



Politics

BY JANE CLIFTON

Aporkalypse now?

It's time to give pigs and chickens a fair go.

People are fond of saying the law is an ass. But now we're getting some belated insight into what the law is if you *are* an ass. Or a pig. Or a chicken. It turns out that, just as we routinely justify our purchases of super-cheap goods from Asia, often produced by the misery of sweatshops and to a background of human rights atrocities, so our farm meat is built on a foundation of perfectly legal suffering that we choose not to think too hard about.

We shouldn't get into too much of an orgy of self-reproach, for the fuss about cruelty in pig farming tells us more about our susceptibility to cheap celebrity power than it does about our lack of humanity.

There was poor old Sue Kedgley, selflessly courting ridicule five years ago when she practically bowled other MPs and campaigners out of the way to make sure it was *she* who got photographed on all fours in the sow crate and no one else (and very fetching she looked, too) – and did we take any notice?

Animal rights groups have for years been publicising heart-rending footage of suffering pigs and chickens in this country – and was there ever an outcry?

But take one self-publicising comedian, who – glory of glories – trebled his cachet by appearing on a few years' worth of pro-pork television commercials, but who has now had an epiphany, and suddenly We Care.

Well, whatever it takes. This could be

one case where the naughtiness of celebrity power truly does some good. New Zealand could be leading the world on humane management of farm animals, when instead – to shamelessly hark back to the era of William Wilberforce – we are still well south of the Mason-Dixon line.

The single most shocking thing about that footage Mike King fronted on *Sunday* was this: it's perfectly legal to treat pigs that way. To have them cooped up, screaming, lying in their own excrement or simply lying dead. That farmer did absolutely nothing wrong, and the Maf inspection – his second in the last three years – confirmed this.

Animal welfare groups have known this for years, but, perhaps because of the bland assurances of politicians and officials, have been unable to get across the fact that we have quite deliberately legalised animal cruelty.

In the stealthy way our bureaucracy has of misdirecting our attention, the National Animal Welfare Advisory

Committee (NAWAC), which advises the Government on minimum legal standards for the care of farm and domestic animals, is cunningly misnamed. By law, in its decision-making, economic considerations are given equal weight to that of animal welfare. So while NAWAC's bottom line is that a farm animal must be able to exhibit its natural behaviour – that is, walk about, sniff other animals' bottoms, dust-bathe, pick fights with rivals, roll about in the grass, gaze balefully at passing farm workers while chewing insolently, or whatever – that behaviour can be curbed where they obtrude upon economic considerations.

In the case of chooks and porkers, who tend towards stropiness and are best given lots of room, that means many spend most of their lives in tiny cages, indoors, going quietly mad.

Some extraordinary "research" has been tendered to justify this confinement in welfare terms. A recent finding was that caged chickens' faeces

Moral dilemmas

Talk about over-correction.

Last week, the Cabinet blithely agreed to the appointment of controversy-magnet Christine Rankin to the Families Commission. This week, it came over all Nervous Nellie and balked at the appointment of a handful of blameless, earnest, little-known technocrats to run the Auckland super-city transitional agency, in case of a lurking scandal.

Chalk up another one to Christine: a new political phenomenon, the Rankin Effect, has been coined in her honour. The furore that erupted in the wake of her already ill-advised appoint-

ment seemed, bizarrely, to have caused moral panic in the Beehive. What if more of those the Cabinet has cheerfully given plum jobs to turn out to have had divorces, affairs, unpaid dog regos or a slew of parking tickets?

In reality, though, the Cabinet's panic was rather more inward-looking. It seems to have realised it can no longer coast in honeymoon mode. Its inability to babysit inexperienced and vulnerable MPs like Melissa Lee and Welfare Minister Paula Bennett has found it out. Its political machine is flabby. John Key is fond of saying he's "relaxed" about this and

that – including, at the time, about the Rankin appointment. In prime ministerial politics, however, too much relaxation can result in death.

Helen Clark and her legion of Mini-Mes micro-managed much of what came out of the Beehive, and would never have let an unprepared Lee blurt dopey comments to a by-election meeting, or let Bennett have her way over Rankin.

If Clark's steely reign should have taught all future prime ministers one thing, it's that a bit of control-freakery doesn't come amiss.



contained lower evidence of stress hormones than those of free-range chickens – suggesting the dear little squawkers were happier to be cooped up.

Well, I can tell you that if I were to be kept for most of my life in a small cage in a dark barn with no stimulus or space to exercise, my pooh would contain little evidence of adrenaline or cortisol, either – because I would have had the spirit sapped out of me, and would probably be rendered clinically catatonic.

But, to give the researchers their due, I would certainly be calmer than the free-range version of myself.

The sticky question for the Government is, where to from here? Politicians absolutely hate admitting guilt, yet to move forward here, both parties must, by implication, acknowledge decades of complicity in cruelty. National and Labour happily accepted the advice of NAWAC, knowing full well the implications for the animals.

The charitable view is, they have become inured to the pragmatism of it.

Current Agriculture Minister David Carter is a farmer, and a happy and knowledgeable one at that. Yet he insists he had no knowledge of such cruel practices as were shown on TV – practices that proved to be the deliberated-upon and

intended consequences of the present law.

The very thought of telling big industries they must spend trillions more on buildings and husbandry because of animal welfare concerns, with the ruinous knock-on effect of considerably dearer staple foods, is bowel-withering to any politician or bureaucrat.

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And to be fair to pig farmers – difficult though that is when you see what some of them consider to be happy pigs – the system is against them if they do decide to expand their plant to give the pigs more room. Such plans must be fed into the great ponderous maw of the Resource Management Act, meaning expense, obstacles and indefinite delay. So even if our MPs were to take the brave decision that sow crates be enlarged, and that crating periods be drastically reduced, it would be physically impossible for the industry to comply.

And for a politician even to think of loading a couple of bucks onto the price of eggs, chicken or bacon – at any time, let alone in the midst of an indetermi-

nate recession – is to have to stick his/her head between the knees and breathe into a paper bag. (Where are the cortisol-in-poo researchers when you need them?)

It's a big, complex issue and there's no quick fix. However, Prime Minister John Key, in reflexively expressing the horrified sentiment of much of the population after seeing that piggery footage, has a terrific political opportunity here. And there could be a buck in it.

What better way to combat the menace to our farm exports of food miles consciousness, than to be able to boast, in time, that we lead the world in humane management of farm animals? In tandem with our claim to have the world's cleanest, greenest agricultural practice – aspirational now, but achievable in time – this would secure our role as a premium ethical food-supplier anywhere in the world.

It would also endear National to the Greens, who alone in Parliament regard animal welfare as important. And it would show moral leadership; that Key credits New Zealanders with being a people for whom cruelty is not supportable, even at the risk of inconvenience and expense.

Now what we need is a "celebrity" to "discover" the cruelty to battery hens. Nicky Watson again or Norm Hewitt? ■

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