They just don’t get it

The federal government’s decision to ban live cattle exports shows why they don’t understand rural Australia, says Louise Staley.
Aas a sovereign nation, Indonesia has the right to run its domestic policy as it sees fit. As a democratic country with a free press, we retain the right to express our opinions. But fundamentally, we do not have the right to force another country to adopt our policies and standards.

Yet this is what occurred following the Four Corners program showing animal cruelty in an Indonesian abattoir. Panicked by a maelstrom of reaction, the Gillard government banned live cattle exports. Indonesia reacted by refusing to renew export licences and threatened to take Australia to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The deputy agriculture minister Bayu Krisnamurthi complained that, ‘if only applied to Indonesia, this is discriminatory and we will submit [a complaint] to the WTO. There are several other countries importing from Australia facing the same [animal welfare] situation.’

There is nobody in Australian politics making the case for the sovereign right of Indonesia to run its abattoirs as it sees fit. Policy making is about balancing competing interests and, unemotionally as it may appear, animal welfare is not the only concern here. Nor are other concerns solely economic, although the economic losses from the ban were substantial and born disproportionately by a very small group of rural Australians who had done nothing illegal.

We rightly entirely reject international ‘experts’ who seek to ban Australia culling kangaroos or growing genetically modified crops, yet the natural response of many Australians is to assume we can dictate to Indonesia.

There is no doubt that there are powerful and vocal interest groups with much to gain from the footage of animal abuse being aired, as it did on Four Corners on May 2011. The vegetarian lobby—Animals Australia, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and others leveraged the program to pursue their ideological goal of eliminating meat from the human diet. Animals Australia shot the most disturbing footage and gave it to Four Corners expressly to further its aims of ending the live animal trade.

**THE CHICKEN AND DAIRY INDUSTRIES ARE IN THEIR SIGHTS AS WELL. FOR THESE ANTI-MEAT IDEOLOGUES, ONLY VEGANISM GETS THE TICK OF APPROVAL**

AAP reported former policewoman turned animal activist Lyn White, who shot the original footage that sparked the whole debate, said she won’t rest until all live animal exports are stopped. The website of Animals Australia urges readers to ‘make the pro pig pledge’ by eliminating all pork products from their diet—no more bacon forever. The chicken and dairy industries are in their sights as well but perhaps the most bizarre campaign is against eating fish, shellfish and molluscs on the grounds they feel pain when harvested. For these anti-meat ideologues, only veganism gets the tick of approval.

While the stereotypical abattoir worker is about as far from a vegan animal activist as possible, live animal export is the cause that unites the two tribes. Meat unions are implacably opposed to live export: they want all meat killed here and butchered by their members. And to the untutored ear it is an appealing idea that the meat can be raised and slaughtered here to Australian animal welfare standards. But the fundamental flaw is of course that Indonesia can buy their live cattle from other countries. Australia has many advantages in this trade: proximity, the rule of law, safe food production, but Australia is not totally unique: we do have competitors.

Australians rightly objected to animal cruelty on such a widespread scale. That the barbarism occurred in Indonesia, with questions over whether it was caused by some interpretation of Muslim ritual slaughter, further inflamed passions.

But there is a level of hypocrisy here—outrage about animal welfare of Australian born cattle in Indonesia but no comment about the treatment of cattle in Indonesia imported from other countries.

Do Australians really care about this, or is animal cruelty in Indonesia just another way to display moral vanity? Are we expressing our fear of Muslims and their cultural practices that supposedly require no stunning prior to death? The response to a TV program by people who had, in the main, not seen it was out of all proportion to its importance as an issue actually affecting their lives.

Asked on ABC Radio what the hottest issue for her constituents was, Anna Burke, the Labor member for Chisholm, nominated ending live cattle exports. And this was months after the Four Corners program and in a week where the carbon tax and asylum seekers were dominating the media cycle.
Without question, the horrific scenes of Australian cattle suffering protracted torture, painful deaths and grotesque abuse in Indonesian abattoirs touched a nerve. Despite Four Corners only being watched by 494,000 people Australia-wide, urban voters and animal activists were quick to register outrage with over 200,000 people clicking the box to sign a GetUp online petition. And, having seen the footage, there is no justification for what is depicted.

