

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 12 March 2024

MEMBERS

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David Davis – Deputy Chair

John Berger

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PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

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Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Sarah Mansfield

Rachel Payne

WITNESS

Pam Ahern, Founder and Director, Edgar's Mission.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Pig Welfare in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome and elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee, who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings or who are watching in the public gallery today.

To kick off we will introduce committee members, starting in the room with Mrs Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thanks. Hi, I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria.

Renee HEATH: My name is Renee Heath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Northern Victoria Region. As with many witnesses on this inquiry, I know Pam very well, and she is a constituent. We might have Mr Berger or Mr McIntosh joining on the screen at some point. Wonderful.

Thank you very much for coming along today, Pam. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council's standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you please state your full name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Pam AHERN: My full name is Pamela Ann Ahern, and I am representing Edgar's Mission's today.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, Pam. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure we have plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Pam AHERN: I would also like to acknowledge we are meeting here on land traditionally held by the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I dedicate my presentation today to those who are at the heart of this inquiry, pigs, and I do this from my unique vantage point of over 20 years of my life with them. My life with them has been pretty much on their terms, not our terms. I do this because I ask: how can we as a society make decisions that are so impactful upon these animals yet we do not really know who they are? I also want to dedicate this to my dad, who said to me, 'Be brave.'

Be brave: those are the very words I said to myself around 21 years ago as I nervously embarked on a life-changing journey. It was a journey that pretty much happened right over there on the hallowed steps of Parliament House in the company of a pig. The code of practice for pig farming was up for review. It was 2003, and I thought to myself, 'Who better to argue the case for pigs than a pig?' It was something I had quickly learned from a tiny piglet I named Edgar Alan Pig. You see, some weeks earlier, Edgar had done a photoshoot with Hollywood actor James Cromwell, and the aim of that photo shoot was to raise awareness about the plight

of pigs and our flawed animal protection laws, because most people are like the once naive me and believe that our animal protection laws are setting the standards of how animals can be treated in our society.

I thought, 'This is awesome. Our society has carved out legislation that protects animals from cruelty.' This was not some fringe group of fuzzy animal lovers; these were our esteemed lawmakers. But as everyone in the room here today knows, when it comes to animal protection legislation we have been guilty of playing favourites with animals. We treat animals not on the basis of their ability to suffer, their emotional intelligence, their cognitive abilities or even science. No, our current treatment of animals is based on the form that they have taken. The treatment is based on society's intended use of them and our familiarity, or lack thereof, we have with them.

So who are pigs beyond the commonly held view of the 'before' of pork, ham and bacon? People often ask me to tell them about pigs, and my answer never varies. I say, 'Well, which one?' They are all uniquely different. But one thing that unites them all that never wavers is that each and every one of them cherishes their life. I ask you now to be brave and come with me on a journey as I introduce you to a small handful of the pigs that I have been so fortunate to know, some of the pigs who have actually escaped the system that would otherwise have claimed them.

Who better to get the ball rolling than the eponymous Edgar Alan Pig himself? The first thing that I learned about Edgar was that he was not to stay little for very long, because he was a commercially farmed pig, a Landrace large white cross to be exact, and he was designed for exponential growth. Like all pigs, I would come to know, he had a range of emotions, and he put his own spin on them. My dear Edgar was a bit of a sleepyhead. He would rather sleep all day than engage in the roughly 16 hours of foraging and exploratory behaviour that pigs like to do – that is of course if pigs are allowed to do that. I remember well when I took him to Parliament House in Sydney on Macquarie Street. He travelled there ever so comfortably in his own chauffeur-driven, air-conditioned, straw-filled pigmobile, stopping along the way when he requested to go for the toilet. It is a stark contrast, I am sure you will agree, to how most pigs are transported in this country. I remember one passerby commenting when he was asleep in the middle of Parliament House, with a big burly security guard over me saying, 'You've got to make the pig move, love.' The person said to me, 'Aren't you scared your pig's going to get disturbed and frightened by all that's going on around him?' I said with a bit of a wry smile, 'I guess he'd have to wake up first.'

Edgar taught me vividly and delightfully how clean pigs are. Honestly, I swear if the horses I had in my 40-plus years as an equestrian were half as clean as my Edgar, I would get back 20 years of my life. That big, big belly of his I reckon was one big bladder, because when I would let him out of a morning he would go to his own designated toilet area and he would pee and pee and pee. I know from the many pigs that I have cared for over the years that they all share that cleanliness habit of not urinating or defecating where they sleep. How have we got it so wrong then when we refer to someone who keeps poor house as living like a pig? Surely that debases our humanity and shows our ignorance. But perhaps those people are unwittingly referring to the excrement-rich and ammonium-filled conditions that most pigs are housed in on commercial farm settings.

