

Greyhound ban shows need for joined-up thinking across all animal industries

Written by Elizabeth Ellis, Honorary Senior Fellow, School of Law, Faculty of Law, Humanities & the Arts, University of Wollongong

There is [ample evidence](#) of systematic cruelty and regulatory failure with which to justify the New South Wales government's [decision to ban greyhound racing](#). But this is a single industry in a single state – if we step back and look at the wider picture we see a telling lack of consistency in animal welfare policy and practice around the nation.

The [ABC Four Corners investigation](#) that sparked the NSW inquiry found [wrongdoing in multiple jurisdictions](#). Yet only the [ACT is set to follow NSW's lead in banning the greyhound industry](#) rather than simply pledging to increase oversight.

How many trainers will simply move interstate, taking the animal welfare problems with them?

Even within states, there is considerable inconsistency in the regulation of different animal sectors. The Baird government has rightly condemned the [killing of up to 68,000 greyhounds over the past 12 years](#). Yet [tens of thousands of cats and dogs are killed](#) every year in NSW because the government has failed to control their breeding and sale.

The government has already held two inquiries into this issue: first by the [Companion Animals Taskforce](#), which reported in 2012, and then by a [parliamentary committee on companion animal breeding practices](#) in 2015. But in contrast to the swift response on greyhounds, the recommendations have been timid and government action glacial.

Still in NSW, but on a very different issue, the increased land clearing likely to accompany [proposed changes to native vegetation laws](#) will have significant impacts on the habitat of native animals. Why is this not also a major animal welfare issue?

Inconsistent policy and practice are not confined to NSW. In Victoria, while the state

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government has [tightened laws governing pets](#), it continues to allow [jumps racing for horses](#) and the recreational shooting of ducks. Both activities are banned in many other parts of the country.

Philosophical anomalies

Policy inconsistency reflects anomalies at the philosophical level. Without a hint of irony, the NSW inquiry [condemns the treatment of greyhounds](#) as “commercial commodities, not animals to be cherished and loved”. However, this legal property status underpins the regulation of all domestic animals.

This is most clearly evident in livestock industries, with the routine commodification of animals and acceptance of mass “wastage”. This is precisely the issue cited as the [main rationale for the greyhound ban](#).

How to explain this different thinking, when livestock animals are as individual as pets and just as capable of feeling pleasure and pain? If it is necessary to rely on animals as our main source of food and fibre – and this idea is [increasingly contested](#) – does not their sentience demand at the very least a much greater measure of humane treatment?

In any case, if greyhounds are considered more deserving because they are dogs rather than cows, pigs or chickens, this brings us back to the question of why breeders of pet dogs and cats haven’t met with similarly strong action as those who breed dogs for racing.

Barriers to reform

The NSW greyhound inquiry has also raised another issue that cuts across animal industries: the conflict of interest that arises when one body is responsible both for promoting the industry and for regulating welfare within it. It is no coincidence that examples of animal cruelty in the live export and greyhound racing industries have both been exposed by animal activists and the media, rather than the regulators.

Premier Mike Baird has [acknowledged](#) his failure to pay sufficient attention to the concerns of animal advocates, including the dissenting views of John Kaye, the late Greens MLC and deputy chair of a [2014 parliamentary inquiry](#) into

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greyhound racing. In that inquiry, the majority report found that “the incidence of greyhound cruelty and neglect is minimal”, despite [compelling submissions to the contrary](#).

It is heartening to note Baird’s [recognition](#) of the importance the public attaches to animal welfare. Unfortunately, belated and inconsistent government conduct tends to trigger cynicism even if the action is properly informed and courageous; witness Baird’s subsequent denials that it was all a [ruse to hand dog tracks to property developers](#).

The [reaction to the ban by industry](#) and the [NSW Labor opposition](#) make it clear that a conservative government is not immune to the kind of political and legal backlash that followed the federal Labor government’s [2011 suspension of live exports to Indonesia](#) over animal welfare issues.

None of this is conducive to the sustained reform that is urgently needed. Moreover, it is symptomatic of a regulatory framework that is showing its age. A more coherent strategy is required, one that identifies animal welfare problems consistently and proactively, with long-term planning and nationally consistent implementation. The establishment of an independent office of animal welfare, ideally at federal level, is critical to leading this kind of change.

Better planning and greater consistency would improve animal welfare as well as minimising the negative impact on human lives when changes are made. This would also prove advantageous for governments, by helping to shield action taken in good faith from attacks by political opponents and vested interests.

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