

The Australian

Live exports are cruel and must be banned

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A ship loaded in Darwin with 3000 cattle destined for Indonesia last August. Picture: Terry Trewin

Source: Supplied

AUSTRALIA is a proud and beautiful country. The people are warm, progressive, well-educated and known across the globe for their outstanding hospitality.

It is no wonder that Australia ranks No 2 on the global human development index.

This is why the world watched in shock last year when we became aware of the horrific circumstances that Australia's live export industry was willing to supply animals to Indonesia.

While Animals Australia's investigation and the subsequent award-winning ABC Four Corners program generated outrage across Australia, the images of Australian cattle being eye-gouged, kicked, whipped and tortured created a similar outpouring of rage across the globe. The vision that we had of Australia as an ethical and forward-thinking nation changed in that moment.

The Gillard government's decision to suspend the trade was seen internationally as the obvious and correct response. In that moment the international community believed this was a rogue industry that finally had been caught out and, as such, would never again have the support of the Australian government.

It was only through the efforts of Animals Australia and the RSPCA that we were awakened to the fact this was not the first time the live export industry had been exposed for supplying animals to barbaric treatment.

We were stunned to learn that despite years of evidence documenting the cruel treatment of Australian animals throughout

the Middle East, this industry has retained the unconditional support of successive Australian governments. Moreover, this support was in direct conflict with the views of the vast majority of Australians, who were appalled by their country's participation in this trade.

It came as no surprise that the failure of the government to ban this trade has been an ongoing source of disbelief for caring Australians and, for many, despair.

Their despair, however, will only increase on learning that Australia's involvement in the live export trade has been undermining efforts to improve animal welfare on a global scale.

Australia is a member of the OIE, the World Organisation for Animal Health. This international body accepted the challenge and responsibility of improving animal welfare across the world, and Australia and all of the countries it presently exports to are signatories to the OIE.

In the media the Australian government has termed OIE guidelines "international standards", but this is misleading. The OIE "animal welfare" guidelines discourage only the worst abuses such as throwing, dragging, beating and slashing at animals' leg tendons with knives.

However, lacking enforcement powers, the only way the OIE can be effective in reducing the worst abuses is if signatories make compliance with OIE guidelines the basis for bilateral trade agreements.

Australia's ongoing willingness to sell animals to countries that are failing to comply with OIE guidelines has been actively undermining the work of the OIE to encourage animal welfare improvements in those countries.

This is in addition to the example that live export inherently sets to countries still to recognise that we have ethical responsibilities to protect animals from cruel treatment. Shipping animals halfway across the world only to be slaughtered sets the worst possible example, as it is contrary to every established animal welfare principle and can never be ethically justified.

There are inherent risks that can never be overcome when a vessel takes to sea with live animals on board. While the world has been shocked to see the treatment that Australian exported animals have received in the Middle East and Indonesia, people were equally distressed to learn of the routine suffering animals endured on Australian live export shipments.

How can an industry that has been responsible for the suffering and deaths of 2.5 million animals during transportation in the past three decades maintain government support and be allowed to continue? That surviving animals have been provided to countries where there are no laws to protect them from cruelty is simply further evidence of the immoral nature of this industry and the inconceivable abandonment of these animals by the Australian government.

Every decent person across the world applauded the action taken by the Gillard government to suspend the trade to Indonesia as well as the tabling of legislation to ban live exports. It was taken for granted by the international community that a vote in the Australian parliament to end the trade would be unanimous.

We were therefore appalled to learn that both main political parties in Australia refused to support this legislation, despite overwhelming support from the Australian community.

The questions need to be asked: why do the operators of an industry that brings such shame on Australia and is responsible for such suffering have a stranglehold over Australia's decision-makers? How can so few counter the opinions of so many? How can an industry that has animal cruelty at its heart fail to move the hearts of Australia's political leaders? Some things are just wrong and no amount of profit, no amount of excuses, will make them right.

Tragically, Australia's live trade is one such example. Overwhelmingly, there is a shared belief across the globe that humanity has ethical responsibilities to protect animals from harm. That a country such as Australia has failed to do so must be a source of anguish for the vast majority of Australians who care about the humane treatment of animals.

Present initiatives by the Gillard government to finally regulate this trade are all too little, too late. The only way to repair

the damage done is for the trade to be banned and, through doing so, to finally send the right message to importing nations: that animals and their welfare matter.

To all Australians who last year united in opposition to this cruel trade, be heartened by the fact the international animal welfare community and all who are compassionate worldwide are with you. Our message is: do not give up.

We will throw our weight and support behind your efforts and that of Animals Australia and other welfare groups, until your government recognises its responsibility to ban this cruel and immoral trade in living beings: a trade that brings great shame not only on Australia but on humanity itself.

Chris DeRose is the president and founder of Last Chance for Animals, a US-based animal rights organisation.