Edgar knew his name, and if it were his want he would come to it. I will give you an example. He would be off in the garden when he was not engaging in his 18-plus hours of sleeping. Though he would be going 'Woof, woof,' coming to know pigs, I recognised that they did not just make noises; they were actually communications of a vast array of things that meant something. It would be, 'What have you got?' He would be looking at my hand with his poor eyesight, which pigs are notorious for, determining whether it was worth his while to come over or not. Generally it was not. I learned never to leave him in the house alone, because his curiosity often took him to places and cupboards where he should never go. There was many a time when Edgar could be spotted in the backyard. He would look around to see if someone was watching him, and if someone was watching him he would toddle on past nonchalantly. But if he did not think someone was watching he would get his big snout, he would manoeuvre it like a hand and he would slide the door open and step inside.

And Alice pig – if you have seen *Charlotte's Web*, you have seen Alice. She played the mother of Wilbur in the hit movie. At the end of filming Alice went back to the factory farm from where she came, her last group of piglets to be weaned off her, and she was to be sent for slaughter, as all mother pigs do when they reach their use-by date of around four to five years of age. Paramount Pictures found out about this. They would have none of that for Alice, their star, so she came to live at Edgar's Mission. Just to give you a bit of a contrast of what

her life was like in the factory farm, this is a replica sow stall, made to dimensions 2.2 metres long by 0.6 metres wide. That was Alice's life. I remember the day that she came to sanctuary so vividly. It was incredibly moving. She was reluctant to get out of the trailer that the farmer had brought her in. So we got inside, and he coaxed her out. As soon as she hit that luscious green stuff underneath her feet, she dove down and ate that grass like there was no tomorrow, and I remember the farmer saying, 'Look at her go. She has never seen grass before in her life.' There was more than a touch of joy in his voice, and I reckon it was in his heart as well. But then he quickly dusted off his empathy, shut the door, got back in his vehicle and headed off. Alice's journey was to end well, but not so for the vast majority of pigs, who will never find such a kind life.

Actually, that is her with Edgar. Edgar was terrified of Alice. She used to hunt him down, and Edgar would run away as fast as his little piggy legs would carry him. She was a very good judge of character though, clearly. Alice would go on to live seven incredibly more joyous years at the sanctuary, passing away at around 13 years of age. She was humanely put to sleep as one would their beloved dog. She was laid to rest in the paddock that she loved so much. A bouquet of flowers and all of our tears marked the spot. But what came next will live with me forever. Daisy pig, her best buddy, slept on that grave for several days, and that more than informed us that grief and loss are not only a human preserve. That is something I have witnessed over and over again at the sanctuary with pigs who have outlived the life of their buddy.

While talking of buddies, I have to tell you about Emma and Eliza. These were two breeding sows who found sanctuary and solace at Edgar's Mission. Both arrived heavily pregnant, and that gave me a beautiful window to witness the incredible preparatory lengths that these sows went through to give birth. Far removed from the barren concrete stalls and cold bars of their cousins, Emma and Eliza built elaborate nests for their babies. They collected sticks, branches and twigs, fashioning them perfectly to accommodate the birth of their piglets, seven and eight respectively. It was incredible watching the sows interact with their babies. They were fierce and protective mothers: they would call to their babies when it was time to feed; they would lie down ever so carefully. And should one of those little babes be in the wrong spot, a raucous squeal would come out, and that agile mother would gently reposition herself and the piglets would also have the opportunity to wriggle into the sides of the nest that the mothers would make for their babies. It was such an incredible experience watching this. Emma and Eliza and all of their piglets loved life to the fullest, and whether it was cooling down on hot days or kicking about playing they never failed to draw us into their world – and we were so lucky to actually have this unique window to see these things. What an incredible sense of play and fun pigs have – I think they might be the natural comedian on the farm.

'Be brave,' I said to myself when I attended a rescue on the Western Highway several years ago, expecting to find a four- to five-month-old pig who had come off a slaughterhouse-bound truck. Instead I found a 200-kilo young boar. His sides were reddened from his encounter with the tarred road, and he had a sedative dart in his rear end. That was how I met Ferris. Although I had heard stories about the aggressive nature of boars, I leaned on the words of a wise teacher from back in my equestrian days. They said, 'If you treat a horse like a rogue, they'll behave like a rogue.' So with trust in my eyes and my heart I got to know Ferris. I got to know him as one of the sweetest, gentlest giants of a pig. Once he had recovered from his ordeal, he was surgically castrated, and then he joined our pig herd. Today he is a much-loved pig of the sanctuary and a stellar ambassador for his kind. If you see this top right-hand image here, he has his mouth open. He is offering his deep 'Huff, huff, huff, huff.' That is their greeting. They actually exchange their breath with other pigs and you – if you are lucky. Since that time, I have had the good fortune to have several more boars find sanctuary at Edgar's Mission and never once have I found an aggressive one.

