

# **HUMANE EDUCATION: THE POLITICAL CONTEXT**

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I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are gathered on today. I will be touching on some of the political contexts of the issues that the conference has already been talking about, the political context of humane education, and how to promote, get greater acceptance of a compassionate ethic for animals from a political perspective.

Politics is really just about people, and it's about ideas, it's a battleground of ideas. There's nothing particularly mysterious about it. It's often portrayed through the media as some really mysterious arcane activity that people do in back rooms, and the rest of us out in the community just have to sit back and hope it turns out okay. It's not really like that at all. There are lots of people sitting around in back rooms, but that's because they enjoy doing that sort of thing. There's a million different other ways that people have an impact, and politics, in its wider sense, is about people engaging in issues of concern to them, and working with other people to get more attention to those issues, to literally make the world a better place. Politicians just play one role in that. Political activity isn't something that should be seen as something that happens somewhere else. That is the most essential thing we have to keep reminding ourselves, when we're talking about political context. Politics is really just another framework for approaching an issue, looking at what is the social context of this issue at the moment. What do people think about it? How do we get more people concerned about it? What are the barriers there? Where's the opposition? And that's a community-wide framework we have to work within.

Having said that, of course politicians do play a powerful role in influencing community views and shaping community perceptions in directing where attention goes to. And they certainly can make an enormous difference in blocking positive change, or facilitating positive change, and animal welfare is no different in that regard. The first challenge with any sort of issue like this is to get sufficient people to recognise the importance of it. That's why any type of activity that explores these ideas and that promotes the importance of a more compassionate ethic is crucial. It is important to find an angle that will appeal to your target audience, in this case politicians. From my perspective, promoting something purely from

the animal welfare view or the animal ethics point of view, let alone animal rights point of view, is pretty hard work in the political context. Antennae go up and alarm buttons go off.

I believe one of the most compelling arguments for stronger attention to be paid to better treatment of animals, in whatever framework you want to put it, is the compelling evidence of the link between violence towards humans and violence and mistreatment of animals. There is an inseparable overlap between a compassionate ethic towards animals and a compassionate ethic towards fellow human beings. This approach puts animal welfare into a frame of self-interest, if you like – something politicians often examine. They don't necessarily always talk about it and acknowledge it, but they're always examining "where's the self-interest in this for people? How can I frame this issue in a way that makes people see what's in it for them?" That makes it sound like quite a selfish approach, and in some ways, I think that's unfair, because it is just human nature. People will naturally pay more attention to something if they feel it's got some relevance to them. And that, really, is what it's about. I think if we put it in that framework, it's not about, "Oh, how do we appeal to people's selfish side?" It's "How do we make people realise they've got a stake in this?" And people do have a stake in this. Particularly when you recognise the wider social benefits of people having a more compassionate mindset across the board, whether it's to animals or to human beings. And that is a key argument in favour of paying attention to animal welfare issues.

The other aspect is that it is important to continue talking and trying to engage with all politicians because of the role politicians can play at all levels, from the leaders down to your humble back-benchers. This doesn't mean looking for anything particularly mysterious and tricky about how you engage with people, or even trying to necessarily convince them that there's bucket-loads of votes in an issue for them. It is just educating them. So it's just thinking about how can you make politicians aware of an issue, how can you make them realise this is important? All of you here have more information than I do about why these sorts of issues are important, and are used to thinking of ways you can approach people – whether its politicians or anybody else, about convincing them that this is important and it needs more attention.

As part of doing that, you have to deal with some of the perceptions, prejudices, and aversions people have and you have to make some decisions about raising issues that people find confronting. For example, in all of the focus on climate change, so many environmentalists are averse to talking about reducing consumption of animal products as a way to reduce climate change, even though there are more omissions from livestock than there is from all forms of transport on the planet put together. If people cut out consumption

of animal products, they'd do far more than if they got a hybrid car or if they caught the bus or all those sorts of things, although it would be good if they do all that as well.