But the reaction went beyond a rational response. The calls for a total and permanent ban of live cattle export are predicated on an assumption that the practices in Indonesian abattoirs cannot be improved. Such a response is both unsupported by the evidence and xenophobic. Our political culture has become so immediate, so populist, that reflective policy-making is jettisoned.

Most Australians would find film of a first-world abattoir confronting too, let alone one in a developing country, even if it were operating at best practice. On a personal level, some years ago IPA director Tim Wilson and I saw Fast Food Nation at the cinema. The film contains a scene of a killing room at a big US abattoir. I covered my eyes for much of it and had to force myself to watch it, and I live on a sheep farm! At least part of the response to the Four Corners program would have occurred had they shown even a good Indonesian abattoir that had no abuse.

The disconnection between most consumers and the meat industry is immense and it usually suits both parties just fine. Consumers like their meat to come in neatly Gladwrapped trays in the supermarket or even cooked by someone else in a burger, while producers persist with the fiction that meat comes from grass-fed steers and lambs gambolling across verdant fields. What happens in between is conveniently left shrouded.

When confronted by what goes on inside an abattoir most Australians will regard it as abusive, even when it is humane slaughter, with proper restraints, complete stunning and swift slaughter. Even many feedlot and animal husbandry practices would be offensive to many urban people. The only interaction the majority of Australians have with any live animals is as pets, no wonder so many people end up seeing livestock through the lens of anthropomorphism.

At a profound level, consumers do not understand the people who produce beef (or lamb or chicken) for them. When people who grow cattle for the live export trade say they are horrified by the footage inside the Indonesian abattoirs and that they care for their cattle, many consumers disregard such
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Comments, not only because they assume the producers knew all along of the abuse, but because they really can’t imagine what caring for an animal other than a pet means. The concept that someone is caring for an animal as they raise it for slaughter is unimaginable even from many who themselves happily eat meat.

Such attitudes bode badly for livestock exporters. Unlike domestic livestock practices, which if materially altered would increase the price of meat to consumers, export regulations are seen as cost-free to most voters. Hence, there is an ever-present risk of political decisions that either end the industry through bans or restrict it to such a point it is no longer economic. And just because the trade has resumed, no doubt with incredibly high levels of supervision to ensure no further footage of abuse appears, the risk to the industry remains. All it would take to close it down for years would be evidence of an Australian animal ending up in an unaccredited abattoir.

This is a failure of the political process. The over-reaction by the Gillard government in shutting down the trade occurred because this story dominated the media cycle for more than 24 hours in a negative way for the government. The bans caused large economic losses, great disruption to whole communities and special hardship for Aboriginal Australians employed in one of the few success stories for Indigenous people. A responsible government, one that governed for all Australians, irrespective of where they lived, would have taken into account the effect on Australians’ livelihoods, not simply the white-hot emotion of others who had no personal involvement in the industry.

Successful government is many things, but high on the list is having at least some idea about what areas of policy are suitable for government intervention and which are not. It is difficult to see how salving some people’s psychic pain became the goal of government, especially when it comes at the real pain of lost jobs and closed small businesses.

Moreover, government action achieved no additional animal welfare outcomes. The Four Corners program had already caused public outrage and alerted the industry to the problem. Animal welfare standards improved immediately—before the ban. Often the sunshine of intense scrutiny is enough to force change.

A better approach would be to let cattle producers decide for themselves whether they want the cattle they have raised then be sent to Indonesia and, also, let Australian consumers decide if they want to buy beef from people who also sell to Indonesia.

What this episode indicates is that politicians and bureaucrats in Canberra have either a very poor understanding of the needs of rural and regional Australians, or a willingness to sacrifice their needs in exchange for votes in the cities and suburbs. And that means that many rural industries—not just live export—are highly vulnerable to disastrous policies in the future.