Now, I know time is running short for my presentation. I just need to tell you the entire time that I was preparing this a little piglet named Chris Mas was sleeping at my feet snoring away. Every now and then he was requesting to go outside to the toilet – although I do question the little guy's motives, because he knew every time he did he got a grape. Pigs really are smart. You will come to notice things in some of these images of Chris – there he is; he is playing. So if you have a pig in your house, you will see why you have got to put everything up, away from pig height. He is getting into the shopping there – good on you, Chris. There are some more shots of him sleeping. He loves his Pineapple. He used to have a little Chickadee he slept in, but he outgrew the Chickadee and now he has escalated to the Pineapple. In the shot there on the left you will see a little bit of pink around his bottom. That is where he was surgically castrated at the local vet with anaesthetic and pain relief. He has also got a little tail – the cheeky lad – and he uses that to let me know what sort of mood he is in. It is something that we have seen with numerous litters of piglets at the sanctuary: we have never, ever

found the need to cut their tails, neither too to clip their teeth. I actually think he has been watching *Babe* one too many times, because he does like to try and round up the sheep and the chickens.

One final Edgar story from me: when I would take Edgar for walks in the park – I would have my beautiful Edgar on one side and my little dog ET on the other – people would come from everywhere to marvel at Edgar and his unique brand of pigginess. They would tell me that they had never met a pig before. They were blown away by how clean and clever and personable he was. They would rub that glorious tummy of his and he would flop on his side, and when they hit the right spot, he would stretch his legs out even more. Over and over I heard the analogy: ‘He’s just like my dog.’ But as we know here today, the treatment of most pigs is not like dogs. That was a watershed moment for me. How could it be that these very people make decisions every day for how intelligent, sensitive and fun-loving animals live and die, but so few people get a chance to know them? It is so easy to go on doing something that we have always done before, but it takes courage and sometimes the gentle nudge of a pig to change.

So I say to you now to be brave: to be brave, as I was that day I went to the steps of Parliament House with Edgar Alan Pig; to be brave, like Steve Jenkins and Derek Walter, whose lives were turned around by one incredible pig named Esther; to be brave like those who did venture into those CO₂ gas chambers and factory farms to bring to our attention the terrible suffering and unimaginable deaths faced by pigs that we would not otherwise know about; to be brave like the one-time pig farmer Bob Comis, whose journey from ethical pig farmer to vegan is chronicled in the movie *The Last Pig*; to be brave and stop the cruelty and suffering of pigs. Please, I implore of you, be brave and have the courage and compassion to go where your conscience urges you to go. Be brave. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Pam, for your presentation today. Obviously your journey with Edgar’s Mission started off with a campaign surrounding the model code of practice for pigs. Can you explain to us what has happened in terms of pig welfare in farming since that time?

Pam AHERN: Well, it will not take long, and that is the tragedy of it. I remember in 2003 APL vowed and declared that pigs had to be kept in sow stalls for their welfare; it was actually going to compromise their welfare to take them out of them. Well, now they have actually moved the bar on that slightly, and they are actually saying that they can actually farm pigs outside of the sow stalls. But I would have to say little improvement has really happened, apart from the awareness of the public of what is happening to pigs and more importantly, I think, through the exposure of what is happening on pig farms and also through sanctuaries around the world, people getting to know who pigs really are and questioning what we are doing with these animals.

The CHAIR: Thank you. In your submission you explain that the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act*, which most Victorians would presume covers all animals, actually does not cover many animals in farming. Can you explain what that means for pigs in farming systems?

Pam AHERN: The irony of me walking my dog and my pig in the park was never lost on me. You know, they both knew their name, and occasionally they would answer to it. They both liked walking in the park with me. They both liked sitting on the couch watching TV. When it was hot, like today, I would put the air conditioner on to cool them down, and when it was cold I would turn the heater up to keep them both warm. For all intents and purposes Edgar and ET were pretty much the same, except for one stark reality, and that was the shape they had taken and public perception of them.