The aversion to talking about these issues is there, simply because most of those campaigners know that when you're trying to convert the wider general community, and you talk about cutting back on consumption of meat, people get very defensive. People think that they are being pushed into compulsory vegetarianism or compulsory veganism and there are still many societal prejudices around that. To point to a very political example, when former NSW Premier Bob Carr resigned a couple of years ago, there was a bit of a battle within the Labor Party of New South Wales about who might succeed him. One of the possibilities was a guy called Carl Scully. There was open public commentary about how he couldn't possibly be Premier because he's a vegan, which was seen as just too weird. In response to this criticism, Carl Scully did a photo shoot of him eating eggs to prove that he was just a vegetarian, not a vegan and wasn't weird. That was reported in the media as being used against him within the Labor Party: "This guy's a vegetarian, he won't appeal to people". This sort of thing is used to attack people's political credibility, which is why if people are trying to convince somebody to change their behaviour, they'll pick something that's less threatening and try and present an issue in a less confronting way. There's logic to tackling the less threatening changes but there's also a point as well, if you're trying to change behaviour that you've got to confront people. Obviously, it's all a matter of context, and the issues you're trying to raise, as to when you raise them, how far you want to push them, and how you present them.

In a political context it is important to be continually looking at how you can make that case effectively, including which words you use and don't use and how the perceptions of those words change over time. Words and labels can be valuable things. For example, everybody 'knows' people in Animal Liberation are ratbags, whereas people in Animals Australia are very respectable, of course!

This doesn't mean reducing language just to spin without worrying too much about the substance underneath it. Keeping the facts underneath is absolutely crucial over time if you actually want to make sustainable change and shift social attitudes, social views and values. Linking effective and strong language to substance, research and a factual basis is absolutely critical. You might be able to get a win on an issue with a clever marketing campaign now and then, but if you actually want to really shift views, I believe you've got to stick to the substance.

Another aspect that needs to be emphasised in a political context, is that whatever the issue, change takes a long period of time. It's gradual and the most sustainable, entrenched change is change that is gradual and built up over time, rather than suddenly convincing somebody out of nowhere to make a change that people aren't ready for. Laying the groundwork is very important, even though it's slow and tedious and feels like bashing your head against a brick wall.

Part of doing the hard slog is also being ready to take advantage of political windows of opportunity, and you can never tell when these will open. You can't always tell when something will come up that will match the sorts of arguments you're trying to make, and the key thing is that you need to be continually making the arguments so that you're there when an opportunity presents itself. There's any number of hopeless causes, so-called, or assumed hopeless causes that succeeded because people kept bashing away when it seemed hopeless, and things changed – some of them predictable, some of them not. Stars align, the window opens, and the people that have laid the groundwork made that gain. But often it's small gains over time.

It's also important to be aware of the other actors on the political stage. For example, when the speaker from Animal Club speaks later on today, they will probably mention the reaction from the National Farmers' Federation when they looked at setting up the Animal Club program. The National Farmers' Federation basically suggested that Animal Club is an insidious infiltration of our schools to promote a radical vegetarian agenda. So even that simple thing of 'let's just encourage kids to be kinder towards animals' gets met with quite ferocious and extreme attacks from what is probably one of the most powerful political constituencies in the country.

And similarly, we currently have changes being proposed to the *Trade Practices Act*, specifically to enable the Competition and Consumer Commission to supposedly be able to take action against animal rights protesters, who advocate boycotts against something they've got ethical objections to. I won't go into that, because I haven't got the time, but, frankly, what they're proposing to do in the law isn't going to do that, and they know it's not going to do that. It's all about the rhetoric the people opposed to change put out and them saying, "We're doing this because business has got to be protected against these sorts of people, who are basically promoting an ethical agenda, but they're harming business along the way". We need to anticipate how the groups opposed to what we are trying to promote will act and be ready to challenge their responses and ways of framing the debates.

It's also worth noting the importance of some of those other mechanisms that do shift behaviour and shift attitudes, and one of those is law reform. Not just change of laws but also the enforcement of existing laws. One of the continual amazements I've had since getting into Parliament is you can spend ages trying to change the law and get a fabulous new, bright, shining, fabulous piece of legislation and think, "That's marvellous! Look at that! What a magnificent achievement!" And then, you realise that you've actually got to make the governments enforce the damn thing. Almost everybody will say, "I'm against cruelty to animals. I think we should have less of it. We should enforce our laws more strongly." But even with the best law in the world, if there are no actual resources behind it, or no political will to enforce it, then you've still got a long way to go. That again comes down to values. Values inform enforcement of the law and interpretation of the law. That's why having these sorts of forums and discussions are so important.

