

Independent Office of Animal Welfare

Ms PARKE (Fremantle—Parliamentary Secretary For Homelessness and Social Housing and Parliamentary Secretary for Mental Health) (21:54): I want to take this opportunity to speak about the proposed Independent Office of Animal Welfare. Last November, caucus acted on the 2011 National ALP Conference platform commitment to establish this much-needed oversight body and I am pleased to say that work on the model for the office is well advanced. Australians care about animals, farmers care for their livestock, families care for their pets and people feel passionately about Australian wildlife. There is virtual unanimity regarding the importance of the humane treatment of animals, yet public faith in Australia's animal welfare system has been undermined in recent years by revelation after revelation of cruelty to livestock, both here and in countries to which we export live animals. In almost every case, the systemic mistreatment has been revealed by animal welfare groups, and the public is right to wonder how these incidents can happen when Australia has good animal welfare laws and prides itself as a world leader in animal welfare.

I believe the answer is relatively simple. The industry self-regulation has often amounted to self-delusion, and unfortunately no existing government department has overarching responsibility for animal welfare as its core role—and that is what is needed. Currently, the federal Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, or DAFF, has chief responsibility for animal welfare policy, and most state and territory departments of agriculture and primary industries are responsible for animal welfare legislation. The regulatory regimes for live animal and meat exports are currently administered and enforced by DAFF and include welfare considerations. Other departments at both levels of government are involved to varying degrees in specific animal welfare issues on the basis that these are incidentally relevant to their core areas of responsibility, such as environment and health.

Departments of agriculture, including DAFF, are not widely regarded by the community or animal welfare groups as impartial when it comes to animal welfare. DAFF's historical role as an agency with a core responsibility for ensuring profitable primary industry means that it is ill-suited to take on the growing role of animal welfare oversight and regulation, especially in relation to livestock. It is inherently conflicted because improvements in animal welfare are often not consonant with increased productivity and profitability, and vice versa. These conflicts of interest skew decision-making in the development processes for the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines and the Australian Standards for the Export of Livestock.

Decision-making committees also tend to be dominated by industry and agriculture. A lack of independent animal welfare science is also a major problem. While the Australian animal welfare system strongly advocates the need for policy to be evidenced based and to reflect scientific knowledge, this is currently not often the case. Research topics are prioritised and controlled by livestock industries in partnership with DAFF, even though much of the funding is derived publicly. Commonly, industry bodies dictate whether research findings are published in scientific journals. The results of too many animal welfare studies remain commercial in confidence and not subject to independent peer review and public access.

What is required, and what this Labor government is proud to be developing, is an independent office of animal welfare. As a statutory authority outside the agriculture portfolio, the office will be dedicated to animal welfare policy, science and law, and will be independent of undue influence from competing political and commercial interests. It will be internationally recognised as a centre of excellence in animal welfare. This would be the ideal framework for assessing emerging animal welfare issues in a more objective and consistent manner, and to demonstrate to our trading partners the importance of animal welfare to the Australian people. For the first time, the Australian government would be able to provide an expert animal welfare opinion free of the conflicts of interest that characterise existing arrangements. The office would take the lead role in managing the development of national animal welfare policy, including the standards and guidelines, and facilitating harmonised legal outcomes by the states and territories. The office would not administer or enforce animal welfare legislation—currently, the responsibility of states and territories—due to the political, constitutional and budgetary difficulties this would involve. However, it would oversee the live export system since this is a specific responsibility of the Commonwealth.

A significant proportion of the resources and funding for the office would be sourced from existing government structures. The functions proposed for the office do not represent a significant increase to those already provided for, and there would be considerable cost savings by the rationalisation of existing animal welfare committees and processes. This is a real opportunity for Australia to manage animal welfare in a better, fairer and more cost-effective way and I believe this reform will be warmly welcomed by the Australian community. I would like to acknowledge Mr Jed Goodfellow and Dr Jenny Hood for their assistance with the proposed model.