I know when I was growing up with my dear dad, who I included in my dedication, he always would challenge me. He was great friends with the late, great Frank Galbally, the criminal lawyer. That sense of justice came from those two – being just and fair, I could find no justification for treating Edgar differently than my dog. I am really struggling how our law can do it. How can our law discriminate against these animals because they look different and because of our perception? One of the great determinants of a society’s ethical progress has been our ability to embrace those we once considered different – the colour of the skin, the religion one followed, even gender. It was Chief Justice Michael Kirby of the High Court of Australia that said that how we treat animals today is our next great social justice movement, and I really do think he is on the money. It does involve uncomfortable choices. I remember my dad said to me – he used to call me Itsy – ‘Itsy, be careful where this will take you,’ because at that stage I did eat meat, and I think he knew where this was going to take me, but he told me to be brave.

The CHAIR: Thank you. My parents say the same thing to me about doing this job.

Pam AHERN: You are very brave – you are all very brave.

The CHAIR: I can completely relate. You have explained to us some of the natural pig behaviours that you see exhibited at Edgar’s Mission when they are rescued or come to you. Can you explain to us the natural behaviours that they are denied in these settings?

Pam AHERN: Pretty much everything they get to do at sanctuary. I guess the most denied is to get to make a choice. Unless you consider a choice a step forward or a step back. One of the things when I created the sanctuary was for it to be a true sanctuary. I wanted those pigs to get up of a morning and say, ‘What am I going to do today?’ And a pig on a factory farm does not really have any options to say, ‘What am I going to do today?’ They are confined. They are even denied the chance to see the sunlight and smell fresh air and walk more than a few steps. I mentioned about how clean pigs are; I remember when we were going to Sydney on the highway and Edgar wanted to go to the toilet. It was a huge highway and there were no stops, and he was getting louder and louder – we were just going to have to pull over into the emergency stop because he wanted to go to the toilet. For those pigs to be forced to lie in their excrement and that of other pigs must be so incredibly frustrating for an animal who is so naturally clean. Pretty much every one of their natural behaviours apart from breathing and drinking – even mating is made artificial for those animals – are denied them. I think it is also worth mentioning what it does to the people who work in these industries, because I have met people who have worked in these industries. I think part of their heart has to shut down to allow them to do those sorts of things, to inflict suffering and pain on other animals. My heart goes out to them.

The CHAIR: Yes. As you would know, being a bit of a pig expert, they are one of the smartest animals on the planet and can in fact tell the passing of time. This sow stall that you have here today is obviously used to educate visitors to Edgar’s Mission. Can you explain the response when they see it?

Pam AHERN: People think it has come from a bygone era. People think these are banned in Australia. People are shocked to actually learn that this is still happening right here right now on our watch. They say what can I do about it? And I say, you can choose kindness. Because every single one of us has the power to change the world by the choices we make. Now I can say the hardest way to save animals is to start a not-for-profit rescue sanctuary for them. The easiest way is to make a kind choice.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that is my time. We will go to Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thanks for your submission and for coming and presenting today and for bringing us – you know, you have got the afternoon session, after lunch, and the props are very engaging, and we thank you for that. I wanted to ask, based on your observation over the time that you have been doing this work, your view on voluntary self-regulation by the industry: how effective that has been in bringing about change and what you would like to see governments do instead?

Pam AHERN: I am not really in a position to really make an informed comment on that because I cannot see how voluntary it is – you know, working at the sanctuary pretty much takes up 24 hours, 24/7. But from what I see, from what is coming out and from things people like Farm Transparency are bringing to light, and even whistleblowers from within the industry, there is a great level of concern that these things are not happening. There was the commitment to phase-out sow stalls by 2017 and it has not happened. So as consumers you have to question the faith you can have on the veracity of the statements that they say.

Katherine COPSEY: We have heard quite a bit today about the need for improved inspection powers, and with the laws that we have, how do you think we are faring in terms of enforcement of codes of practice with the existing controls we have on behaviours and what is meant to be happening inside the pig industry?

Pam AHERN: I think we are failing, and I think we are failing humanity. I think if we cannot do something humanely, we should not be doing it at all. We have so much science now informing these things that we know what we are doing to animals – particularly pigs, these highly intelligent animals – is not in their interest. And for the momentary dietary pleasure that people get from that, I have to ask people to ask of themselves: is it worth it? One of the things that I grew up with – I felt terribly cheated when I found out what is happening to animals. I had this bucolic notion of MacDonald’s farm – I had my toy farm set and I still have it today; I also

have a real farm set – and it was not what I thought it to be. We hide the death; we hide the suffering. We think these animals live yippy-skippy lives and go to the slaughterhouse, but they do not.

Katherine COPSEY: Some of the specific things that have been talked about today are having unannounced inspections and having greater oversight and transparency – so ongoing recording and access by an inspectorate to those recordings at any time on request. You touched on the behaviour within the industry – do you think that those sorts of accountability measures could help?

