

Animal Rights in Australia: Eco-Terror and the “War on Terrier”

Johnny Depp’s Dogs and Barnaby Joyce

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“It’s time that Pistol and Boo buggered back to the United States.” – Barnaby Joyce, Australian agriculture minister, ABC, May 14, 2015.

One should be able to make light of it, though anything involving introduced species, pet sympathy and a community watery-eyed at thoughts they might be affected is bound to bring frowns and scowls. Attitudes to the environment in Australia tend to vary between loathing and anthropomorphic bliss. Rarely does a sensible mind get a word in.

Animal slaughter is sanctioned by scientific-agricultural establishments, armed to the teeth with lethal viruses. Elaborate techniques of killing the Indian Myna bird, to take but one example, fill city council brochures, some of which come uncomfortably close to historic example of how humankind dealt with their own. (Take gassing in cars as a form of improvisation, and the general use of carbon monoxide.) “The World Conservation Union,” notes the City of Lake Macquarie Council in tones of sombre finality, “has declared the Indian Myna as the second greatest threat to native birds after land clearing.”[1]

Tribal rituals characterise the process of hunting fauna that have erred in killing human counterparts. The native Dingo is demonised as a marauder. The elusive saltwater crocodile is pursued after consuming its human quarry. Sharks are deemed to be terrors in need of culling.

Johnny Depp’s pets, who would otherwise only deserve mention in glossy back pages, have moved to centre stage after he did not declare them to Australian quarantine. Both he and spouse Amber Heard were believed to have carried the dogs off a private jet concealed in a handbag. “Under section 67 of the Quarantine Act,” stated a stringent senior lecturer in law at the University of Technology in Sydney Talia Anthony, “it is very clear that he should have been charged straight away.”[2]

At its core is a persistent tendency in the Australian approach to external threats. Here, they are not coming in the form of biped refugees or asylum seekers evading fictional queues of processing. In this case, they are quadrupeds who might be infected with an assortment of diseases. The rationales are similar – threats to the sanctity of Australia’s virgo intacta, be it by morals or the dangers of a biohazard.

The country’s Agriculture Minister, the rather colourful if incautious Barnaby Joyce, explained that, “There is a process if you want to bring animals: you get the permits, they

go into quarantine and then you can have them.” Regarding Depp, “if we let movie stars – even though they’ve been the sexiest man alive twice – to come into our nation [and break the laws], then why don’t we just break the laws for everybody?”

The theme of environmental purity was bound to intervene in descriptions from the minister. “The reason you can walk through a park in Brisbane and not have in the back of your mind ‘what happens if a rabid dog comes out and bites me or bites my kid’ is because we’ve kept the disease out.” No such dogs. No rabies down under in the land of the pure. This view, incidentally, is not shared by US customs, which disagrees with Barnaby on the issue of Australia being free of rabies.

For those not in the know, Australia’s policy on the subject of ecological protection is filled with inconsistency and disaster. It is often insensible – lurking behind it seems to be an insistence that the scientific fraternity has a monopoly on getting it wrong. At the very least, they want first digs at ruining the environment, a sort of merry attempt at curing by killing. A Hollywood actor, well, would be something else. Things might have gotten amusing had the actor introduced an invasive species of cactus, something which Australia knows all too well from the introduction of the prickly pear in the 19th century.

The Australian environment has been subjected to sustained attacks for decades. Australia’s European settler’s laced Victoria and New South Wales with European varietals, obsessed by ideas of recreating the majesty of the English garden. The rabbit found its way onto the scene, wreaking staggering havoc. Foxes were introduced. As were forms of game. Animal sympathy came a distant second to agricultural protection.

The scientific industrial complex then went into action attempting to find a “cure” for the Australian environment: the rabbit would be infected with myxomatosis, a condition that sees the animal develop tumours, fatigue and blindness. Death can follow in a matter of weeks. True to nature’s wisdom, the species began resisting the introduced virus, which called for a second viral blast – rabbit calicivirus.

There is an eco-war being waged, and Boo and Pistol were destined to become its collateral, if somewhat hyped victims. Had they been euthanized, as promised by Joyce, they would have joined others in the special, if somewhat manic efforts at keeping Australia safe. Yet such a discussion would be taking place alongside the daily battle of community inspired “eco-warriors” keen to rid the environment of introduced species. They are the self-appointed guardians of the green gate, keen to back up native species against vicious invaders. Kill the cane toad. Kill the myna. Kill, well, everything foreign.

All of this is serious stuff indeed, so much so that the “war on terrier” saga found US-based comedian John Oliver in an unsparing mood on HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*. After describing Australia as a land of unforgivably bizarre exotica (the platypus was deemed a “creep”) his targets became clear. Pistol and Boo, in being told to bugger off, were being given the full rounded political treatment. “I’ve got to say that’s pretty ballsy. Elected officials very rarely risk openly telling puppies to go fuck themselves.”[3]

Eco-terrorism, like other forms of terrorism, assumes a variety of forms. It can come in the form of rampant rabbits, concealed canines, and microbial activity. But it also manifests itself in the negligent and generally incompetent actions of the scientific environmental front. Like Joyce, purity is their game. Catastrophe is often their handiwork.

In its dramatic finale, the dogs were flown home before the “death counter” ticked over. And Oliver’s program issued an ultimatum to Australians. “As of this moment you’ve got 50 hours to get everything Australian out of our country, or else.”

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Notes:

- [1] <http://www.lakemac.com.au/natural-environment/pests/indian-myna-birds>
- [2] <http://www.news.com.au/national/johnny-depp-and-amber-heard-should-have-been--charged-say-legal-experts/story-fncynjr2-1227357612722>
- [3] <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/05/19/john-oliver-mocks-barnaby-joyce--hilarious-segment-depps-dogs>

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