So that's the sort of battleground, I guess. And you all know these things in different ways, but its how you engage with that, and recognise there's a lot of positive ground out there, despite some of the negative. It's all part of making those judgements about how you can accentuate the positive and minimise the negative. So good luck with that, and if I can be of help with it, then feel free to get in touch.

**Q – Delegate:**

*Thank you Senator. I'd like your view on the question of whether you recognise that there is a major hurdle in understanding and awareness, in terms of animal rights and expanding that, in the fact that maybe there's not enough accent in scientific teaching at school, that we all derive from a common origin – life – and that we're all parents somehow, we're cousins, whatever, plants, animals and us. And to contrast the scientific teaching at school with religious thinking as derived from Genesis, I think one of the speakers made reference to it yesterday. Do you have a view about that? Whether there should be more clarity in what we teach?*

I'm not a teacher – at least in the formal sense of the word – or an educator, and I'd bow to others who have much more expertise than I do about content of curriculum and how you frame it and how it all fits in.

I would make a couple of comments. I think whatever the thread is, even within particular strands, there are always different things you can focus on. I'm not an expert, but if you use the religious strand you talked about – and I've read some fantastic theology, theological books, about animal ethics, based on the Christian theology, and that I've found, in some ways, more meaningful to me than Peter Singer's writings, even though I'm not religious. So I think it is how you approach it.

My other comment is you've really got to look at how to break through what - I may have the wrong term, but I think of it as cognitive dissonance. We've got a whole lot of things. We can know something on one level, but as soon as you present it to us in a different way, we deny it. The one I think is frankly bigger than the relationship with animals and the planet is, in an Australian context, one of the biggest political hot potatoes is history and how we teach history, and the absolute inability

of our country to admit what is so overpoweringly obvious about the monumental persecution and killing and oppression and genocide of indigenous people in this country. The evidence is just everywhere, right in front of our faces. And we refuse to acknowledge it and get very, very, very, very toey when anybody tries to point it out.

So, if we can't even acknowledge something as obvious as that which we've done to fellow human beings then, you know, it's perhaps no surprise that we can have that dissonance in regard to our relationships with animals.

That does come back to the importance of letting people know what you think personally, not just sitting in the lounge-room and throwing bricks at the television, or grumbling to each other and with people that agree with each other, but trying to get out to others outside your own personal goldfish bowl. That includes politicians. The power that people in positions of political leadership can have in shaping public attitudes is quite significant. To use a very current example of the Federal Government's attacks on Australians of African background - pre-meditated, deliberate, conscious, totally politically driven. What it does, apart from anything else, is it makes prejudice and bigotry acceptable.

Now, it doesn't turn everybody towards prejudice into and a bigot, but it exaggerates those things. It makes public displays of something that used to be, in the past, not acceptable, not on, now seen as fine. That's another whole separate issue but again it shows that how we frame debates can be so important. That's why continuing to push our views - as with any time when you're trying to convince somebody of something that they might not agree with - in a way which is most likely to be successful. That means usually not smacking them head-on and calling them a 'racist pig' or calling them a 'merchant of death', if they happen to be a farmer, or those sorts of things, is important. But I think it does emphasise why it's important to continue to engage in those debates, but also how big the barriers can be.

**Q – Delegate:**

*How do politicians choose their key areas of interest s? Do they look at their mailbag? Are they influenced excessively by the NGOs or by the industries? How do they choose their key topics?*

There's a range of different types of politicians, and I suppose I'm from a smaller party and I'm sometimes, even within that smaller party, sometimes seen as a bit of a maverick. So what might influence me might not be the same as what influences Kevin Rudd - in fact I'm sure it's not - or John Howard. I'm not trying to be cynical about it, but obviously, it's commonsense. If you're a politician, you're trying to get re-elected. You'll focus on issues that are going to be of importance to a large number of people, particularly if you're in a major party. If you're in a smaller party, you only need to get a smaller percentage of the votes so you'll focus on something that has specific appeal. That doesn't mean these are the most important issues. It's one of my pet bugbears, as a Queenslanders, that so much of the environmental debate is focused on forests in Tasmania, which are very important and we shouldn't be chopping them all down, but we've got far more significant forests in Queensland, particularly up in Northern Queensland. We have much greater biodiversity. The Traveston Dam is far more environmentally destructive than the pulp mill, but I've been getting, literally, 10,000 emails about the pulp mill from all around the world, and I've had about five about the Dam from people in Queensland. So it's not rocket science to figure out that I might get more support if I bang on about how bad the pulp mill is than if I bang on about how bad the dam is.

