

Visit to Halal Abattoir

On 14 August 2003 I met the Chief Executive Officer and managers of the largest meat processing company south of Perth. The company operates an abattoir as well as a processing and packaging operation.

During our meeting, we exchanged views on the live animal export trade export trade. I emphasised that PACAT's major concern is the cruelty of the trade and the unaddressed animal welfare issues which were endemic right throughout the trade, from the farm gate to the final destination overseas. In particular, we discussed the observation reports of slaughter procedures overseas, and agreed that methods used overseas are unacceptably inhumane and cannot compare to our strict Australian procedures.

I outlined PACAT's agenda, which is to convince the Federal government to phase out this trade and replace it with processed meat to all the overseas markets. The cruelty issues alone have not stopped the trade in the past and no doubt will not stop the trade in the future. But by expanding the meat processing industries throughout Australia, there would be more employment for Australians in all aspects of the meat processing industries; value-adding to our export industry; and an end to the inhumane live animal export trade.

The CEO, who is on the Meat Processing Taskforce (MPT) which was formed early this year, verified that he had read PACAT's report which had been sent to him, and which outlined the adverse economic impacts of the live trade on the meat processing industry.

He stated that his company, which exports to the Middle East, Asia, Japan and USA, currently employs between 350-400 staff and has been operating under capacity for years. He stated that the overseas markets for Halal meat cannot be met because the live trade gets first preference from the livestock sales yards. But he said that if the company had a consistent supply of cattle all year round, they could increase their workforce by another 200 and operate at full capacity 7 days a week.

Apparently there are four other combined Halal abattoir / processing companies in Western Australia, handling cattle, sheep and goats, and they are all operating under capacity. There are approximately 64 abattoirs operating in Western Australia. Many of these abattoirs can only employ their staff for 2-3 days per week. All have supply problems due to the live trade.

When our meeting concluded I was taken to the Quality Assurance Manager's office and given the regulations and procedures for Halal slaughter to read. Then we both went to the clothing store to put on the regulation long white coat, rubber boots and paper cap before being admitted into the abattoir.

I was amazed at the size of the abattoir operation. It was unbelievably clean and the walls, fixtures and fittings were all finished in stainless steel. The floor staff were standing on platforms and attending to particular tasks on the assembly line of hanging carcasses. We walked past them to the very end of the building and arrived at the stunning box where the animals are stunned.

The box is made of stainless steel and it faces toward Mecca. Only one animal at a time is in the box and it cannot see the hanging carcasses. Its head is the only part which is visible. The person conducting the stunning is a trained slaughterman. The person undertaking the ritual slaughter, is a Muslim slaughterman,

I witnessed the bolt gun being placed to the middle of the cow's forehead. The animal was not stressed and it actually appeared curious because it did not know what was happening. I was only an arm's length away from its head.

The side door dropped down automatically away from the box as the unconscious animal collapsed. There was no sound and no movement from the animal. The Muslim slaughterman chanted in Arabic as he grasped the head and severed the cow's windpipe and carotid artery. The whole process lasted no more than six seconds. I was told that the prayer chanted translates as, "In the name of God, most gracious, most merciful."

I left the abattoir feeling somewhat numb and saddened, however, I can honestly say that Australian abattoirs are no doubt far better places for an animal to end its life than the overseas slaughterhouses where inhumane treatment and brutality is accepted as the norm.

After shedding my abattoir clothing, I was taken to meet the staff training manager, who showed me the training program documents. He explained that the top two training priorities are animal welfare and safety. His company employs eight full-time Muslim slaughtermen and 35 Australian slaughtermen, as well as butchers, process workers, packers, outside staff, vets, stockmen and so forth.

The Muslim slaughtermen have been recruited from an Islamic body called Halal Sadiq Services. They have to be registered and have current identification cards certifying their accreditation with Sadiq Services as well as the Perth Mosque Inc. The slaughtermen as well as all other abattoir staff have to pass written and oral tests about every aspect of their jobs prior to employment.

All vets, meat inspectors, and process activities are overseen by the AQIS VOIC vet (Australian Quarantine Inspection Services, Veterinary Officer in Charge) who also verifies that the meat is Halal (meaning 'lawful' in Arabic).

The company's emphasis on animal welfare commences from the day the cattle are unloaded from the trucks until the day they are put down. The company owns the very large irrigated paddocks that surround the buildings. When the cattle are

unloaded, they are watered, fed and rested and every animal is given a health check.

I then returned to the main office where I had another quick chat to the CEO, who was interested to know what I thought about my tour of the abattoir section of the company operations. The company's position in regard to the live trade is that the meat processing industry needs to be allowed to compete on a level playing field. This is not the case at present. For example, there are too many costs imposed on the meat processing industry that are not imposed on the live trade, and too much additional government support for the live trade, that is not available to the processing industry.

We agreed to keep in touch with one another. I was asked not to mention the name of this company, no doubt due to the Halal butchershop fire recently and concern about sabotage arising from racial hatred and ignorance.

Several days later I sent a letter to the CEO of the company, to thank him and his managers for their time, cooperation and courtesy.

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