

CHAPTER 16

CONCLUSION

Introduction

16.1 Animal welfare is of increasing relevance to the farming industry. It is vital both for the health and well-being of the animals involved, and for the financial future of the farming industry that an increasing and critical interest be taken in that mixture of economic, scientific, ethical, aesthetic and practical concepts which make up the complex subject of animal welfare, and that action be taken on the new knowledge and ideas thus gained.¹

16.2 Animal health, well-being and productivity in intensive industries begins with the appropriateness of the constructed environment. Housing systems, fittings and appliances need to meet not only the specifications to accommodate the physiological capabilities of animals but also the specifications drawn up to recognise the effects of environmental stimuli on behavioural patterns of individual animals and groups.²

16.3 Economic conditions and social standards change and production systems must evolve to meet new needs. Science can be made to work as much for the benefit of the animals as for their production. High technology applied in animal husbandry need not entail negative effects. Computer controlled detection systems can assist welfare by the monitoring of animals as well as providing personalised feeding regimes; in the case of sows enabling groups as opposed to individual stalls.³

Standards for Husbandry Systems

16.4 However, concern about the possible impact of technological advances on farm animal well-being is valid and raises the question of standards being set for systems in commercial use. Cage systems are an obvious area requiring some sort of standards test before market release. Noting that standards are set for a range of commodities which are released onto the market the Committee recommends that governments with responsibility in this area develop standards for new and modified animal husbandry systems.

Activists and Ethologists

16.5 It has been very apparent during this inquiry that it is not only animal welfare activists who have been at the forefront of the concern for food animals. The animal welfare lobby has assisted the focus on the physiological and behavioural needs of farm animals but the concerns have also been agriculturally based. As Professor Egan stated in evidence:

... The animal welfare lobby has had a very positive and beneficial effect. It has forced along things that were drifting or that were not happening at all, and I take my hat off to it. I also take my hat off to the ethologists who, long before the animal welfare lobby existed, were saying that there is another part of animal production systems that really has not been looked at ... These people have been the leaders of the true basis of behaviour studies and what welfare is about for 40 years and more - long before it became popular to make assumptions about what is good and what is bad. What I worry about is that animal welfare is led by people who make assumptions. One good thing that comes out of that is that it draws people's attention to the fact that here is an assumption that needs to be addressed and laid to rest or, alternatively, taken apart so that you can analyse it for the components of it that are real as opposed to the components of it that are misguided opinions.⁴

Perceptions and Reactions

16.6 This is a very complex subject and the average person could not be expected to be well-informed on all aspects involved. As Professor C. Spedding from the Department of Agriculture, University of Reading in the United Kingdom has pointed out, in a civilised democracy we are all expected to hold views on a host of subjects about which we know very little. We are therefore open to propaganda and, in consequence, have to be suspicious of what we are told - including what we are told by scientists and, especially, about what we are told by interested parties.⁵

16.7 In these circumstances, he argues, it is easier to be certain that you are against something than that you are in favour of it. Thus members of the public may be against battery cages for hens because they perceive attributes that they dislike, disapprove of, find unacceptable or will not tolerate. "The same would be true of any one of us faced with a mistreated baby or dog. We may know nothing about either and may not know what should be done, but we have no doubt that what we see is wrong or unacceptable."⁶

16.8 Nor would our attitudes be affected in the slightest by any claims that we cannot know that anything is suffering unless some objective scientific test has been applied or some research carried out. Indeed we would be affronted most by any suggestion that we should suspend judgement until more research had been done to devise an objective test.

... It is because a citizen ought to have views over the whole range of activities in society, that he cannot possibly be well-informed about them all. It is thus no use expecting him to propose what is better; that is the inescapable responsibility of those concerned with production, and especially of those who benefit from it directly. Indeed, the recognition of this responsibility and its ready and recognised acceptance are almost certainly the main basis on which public trust can be built.⁷

16.9 The Committee was constantly reminded during this inquiry of the complexity of the issues and of the implications of over or under reaction. It was warned on the one hand of the dangers of the emotional response, for example, if something looks bad then it must be and it should be changed. As Dr Blackshaw warned "the trouble is if you do things on emotional grounds you may end up with something worse than what you think you have".⁸

16.10 On the other hand, the Committee was urged to recognise that on ethical grounds the current intensive confinement systems for farm animals have gone too far. As Dr Wirth, President, RSPCA Australia, warned:

... the issue of cruelty to animals is a matter of ethics ... The scientific people would say that unless you can prove conclusively and scientifically using various tests or procedures that a system is cruel, it is ipso facto not cruel and therefore should be allowed to continue.⁹

16.11 The problem is that all animal production systems contain elements of stress. Some of those who are concerned about welfare express the opinion that the only adequate conditions are those which exist in the wild. This argument often leads people to assume that extensive conditions are good and intensive conditions are bad for welfare. Extensive systems, and indeed the conditions in the wild, can lead to major welfare problems, for example, predation, extreme physical conditions or disease.¹⁰ The welfare of housed animals can be good, and it is important to try to devise conditions for animals which are based on their welfare rather than on preconceived ideas about the surroundings in which they will look right.

Community Education

16.12 The Committee believes that the community should be made more aware of the problematical issues associated with welfare and intensive livestock production. It considers that the National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare and the State and Territory Animal Welfare Advisory Committees have a role in this area.

16.13 The National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare has an important national role to play at the Commonwealth level. Its major functions are to assess and advise on the national implications of welfare issues, the effectiveness and appropriateness of national codes of practice, and policies, guidelines and legislation to safeguard or further the welfare of animals.

National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare

16.14 The Committee commends the Commonwealth Government for establishing the National Consultative Committee on Animal Welfare and expresses the hope that its staffing and budget resources will be sufficient for it to perform its functions effectively.

Conclusion

16.15 Animal welfare is part of the growing community concern for the environment and for the quality of life of both humans and animals. As the Commonwealth Government noted in its response to this Committee's Sheep Husbandry report:

... changes in our approach to the utilisation of animals are inevitable and ... it is vital for Commonwealth and State Governments, producers, scientists, animal welfare and conservation groups to work together to ensure

that animal production remains sustainable in the face of mounting community concerns about animal welfare and conservation and protection of the environment. 11

16.16 The Committee endorses this view and hopes that this report assists in turning what has become a polarised debate into a harmonised approach to the welfare problems in intensive livestock production.

A. R. Devlin

Senator A.R. Devlin
Chairman

ENDNOTES

1. R. Ewbank, 'Animal Welfare', Management and Welfare of Farm Animals, The UFAW Handbook, Bailliere Tindall, London, 1988, p. 11.
2. Evidence, Professor A.R. Egan and Dr G.D. Hutson, p. S8928.
3. Dr G. van Putten, 'Technical Developments, Ethical Considerations and Behavioural Problems' in Farm Animal Protection - The Practical Way Forward, Proceedings of the Fourth European Conference on the Protection of Farm Animals, 1988, pp. 20-21.
4. Evidence, Professor Egan, University of Melbourne, p. 9512.
5. Professor C. Spedding, Department of Agriculture, University of Reading, 'Marketing the Welfare Label: Meeting Needs and Demand', in Farm Animal Welfare - The Practical Way Forward, op. cit., p. 37.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. Evidence, Dr Blackshaw, University of Queensland, p. 6863.
9. Evidence, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Australia, p. 9599.
10. D.M. Broom, 'The Scientific Assessment of Animal Welfare', in Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 20 (1988) Amsterdam, p. 15.
11. 'Government's Response to the Report of the Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare on Sheep Husbandry', tabled in the Senate 10 May 1990, p. 2.