There are also other factors, obviously. Interest groups that provide you with a lot of support financially or politically, you pay more attention to them. If you're seen to be from a group that is politically powerful and influential - and a lot of that is about perception as much as reality - then you've got more clout. I remember being at a mental health conference a few months ago, and there

were hundreds of people there. Every person there – well, certainly every person that spoke, from the audience, of which there were many – were from a small group at community level that were bashing away about trying to provide support for people they knew who were dealing with mental health issues and the lack of support in it. Huge numbers. But, because of the nature of mental illness and how it affects people and families, and because of the isolating component of it, and just the fact that people don't talk about it in that way, there's very little political clout about it. Even though there are actually tens, hundreds of times more people than there are who are involved in farming or whatever. I'm not picking on farmers, but a lot of it is about the way you can create that perception of having a lot of people behind you. The largest petition in the Senate by a long way in the last few years has been people against live exports. There's any amount of evidence, as I'm sure a few people here could point to, that there's far more Australians that are against live exports than people in support of it, and the number of people that would actually be negatively affected by banning it is very small. I'm not saying they don't count, but if you're looking at a pure numbers game, then, if it was just that, then we wouldn't have live exports.

But there are other factors there of course. In that case such as not wanting to be seen to validate what's perceived as a wider animal welfare agenda, and validate anything that's seen as suggesting that there's excessive animal cruelty in a farming industry. So there's always a wider combination of factors beyond just the raw numbers and the basic facts.

There is actually a lot of potential to get politicians on side. Most politicians do a lot of following. That's understandable up to a point. They'll follow the polls. They'll follow the focus groups. They'll shout their words to match, to tell people what they want to hear. But there is also a lot of scope for leadership. And when they do decide they want to lead something, the capacity there to actually shape the debate and have influence on it is quite enormous. I think that's part of the challenge, to continue to encourage people in all sorts of leadership positions to step forward and speak out. It is not just politicians, but people in general, we need to actually get out the front occasionally, rather than come up from behind when it's safe.

**Q – Delegate:**

*Given the considerable period of time you spent in politics now, do you think you can indicate to us whether or not you've noticed any really tangible shift in political awareness of animal ethics issues at political level, or do you think our governments are still operating on a reactive basis, rather than a proactive one?*

I try to be positive, but I can't be on that one. Sorry. Actually, I think it's got worse. There is a number of individual advances here and there, and there's actually been some significant wins around specific issues. I'm talking here about animal welfare campaigning, which is a bit wider than your agenda of animal ethics and education on compassion towards animals. I think there's overall a positive move forward in a broader sense but at Federal level the Howard Government is a real barrier to progressive thinking in a more general sense. I'm not suggesting that a shift in government is going to deliver Nirvana but, as with any government that's in power a long time, you get blockages that build up. If you want to shift views, then we need a little bit of fresh air in there. More importantly, we need a strong Senate with a strong independent voice in there to keep an eye on them!

There have been advances here and there, but in terms of overall political perception about the issue and the importance of it, it's gone backwards. One of the reasons that has happened is because previously we had a Senate select committee on animal welfare, that examined this issue consistently over about six or seven years. When people are forced to sit down and look at the evidence, all of the backwards and forwards rhetoric from all sides eventually fades down. You've got to look at the facts and people often discover they've actually got a lot more common ground than they thought.

Because that Committee doesn't exist anymore there's no mechanism for consistently looking at the issue in a broader sense. The Committee that's meant to look at animal welfare issues now is the rural committee. That committee is about resources in rural communities and maintaining economic viability of rural communities. People are no longer looking at animal welfare. They only engage with it sporadically, and usually when there's a spat on about something. In these circumstances, everybody has usually taken their predetermined sides.

That's where I think we've got to look at different ways to try and get people into thinking about animal ethics. That's part of what I tried to do with my piece of legislation nationally. But that Senate Committee wasn't interested in the issue at all, which is one of the reasons I'm not feeling so positive. National legislative change might not be a very fruitful area at the moment. There are a million other areas that could be more fruitful, and that will change at some stage, and the window will open. So there are a million different avenues by which to pursue things, and it's just a matter of making your judgements about where the fertile ground is at any point in time.

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