Pam AHERN: Perhaps in the short term, but I actually think the industry has lost its social licence. My dad used to always say to me, ‘What are you going to do, you know, Itsy? If everyone goes vegan, what are you going to do with all the animals?’ It was 20, 30, 40 years ago he said that, and I go, ‘Ah, it’s never going to happen. It’s not going to happen overnight.’ Now I am actually having discussions that that could happen. So the dial is certainly moving. I think the writing is on the wall. People are actually starting to look for free-range alternatives because they think that will appease their conscience. It certainly does not appease the suffering of the animals when they go to those slaughterhouses. You know, these are the great conversations that we are having today. We are actually thinking about the impact of our choices when we never thought about it before. You know, when I grew up no-one knew what a free-range egg was. We know what it is now. But then we also can go beyond that: ‘Do we actually need that?’ You know, ‘Can we actually live happy and healthy lives without harming others?’ I love that we are having these conversations. We are being brave.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Can you just speak a little bit to some of the animals that must come to your sanctuary and get that chance to exhibit their natural behaviours? You have done a great job of sharing that with the committee today. Some of the practices that we have seen are amputations and teeth clipping without anaesthetic. With your knowledge of how pigs behave, what is your view on those sorts of practices?

Pam AHERN: It is not necessary. There is the fact that we resettle litters of piglets off their mothers, and we have never had issues with the tail biting or the need for the teeth clipping. It is interesting you talk about the animals and their road to recovery – I think the pig that really drove home the transformation of her life was Alice. When Alice came to the sanctuary, we had this beautiful straw bed for Alice. We thought she was going to dive in there and just swing herself around – ‘This is damn awesome.’ Alice stood at the door of the stall with the straw and said, ‘Hoo,’ and for pigs that ‘hoo’ means they are scared. She did not go in there for the first couple of days. She slept outside under the stars because she was scared of the straw. Once she knew what straw was, you could hardly get her out of it, and to see the confidence that she had when she would choof around the sanctuary – her ability to turn her life around was absolutely inspirational. She had sores on her side, she was skinny, she was scared, she did not like me, but she turned her life around. That is an intelligent animal.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Copsey. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. Thank you for your presentation. In your opinion is there any ethical or humane way to keep the pork industry going?

Pam AHERN: No, not for an intelligent animal that we are denying the ability to have a good life.

Renee HEATH: Would you say the same for, say, chicken farming, beef farming?

Pam AHERN: Personally, I would. But I do not want everyone to do something because that is what Pam Ahern believed, because if you do the world according to Pam Ahern, you are going to end up with terrible dress sense, not getting enough sleep and eating way too much chocolate. But I do want people to think, because I truly believe in the goodness of the human heart. Even in the worst of humanity there is a good heart. The tragedy for these animals and humanity is that layers and layers of social conditioning have hidden that.

It is so easy for everyone here in this room to go and buy a different product in the supermarket, but when your livelihood and when your family history depends upon you doing those things to animals, it is very hard to walk away. But we have a group now in Australia called Farm Transitions Australia that is actually working with farmers to transition out of farming animals to plant-based agriculture or ecotourism, and this is great, because these farmers do not deserve our condemnation. They deserve our compassion and kindness, because what must it do to them to see those things happening to sentient beings and desensitise themselves to the

suffering? I think that is a tragedy that is happening right here on our watch, and as I said before, if we cannot do something humanly, then we must ask ourselves why: why are we doing it?

Renee HEATH: And you mentioned in your opening statement something about an ethical pig farmer –

Pam AHERN: Yes. Bob Comis.

Renee HEATH: Can you –

Pam AHERN: Yes, please! It is called *The Last Pig*. It is a great movie. Bob Comis was a pig farmer, and he wanted to do free-range pig farming in America because he thought if he could do it ethically he could set a model for what he was going to do. And he had lots of years in the industry. I remember reading the articles he was writing, and I am thinking, ‘This guy’s going to go vegan.’ And then several years later he did, because he really made a connection with these animals. He found it harder and harder to betray their trust, because they got in that trailer because they trusted him, and he knew he was taking them to their death. He could not live with himself anymore. How many farmers must go through that and not have the courage to get out like Bob Comis did?

Renee HEATH: So do you think maybe the lesson in that – and I do not want to paraphrase anything – is that ethical pig farming is not pig farming?

