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Animal welfare cruelled by conflict of interest

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OPINION

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Australian cows are loaded on to a truck after arriving at the Tanjung Priok port in Jakarta, Indonesia, in May 2011.

As long as it remains the responsibility of the Agriculture Department, animal welfare will not receive the attention that it deserves and that the community expects.

The horrific revelations last year of cruelty towards Australian animals in Indonesia, Turkey and the Middle East caused a public outcry and led to dramatic ramifications for the live animal export industry, as well as for our diplomatic relations.

Given these events, a reasonable person might think the Agriculture Department, which has governmental responsibility for animals, would have seen fit to devote a sentence or two to the importance of their welfare in recent submissions regarding the department's work overseas.

Last Friday I asked Agriculture Department officials in a foreign affairs inquiry why they had failed to mention animal welfare in their written and oral submissions. The department said it was an "oversight".

But what this oversight has again highlighted is the need for an independent office of animal welfare.

The Agriculture Department's priority is to promote the interests of primary industry, and I have no issue with this. Indeed, my father is a farmer and I understand some of the challenges farmers face on a daily basis.

However, this stated aim of defending and promoting agriculture and primary industry conflicts irreconcilably with the responsibility to protect the welfare of animals and it puts the minister in an invidious position.

During the live cattle export suspension to Indonesia, farming groups accused the minister of having a conflict of interest because he had to attend to the welfare of animals as well as the concerns of industry.

This notion of conflicted interests is the reason we do not put ministers for mines and resources in charge of the environment. In my view this approach should apply to the Agriculture Department as well.

Animal welfare is an issue of increasing significance for the community. But while it stays under agriculture, it will not receive the priority it deserves and that the community expects. Indeed, one could argue that progress in animal welfare has been so slow in this country because the interests of animals have always come second to commercial interests.

One need only look at Europe to see how embarrassingly behind Australia is in terms of our treatment of animals.

The European Union has banned the battery hen cage on the basis of unacceptable cruelty. Despite this determination being made in 1999, with the ban taking effect last month, there is no legislative movement on this issue in Australia.

The use of sow confinement crates is restricted to four weeks in the EU in light of the suffering caused. Australian producers can continue to use such methods until 2017 for a sow's full four-month pregnancy.

Current governmental processes in place to assess the treatment of animals have consistently failed to make any meaningful improvements to animal welfare.

After three years of consultation, the review of the industry codes of practice for the welfare of cattle and sheep are still under way, and we still don't have a decision on the appropriateness of un-stunned slaughter in Australia.

Despite wide and lengthy public consultation on how long dairy calves can be legally denied feed, this decision was again delayed, making the default position the industry's wishes of 30 hours.

Australia has the opportunity to lead the world when it comes to our treatment of animals. That we are instead trailing other developed nations shows how clearly change is needed.

The Labor national conference in December unanimously endorsed my motion that the government establish an independent office of animal welfare at the federal level, and I note the need for similar offices at the state level.

An independent body that can identify the need for change to meet community and consumer expectations will benefit farmers as well as the animals. Currently, change is only occurring through a crisis, sparked by a public backlash when cruelty was exposed, rather than potential issues being proactively identified and addressed by government.

The retailer backlash that Australia's wool industry faced in response to mulesing and the disruption of the live cattle trade to Indonesia despite years of documented cruelty concerns are just two crises that could have been avoided by the farming community had animal welfare issues been examined independently and proactively.

Change is needed, not only for animals but for farmers who need to be able to plan for the future with certainty and confidence. I look forward to the implementation of this important policy objective.

Melissa Parke is the federal Labor MP for Fremantle.



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