Moreover the argument is ridiculous that banning live cattle exports to Indonesia will somehow destroy the beef industry, because the direct and indirect value of the red meat industry in Australia is something in the order of \$17 billion dollars and employs some 55,000 workers. By comparison the live export trade comes in at about \$1 billion and 10,000 workers. In other words, ending the live export trade will have a marginal effect, even more so when the workers shift to the processed meat sector.

Mr Speaker please excuse me for repeating here some of the very same points I've made before. But it seems that very few Members in this place listened before so I'll keep on having my say until they do start listening.

For instance let me say again that the economic argument is in fact strongly in favour of banning live animal exports because of the way the trade is cannibalising the processed meat industry at the expense of thousands of Australian jobs. So any short-term commercial jolt will be limited while the medium- to long-term benefit will be enormous.

And in any case the three year phase out period stipulated in the Bill gives the industry more than enough time to move from live to processed meat. For instance the mothballed abattoirs in Katherine and Innisfail could be refurbished and reopened, the mooted abattoir in Darwin could be well on its way to completion, and thousands of unemployed and underemployed workers could be trained.

Moreover three years is more than enough time to solve the challenges of steering the northern Australian beef industry away from live exports and towards processing onshore. I am mindful in particular of issues like cattle breeds, transport difficulties in the wet and the cost of northern feedlots. But surely we are a decent enough people to give primacy to animal welfare, democratic enough to respond to public opinion and smart enough to solve our farming challenges.

Mr Speaker this Bill is fundamentally different to the Bill put forward by the Member for Melbourne. While his would legislate the immediate end to all live animal exports, mine recognises the social, economic and political merit in giving the industry a transition period, and in the interim mandating appropriate safeguards the entire length of the supply chain including stunning in the foreign abattoirs.

This is, I feel, a more sensible approach - to quickly put in place effective animal welfare safeguards before the resumption of trade, including mandatory stunning, pending the wind up of the industry within three years.

Such an approach also considers the graziers, the indigenous station hands, the truckers, the shipping line operators, the feed producers, and everyone else involved in the live animal export industry.

Fast-tracking safeguards in Indonesia is also the only way to help the tens of thousands of animals currently in Indonesian feedlots who are being, and will continue to be, treated in exactly the same way as the poor animals we saw on the Four Corners program.

Mr Speaker the live animal export trade is unethical and not in Australia's economic interest. That the Government and Opposition might not support the *Live Animal Export Restriction and Prohibition Bill 2011* is deeply disappointing, not just because of what it says about the Labor, Liberal and National parties, but more importantly because another opportunity will be lost to put in place reasonable and effective animal welfare safeguards.

This should be a matter of conscience and I appeal to all in this place to follow their hearts and support the Bill. It already has the support of Animals Australia, the RSPCA and many people involved in the beef industry. The support of the Parliament will legislate the safeguards our animals need right now and shut down a trade that is fundamentally broken, systemically cruel and not in Australia's economic interest.

Mr Speaker I received an email some weeks ago from a mother who wrote that she doesn't want to have to respond to her young daughter one day asking why we knew how bad the live animal export trade was and yet did nothing to stop it. As the father of a four and a half year old daughter and another who is three tomorrow, I think I know how that woman feels and promise not to let this end here.

Prime Minister and Opposition Leader please do the right thing and end the shocking animal cruelty endemic in Australia's live animal export industry. Please support my Bill or, if nothing else, at least demand Australian standards be applied right along the supply chain, including stunning, and then legislate the reform to protect the animals from those who will follow us.

Prime Minister and Opposition Leader there are important principles at stake here. And to paraphrase Montesquieu, the deterioration of a government, or opposition, begins almost always by the decay of its principles.

Thank you Mr Speaker.