Pam AHERN: He described it as ‘ethical’ pig farming. It is like the ‘free range’. We talk about free-range pig farming. If I can just shoot a little story in there. So much of my teacher has been the school of life. And when *Charlotte’s Web* came out in Australia, my task was to have one of the pigs walk down the carpet with Dakota Fanning for the world premiere. They thought they were going to get one of the pigs in the movie. They were these great, big – they were this big, and they were going to walk down the red carpet. And my task was to get a piglet to walk down the red carpet with Dakota Fanning. I had about eight weeks to do it. So I was looking around to try and find a piglet, with two criteria: it had to be a pink pig and had to have a tail. All the pig farms I approached of course had cut the tails off. I mean, gosh, what was I going to do? I ended up finding this little piglet in New South Wales who was on a free-range farm who had a tail, and they were the runt of the litter. So I went up there and I got to see firsthand a free-range pig farm, and looking around, the life these pigs had was pretty good. Then as we went back to the car – I had little Bur, as I called him, and I was in the car and the farmer said, ‘Don’t look over there.’ What is that? It is a red sign to look over there. So I looked over there, and there in a trailer were these young piglets about five months of age, all crammed in, really scared, who were defecating and squealing. They were going down to the abattoir in Benalla to be killed at the same abattoir that killed the pigs from the factory farms. Their lives were ending, for dietary pleasure. And I thought, ‘Well, that really is it in a nutshell.’ These animals are still living lives based on our dominion, and I come back again to: if we could live happy and healthy lives without doing those things to animals, why wouldn’t we? What compelling reason do we have?

Renee HEATH: I read this morning that about 6 per cent of Australians have a plant-based diet, so that leaves a huge percentage that do choose to eat meat. What would be some improvements that would help the current industry to – I guess you are saying there are not any, because they all end up dying anyway?

Pam AHERN: No, I think there are from Farm Transparency, and in a presentation of Animals Australia there were actually some good measures to phasing out the industry, because honestly a sanctuary like ours cannot take on 5 million pigs that are within the industry now. So there is something that has to happen to those animals and then just a transition out. You know, as I said, the writing is on the wall. Commercial egg layers realise that there is not really a future in the caged-egg industry. People are looking for other alternatives. Consumers as they are becoming more and more informed are turning away from these things that do not align with their ethics. You mentioned 6 per cent. Forty years ago when I became a vegan and I could not even pronounce the word ‘vegan’, I reckon it was probably .0000001 per cent that was vegan, and now it has increased, and I think it is going up exponentially because, I think, of ethics and also the availability of these products. We had the chap earlier speaking about the cultured meat industry. These are industries that are – it is a very exciting time for change and compassion I think in the world.

Renee HEATH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Dr Heath. Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you very much for your presentation. You mentioned the Farm Transparency Project. Their recommendation says a two-year phase-out of commercial pig farming must be announced. Now, from what you have said – what is your view on that?

Pam AHERN: This is a really tricky one. As someone who is advocating on behalf of pigs I have to go home and face them tonight and say that I said, ‘It’s okay to kill pigs.’ So I think I am going to leave that to you guys to work out. I mean, that is your job here. I hope I can inform you to think about what we are doing to pigs and how we go about it. Often people say to me, ‘I only eat free-range pig meat,’ or something like that, as if it is a deal-breaker for them. I have to say to them, ‘Well, my Edgar Alan Pig was a free-range pig, and I no more could eat him than my little doggy sitting next to him.’ I think I said in my written submission about South Korea moving away from dog meat, which is an accepted thing, and it is only an accident of geography that the dog is our friend and not our food in Australia.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. But your view would be that you do not like people eating meat, whatever sort of meat – I guess, like beef, lamb, chicken?

Pam AHERN: It is their call what they do. I am not going to tell them what to do or what not to. I encourage them to think, and I think if people are really honest with themselves, they are going to really have trouble doing those sorts of things. As I said, as an advocate for these animals, I cannot go home and say that it is okay to eat these animals I am advocating for.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. Now, I am just interested in your view of what the Farm Transparency Project did. They acknowledge breaking the law and going on to properties without the knowledge or consent of private property owners, and I guess hearing from some of the submissions we have received, one talks about:

[QUOTE AWAITING VERIFICATION]

Activism involving trespass is an illegal activity and risks biosecurity quarantine breaches and is a safety danger to visitors not familiar with the farm systems, machinery and activities.

The emotional damage and mental health concerns from producers targeted by illegal entry to farms is something that is causing some producers to leave the industry, others to suffer severe mental health issues, even contemplating suicide. This issue is serious and the end should not justify the means. Many of my farming colleagues all live on their farms with their children and other families. They should not wake up in the night concerned about trespass from vigilante groups.

What are your thoughts on that?

