



Text of introductory speech delivered by Nichola Donovan¹ at

Hear Me Roar: a forum to consider the parallels and intersections between equal rights and animal rights in society and law

Co-hosted by Lawyers for Animals Inc. and Victorian Women Lawyers, during Victorian Law Week
Victoria University, Melbourne, 20 May 2010

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Before we introduce our speakers, we'd like to get you thinking about equal rights and animal rights, by explaining how this event came into being, and offering some personal reflections on the significance of tonight's topic.

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Lawyers for Animals is a small (but 'active') not-for-profit thinktank. We were founded in Melbourne in 2005 by two young women lawyers – Caitlin Evans (who's here tonight) and Meredith Shumack. We believe that the suffering of non-human animals is entrenched in our laws because animals have no legal voice, so we try, where possible, to speak up for them. *Lawyers for Animals* regularly makes submissions to those who create or administer laws in Australia in an effort to strengthen the legal protections for animals. Another of our key objectives is to develop an awareness, among Australia's legal profession and the wider public, of animal suffering, and to posit ways to reduce it. That is why we are here tonight.

The idea for *Lawyers for Animals* and *Victorian Women Lawyers* to co-host tonight's forum arose last September, after the assistant convenor of VWL, Astrid Haben-Beer joined our group. We welcomed Astrid's suggestion that our two organisations work together on a joint project of some kind, and since *Lawyers for Animals* hosts an educational event to help celebrate Law Week each year, we suggested directing our joint energies towards this event. We then had to come up with a topic that reflected the interests of both our organisations. For me, personally, this was relatively easy.

During my arts degree at Monash, many years ago, I first learned about 'anti-speciesism' from Peter Singer. 'Speciesism' is the prejudice that humans practise toward other animals based on their differing physical characteristics; which ignores their physiological, intellectual and emotional similarities. 'Sexism' and 'racism' are both similar to speciesism, but they express prejudice against a gender and race, respectively, on physical grounds, rather than against a species.

Strong analogies can be drawn between the comparatively new animal rights movement, and other social justice movements during the last 250 years, in particular: abolition; feminism; children's rights and disability rights. Common to each of these movements was a starting point (not too long ago) when the subject (slave, woman or child) was considered the 'property' of another, and denied basic rights.

Aside from these parallels between animal rights and equal rights, there are numerous examples, in society and law, where animal rights and equal rights intersect. For instance, in recent years, activists in Australia and overseas have been working to progress the notion of legal guardianship for animals - particularly in the context of animal abuse - to give animals an ability to address the Courts (or achieve 'standing') in certain situations. It is worth remembering, that before there was a system of legal guardianship for humans, those who were unable to represent themselves – including people with intellectual impairments, people with severe

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mental illness, and children – were also denied a distinct 'voice' in our Courts.

Another intersection between animal rights and equal rights occurs in the high statistical correlation between domestic violence against women and children, and animal cruelty. Studies show that about ¾ of women who entered domestic violence refuges in the United States reported that their partner had either threatened to hurt, or had actually hurt or killed, their companion animals. Such research has led to cross-reporting legislation in several U.S. jurisdictions, which allows child and animal welfare investigators to refer families with substantiated child maltreatment or animal cruelty, for investigation by parallel agencies. There is also a correlation between people who commit animal cruelty, and those who commit serious crimes against humans: Martin Bryant, who committed the Port Arthur massacre, being a prime example. In both Western Australia and Queensland a database of animal cruelty offenders is now being considered, to help police identify potential violent criminals. But it is salient to note, that unlike the United States' cross-reporting laws, which potentially protect both animals and people, Australian governments are only considering databases that will benefit humans.

In Victoria, the Eastern Domestic Violence Service, Animal Aid and some veterinary clinics, have linked up to create the 'Pets in Peril' program, which offers a fostering service for the companion animals of women fleeing situations of domestic violence. Research shows that companion animals are often threatened and abused in order to coerce and control women to remain in violent relationships. The 'Pets in Peril' program means that women won't have to delay leaving violent partners out of concern for the safety of their animals.

But enough from me and my examples.... I really hope you will enjoy tonight's two speakers, and the Question and Answer session that will follow – at which time we'll welcome your questions and comments.

Astrid will now introduce our first speaker...