

[Review] Malcolm Caulfield.

Animals in Australia: Use and Abuse. Vivid, 2018. 336pp.

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Reflecting on the last decade, Malcolm Caulfield argues that revelations of extreme cruelty in the live export and greyhound racing industries have ‘altered forever the animal welfare landscape in Australia’ (viii); at the same time, substantial progress in animal welfare has been lacking. Critical to his analysis is another recent development: the backlash by industry interests, supported by their political and media chums, to the articulated concerns of unprecedented numbers of Australians. This disjunction, between public disquiet about animal welfare and the absence of a ‘meaningful political response’ (35), underpins Caulfield’s important account of the use and abuse of animals in Australia.

The crisis in animal welfare regulation is most marked in the animal use sector where the influence of industry bodies is matched by the power of state and federal agriculture departments in policy development and standard-setting. While making clear that the book is not a legal text, Caulfield outlines key weaknesses in the regulatory process and the law, arguing that the latter is ‘in the main written to be immune from challenge’ (126). In addition to conflicts of interest, inconsistency and the express exemption of routine husbandry practices, core statutory provisions are couched in the language of ‘unnecessary’ and ‘unreasonable’ cruelty, a limitation exacerbated by major problems with enforcement.

If law is a blunt instrument for effecting change, then science becomes a powerful tool for rationalising industry practices. With expertise in science as well as law, Caulfield provides a valuable account of animal welfare science and its hijacking by the same interests that effectively control the regulatory process. The issues canvassed include industry control of science funding,

inappropriate and misleading use of statistics, and a focus on physical health and biological functioning at the expense of behavioural and other measures of animal well-being. The recent poultry standards consultation clearly illustrates that the weighting of these different measures is hotly contested and that ‘we will be going around in circles for some considerable time if we rely on science to resolve what is essentially an ethical dilemma’ (95).

In addition to the structural frameworks, the power of animal use industries is bolstered by something more opaque: the reverence accorded farmers by many Australians. Here, Don Watson’s words about ‘the power of the bush’ are cited to elegant effect as Caulfield grapples with the complicity of urban dwellers in the disproportionate influence exercised by rural interests. Nor do the public escape a broader critical appraisal: while the ‘average Australian wants improvements in animal welfare’ it is ‘too low down’ (298) their list of voting priorities to compel political action. This is important because significant improvements in the welfare of farmed animals are unlikely ‘until at least one major political party makes animal welfare an election issue’ (33).

Caulfield’s pessimism – there ‘is little evidence this is going to happen in the near future’ (33) – is justified; nevertheless, it appears to pre-date community outrage over the recent live sheep export footage and the resulting shift in federal Labor’s policy settings. This offers hope of some improvement. Given the political reality, however, we must settle for incremental rather than radical change, a point that Caulfield makes on more than one occasion. Even so, I think something more might have been said about the dangers of a reformist agenda. Indeed, the way powerful interests first oppose then co-opt reforms in order to rationalise the continuation of cruel industries is starkly illustrated by the aftermath of both the live export and greyhound racing exposés with which the book opens.

Co-option by industry interests is also a possibility if an independent animal welfare office is established in the future. That such a body is essential to progressing animal welfare is beyond dispute. As Caulfield says, dismantling of the disproportionate influence of vested interests requires transfer of responsibility for animal welfare from state and federal agriculture departments to an independent nationally-based agency, as well as politicians ‘informed by independently-assessed animal welfare science’ (297). This kind of reform is supported not only

by animal advocates but also the mainstream Productivity Commission. But history is replete with examples of regulatory failure by statutory bodies; establishing one will be the first step – ensuring its independence and resourcing will need to be an ongoing priority.

In any case, as we wait for reform, this book helps to provide the information necessary to demand it of our politicians. Caulfield's diverse background and expertise allow him to enlighten and educate on a wide range of issues, as well as adding a fresh perspective to matters much discussed elsewhere. For example, with respect to the legislative threshold of 'unnecessary' cruelty, Caulfield's focus is not only on how common husbandry practices have come to define what is 'necessary' but whether in fact it is 'necessary' to feed on animals at all. This point helps to link the chapter 'Eating Meat', which includes detailed information on nutrients and biochemistry, with the previous chapter on the law and thus provides some continuity between these apparently disparate topics.

Indeed, the book's eclectic content is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it provides a wealth of information about a wide variety of animal welfare topics, all within a framework that encompasses science and philosophy, politics and law. With the key role of science in animal welfare debates, the chapter 'Animal Welfare Science' is particularly valuable, especially as many animal advocates lack expertise in scientific matters. On the other hand, the brief discussion of theories in the section on ethics and morals provides little guidance on how to determine the thornier animal protection issues. And the book, taken as a whole, feels a little disjointed, with the later chapters jumping from 'Killing for Pleasure and Hunting' to 'Consumer Pressure' to 'Companion Animals' then back to 'Wildlife and Feral Animals'.

Some further identification of common themes might have been helpful here and enhanced the overall coherence of the analysis. For example, the problems around companion animal welfare are conceptualised differently from those of farmed animals, a distinction commonly found in the animal law literature but one that, in my view, is overstated. Pets clearly receive greater legal protection than livestock, in part because of their relative visibility but also because our interest in using them as companions coincides much more closely with their interests than our use of animals for fibre and food. But does this mean that the 'issue with abandoned and unwanted (companion) animals is really one of lack of education' (274)? While

education is important, the role of the pet industry in successfully hindering attempts to toughen the regulatory environment suggests parallels with farmed animal regulation and the political pandering to hobby breeders has echoes of the populist deference to the ordinary bloke in the bush.

But this book is clearly pitched at a general rather than an academic audience and too theoretical a bent might have been counterproductive to its aims (though the lack of pinpoint references is frustrating for those who are minded to delve more deeply). As it stands, it is a timely stocktake of animal use and abuse in Australia and one that prompts the reader to ponder how power is exercised in this domain. With its accessibility, extensive detail, and a refreshingly candid approach, this book is a welcome addition to the animal protection literature.