Pam AHERN: That is a really, really valid point. It is a really valid point. I am going to go back a little step to what motivates these people to do these things, to feel the need to actually trespass. In the break I actually did a quick google of how people who broke the law have changed it, and in 0.36 seconds, 2980 million results came up of people who have broken the law and who have changed it. I do not think it is something that these people take lightly. I could hear in Chris and the other lady’s presentation, their voices quivering with talking about what they did. I do not think it is a decision that they took lightly at all. I think they are fully aware of biosecurity when they go into those places. I do not think these are random people who have walked off the street. I think they, with the motivation to help pigs, are going to actually observe full biosecurity because the last thing that they would want is anything happening to those pigs. I think it is absolutely tragic that people’s lives are compromised by what is happening in the industry, but I think it is terrible that people have to go to these lengths.

We would not be having this inquiry without these people doing what they did, and I think that is a tragedy. I mean, there was that horrible incident we saw on 7.30 last night about the bestiality of that pig. I doubt that that is an isolated incident, and that was only captured because of that camera. These are really, really difficult, difficult, difficult questions that we are going to have a range of opinions about. I do not think it is black and white, but at the end of the day I think the best of our humanity must prevail for pig farmers, for activists and for the animals.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. Mrs McArthur, hello. Do you have some questions?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, okay. So, Pam, I know you have got a farm animal refuge place. That is correct, isn’t it, where you take in farm animals that you have saved?

Pam AHERN: It is a not-for-profit sanctuary for rescued farm animals.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, a sanctuary, sorry. What size is it? How many acres do you have?

Pam AHERN: We have 153 acres in Lancefield, and we currently have 434 residents.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. So how many pigs are there? If we get rid of his pig industry, how many pigs are there in Victoria that we would need to re –

Pam AHERN: You missed out; I touched on that, Bev. You are just like my dad. I love your questions. We have actually met at another inquiry, and your questions are very much like my dad's. They really challenge my thought to make sure that I am on the right path. My dad used to say to me, 'You know, Itsy, what if everyone stops eating meat overnight – what are you going to do with all the animals?' This was probably 40 years ago, and I said to my dad, 'Well, it's not going to happen.' But now we are actually having conversations where potentially it could happen, but we have phase-out periods. We have governments that can support these people. I mentioned the Farms Transition Project to help farmers to transition out of animal-based agriculture into plant-based agriculture. So it is not going to happen overnight, as much as I wish it would, but I think the writing is on the wall that these things are starting to happen.

Bev McARTHUR: So, should we slaughter all the existing animals that we need to phase out?

Pam AHERN: No, that is not what I said.

Bev McARTHUR: You are saying that you want to phase them out, and you need governments to support the farmers to phase them out – at what cost to the taxpayer?

Pam AHERN: Well, that is something for the government to look at.

Bev McARTHUR: No, no. You are proposing it. You need to have a costing, surely.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, Pam has provided a very good submission that covers off what her expertise is, and she is not here as an economics expert.

Bev McARTHUR: If you are putting up a proposition that you potentially are going to phase out an industry, we need to know where the animals are going to go that are being phased out. And if you are suggesting that governments need to prop up the farms that are going to have to get rid of all their pigs or their cows or their sheep or their chickens or whatever, then you need to come up with some viable proposition as to how much the taxpayers are going to foot the bill for.

Pam AHERN: I do not know that that is really the role of people who do submissions, and I think that is a bit harsh. If you are going to put that caveat on anyone who puts a submission, you are actually going to discourage people from putting submissions.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, we just need factual –

Pam AHERN: I think we are putting factual information.

Bev McARTHUR: Well –

Pam AHERN: Please allow me to speak. I think people are putting up their thoughts and their feelings, but if you are actually expecting people to do solid costings, economic costings, on these things before they put a submission up, you are going to discourage people from speaking up, and that is the last thing that we want in any society. We want people to have the courage and, as I spoke about in my presentation, to be brave to speak up and together, collectively we arrive at a solution that everyone wants – not necessarily me or you or anyone else here, but we can actually sit down and work out these things together. It is not on one person who only got to year 11 at school. I think that is a really, really harsh thing to ask, and you will be discouraging public input, which is the last thing that you should want in a democracy.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, I just think you cannot be putting up these propositions unless you can evaluate all the consequences. But I suppose you would be aware, as farmers are, that not all land can be transferred into

plant-based agriculture. Some land is only suitable for grazing. So for all the land that cannot be used for plant-based agriculture, crops, et cetera, what do you propose farmers do?

Pam AHERN: We can look at rewilding. There are lots of things that we can look at.

Bev McARTHUR: Rewilding – what sort of level of income will they get from that?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur –

Pam AHERN: Well, they are going to transition to other areas, and I think that is beyond the scope of this inquiry.

The CHAIR: Yes, can I –

Bev McARTHUR: Well, no, we need to have the consequences.

