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# OP ED

For Voiceless, the animal protection institute

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The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

## OP-ED

### **The Hon Michael Kirby Patron of Voiceless, the animal protection institute**

This week, Australia must decide where it stands on live export. As two bills come to a vote in Federal Parliament we have an historic opportunity to end the trade and act on a shared belief – that grave cruelty to our sentient other sentient animals is unacceptable.

The bill sponsored by Independents Andrew Wilkie MP and Senator Nick Xenophon would see live exports restricted and eventually banned from 2014, while the Greens' bill calls for the trade to cease immediately.

On the ABC's *Four Corners* program in May 2011, we collectively learned the uncomfortable truth about live export to Indonesia. More than 500,000 Australian cattle are sent to Indonesian slaughterhouses each year, and many face brutal treatment. We watched these animals have their eyes gouged, tendons cut and tails broken, and we heard the guttural bellowing of intense pain.

Confronted by this disturbing reality, the Australian public demanded change from their political representatives. Animal welfare is sometimes seen as a fringe or extremist cause, but the size and unanimity of response throughout the country has shown otherwise. Australians share a fundamental compassion for animals and a willingness to act when evidence of suffering is presented. We know they share many attributes with humans – fear, pain and grief for starters.

Local producers, too, were outraged to discover that their animals were being mistreated so egregiously, and should not be blamed for the scandal. However, in suspending the trade, the government acted in the only way it could. We cannot prosper by trading in misery which is truly shocking to our sensitivities as a civilized people.

Little more than a month later, the government lifted the suspension and declared that 'supply chain assurances' would ensure acceptable standards in Indonesia. Exporters are now restricted to trading with slaughterhouses that adhere to international standards for animal welfare. However, these international standards fall far below Australian levels of protection of animals from unacceptable pain and cruelty. Further, there does not appear to be any realistic possibility that compliance can be systematically monitored by Australia once our animals arrive overseas. Finally, these international standards are unenforceable. It took a private activist, not a government inspector, to bring the Indonesian shame to our notice.

Welfare concerns are not isolated to Indonesia, but inherent in live export. Similar abuse of sheep and cattle has been exposed in the Middle East. A typical journey keeps animals at sea for up to three or four weeks and causes stress, injury, illness and death. Significant numbers of animals die in transit. Meat and Livestock Australia and Livecorp have been charged with improving conditions in the trade for decades, and have clearly failed to overcome systemic problems. And there is the little matter of ritual killing without stunning that is supported by some religious exponents.

The paramount consideration must now be the ethical one. The live export trade as currently carried out is indefensible. It must stop. There are other animal welfare problems within Australia, but live export is the top current priority.

In our shared sentience, human beings are intimately connected with other animals. Endowed with reason and speech, we are uniquely empowered to make ethical decisions and to unite for social change on behalf of others that have no voice. Exploited animals cannot protest their treatment or demand a better life. They are entirely at our mercy. So every decision of animal welfare, whether in Parliament or the supermarket, presents us with a profound test of moral character. We can turn away from uncomfortable truths, and advance our economic interests, or we can fulfil that which makes us fully human.

There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. Animal protection by Australia is just such an idea. Live export is where Australia should assert its standards. At the very least, we should do so until a rigorous, governmental, world standard system of Australian inspection is fully in place, including overseas, so that we never again have to rely on a private activist and *Four Corners* to tell us the truth that successive Australian governments have ignored in the name of private profits. The European Union shows it can be done. We should follow. Now.

Michael Kirby as a patron of Voiceless, the animal protection institute.

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