The CHAIR: Order! Mrs McArthur, order! I think I have given you pretty free rein with your questioning. Now you are talking about grazing animals when we are talking about confined pigs. Do you have a further question in relation to Pam's evidence today?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes. What about all the pigs that are farmed out in paddocks? I know many of the big commercial farms do not have pigs in pens. They are out in the paddocks. They have got little hutches that they can go into. They are very well looked after. Do you support that?

Pam AHERN: No. My Edgar Allan Pig was a free-range pig. If you had heard my presentation, I could no more eat Edgar Allan than I could my little dog.

Bev McARTHUR: No, but you come from the point of view that none of us should eat meat, correct?

Pam AHERN: I come from the point of view that people need to listen to their heart and make informed choices. I personally cannot eat these animals. I do not know how people in good conscience can cause harm and suffering to another living being when it is not necessary.

Bev McARTHUR: But isn't it everybody's right to choose? I do not care if you do not want to eat meat. I am very happy for other people to eat meat. It is the right of free choice in a democracy, isn't it?

Pam AHERN: It is the right of free choice, but it is also the right for freedom of information, and I do not think the public are informed as to what is happening right here right now on our watch to these animals who are farmed for food. I know I certainly was not. And once I became informed, I stopped.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, I am looking to you to provide us with the acreage that is going to house all the farm animals that get displaced.

Pam AHERN: If you come and help me, Bev, we will do it together.

Bev McARTHUR: 140 acres will not even house one farm.

Pam AHERN: Well, you were not listening. It was 153, so you clearly are not listening to me.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I am sure you are already aware we have access to the Parliamentary Budget Office through the committee, and I am sure we can have a look at the economics of this work.

Bev McARTHUR: So we are getting them to do a costing. Good. Excellent.

The CHAIR: I have just got one more quick question for you, Pam. You spoke about your experiences with farmers when you went to go collect pigs, and other experiences. Is it a common thing for you that you have people from the industry express that they know things might not be done in the best way?

Pam AHERN: We do have brave people who have come forward. Several people who work at the sanctuary have worked in the industry. One lady in particular actually got into pig farming because she wanted

to make a difference in the industry. She really loved pigs. And she actually got out – and I think she was really quite scarred from the experience – because she realised that it just was not possible.

I would like to extend an invitation to all of the committee, and that includes you, Bev, to actually come to the sanctuary and to meet these pigs firsthand and to see what their lives really can be like, because it is incredible, the lives that these animals live when they have one of free choice. You cannot meet a pig and not be impacted by them. That is beyond the snout mark that they will leave on your leg.

Bev McARTHUR: I am looking for the thousands that you are going to have –

Pam AHERN: We will do it together. You and me, Bev. We have got this, Bev.

Bev McARTHUR: The thousands that you are going to house on your 140 acres.

Pam AHERN: You and me, Bev. Bev, it is 153 acres.

Bev McARTHUR: Good luck with that. They will be all starving.

The CHAIR: All right, let us have a bit of order. Let us have some order. Ms Copsey, do you have any further questions?

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. You have spoken briefly about it, but I suppose I am interested in if you have any reflections on the way that the commercial drivers of this industry impact not only the animals but the people working in this industry. Do you get the sense that people in the industry would prefer a playing field that allowed more in the industry to take up more humane processes, with a focus on welfare against commercial interests?

Pam AHERN: My brother-in-law was in the industry, so I actually learned a lot firsthand from his experiences in the industry. He was a very compassionate man, and he was really quite taken by the treatment of the animals. He said that people go two ways when they go in the industry – they become really hardened or they become really softened – but they are not not moved by the experience of actually being in the industry. Pigs are one of the most difficult animals to contain. You can contain a sheep or a goat or a cow easily. You can relatively restrain them. But a pig you cannot, and they become very, very stressed by the experience. They scream, and they will vocalise. That does impact the people working in those industries, and I think we do need to think of them as well, because they are human beings.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Copsey. Do we have any further questions from Dr Heath? Mrs McArthur?

Bev McARTHUR: No.

The CHAIR: Ms Broad?

Gaëlle BROAD: Just a brief question. Talking with the industry, it seems that they have made approaches to raise standards as well and offered to contribute to that process, which seems to be higher than where the code sits currently. What is your view on that, or do you just sit with no change to the standards would make any difference?

Pam AHERN: I think we can certainly do a lot better than what we are doing, but I come back to the question: if we cannot do it humanely, should we be doing it at all? I do not think we can.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Broad. Thank you very much, Pam, for coming along today and sharing your evidence with us and being brave. We really appreciate your expertise and the time you have taken out of the sanctuary, because I know just how much work that is for you each and every day.

That concludes the hearing. However, I would invite any members of the committee who do want to see the display before it is packed up to have a look in the next few minutes.

Witnesses withdrew.