Who will help us protect our farms and families?

FIONA SIMSON

By FIONA SIMSON, CONTRIBUTOR
12:00AM APRIL 9, 2019 • 695 COMMENTS

It’s time for action on anti-farm extremists.

Yesterday we saw what could be the most widespread, co-ordinated attack on Australia’s food supply chain in our history.

At least half a dozen processing facilities were broken into, with extremist protesters chaining themselves to equipment; it took hours for them to be removed.

This brand of reckless criminal behaviour poses significant risks to the safety of our food, the welfare of the animals in these facilities, and the safety of staff and the extremists themselves. That’s not to mention the direct financial cost to these law-abiding, family-owned businesses.

Yesterday’s attacks follow a bombardment of activist trespass incidents on farms in recent months, spurred on by the publication of an online map that highlights farm locations and encourages extremists to take the law into their own hands.

We’ve seen groups of 100 people, clad in black uniforms, storming on to farms while streaming live on social media platforms. Their tactics are simple: to bully, threaten and intimidate.

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It’s important to remember these properties are not just places of business, they are also family homes where right now farm kids should be enjoying school holidays. The organised and systematic terrorising of these families in their own homes says a lot about how far these groups will go in the name of their radical beliefs. This was further highlighted by yesterday’s Melbourne CBD protest, where children were used to prevent police from using force.
I say radical beliefs, because not for a moment are we talking about basic dietary preferences.

As a farmer, I support a person’s right to eat whatever they please, but instead we’re faced with groups who oppose everything from aquariums to the ownership of domestic pets (including guide dogs for the sight impaired). We’re talking hardline extremists who in no way represent the views of reasonable Australians.

They’re so dogged in these beliefs that they’re willing to play Russian roulette with Australia’s food supply, risking the introduction of pests, diseases or contaminants to our highly regulated food supply chain. I should be clear for the record: our industry has nothing to hide. Our farming practices are some of the world’s best, and we’re constantly innovating and improving, with the community’s expectations in mind. We’d love more people to take an interest in farming and experience what we do, but trespassing on private farms is not the way to do it.

The most alarming part of the extremist onslaught is that the law seems powerless to help. More often than not, despite overwhelming evidence provided by the extremists’ footage, no arrests are made. Those who have been charged are given a fine equivalent to a parking ticket and sent off with no criminal record. As a result, reoffending is the norm.

In an extreme example, we saw the theft of livestock by trespassing protesters attract a fine of just $1 under Victoria’s biosecurity laws. The victim in that instance, The Gippy Goat Cafe at Yarragon in Gippsland, announced over the weekend that it would shut its doors because it could no longer expect its staff to endure the constant threats and harassment being levelled at them by so-called activists.

As farmers, we’re watching these events with despair. First, the authorities and internet giants say they’re powerless to prevent the publication of our home addresses on an extremist attack website. Then, dozens of farm raids result in only a handful of arrests. Then, finally we discover that the price of our privacy — not to mention the safety of our staff, families and livestock — is as low as $1.

Surely, then, governments are acting quickly to address this calamity? Not exactly ...

To date, only the Queensland government has announced it will toughen penalties for these offences, notwithstanding sympathetic murmurings from other leaders across the country.

Aussie Farms and other groups co-ordinating these attacks remain registered charities — a privilege that should have been revoked months ago.

To its credit, the federal government has joined us in calling on the states to act, while using its powers to bring the publisher of the Aussie Farms map within the scope of the Privacy Act. Scott Morrison yesterday also committed that the commonwealth would join those affected in a civil suit, something the industry is actively exploring.

However, the net effect of these responses has been, at best, piecemeal. What’s needed is a co-ordinated national response to what is a glaringly national issue. The federal government has a co-ordinating role to play here, to ensure we identify and plug the gaps that are allowing these extremists to ride roughshod over law-abiding farmers — regardless of their jurisdiction.

With a federal election weeks away, now is the time for all parties to clarify where they stand on this. Will they commit to leading a national solution that protects our farms? Or will they leave us to try our luck with the states and any civil proceedings we can mount?

The organised criminals leading this assault on our farms are well resourced, and savvy enough to exploit any loophole we leave open. Unless the response from governments across the country is equally well co-ordinated, we’ll be leaving our farmers — along with their families, staff and livestock — perilously exposed.

Fiona Simson is president of the National Farmers Federation.

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Animal rights activists in Melbourne: green-collar criminals or civil ‘disobedients’?

April 9, 2019 2.36pm AEST

Thirty-nine people were arrested yesterday in Melbourne over an animal rights protest that blocked a major intersection. The protest caused chaos for commuters during the morning peak hour, and politicians and the media were quick to condemn the act.

The prime minister denounced the “shameful, un-Australian” conduct of “green-collared criminals”. The opposition leader commented that protesters should thank farmers, rather than attack them. And some people on social media ridiculed and abused those engaged in the protest.

Yet Australia, like most liberal regimes, should allow citizens to protest as part of their right to free speech. Civil disobedience has traditionally played a positive role in democratic societies. Indeed, the label “civil” is meant to signal something praiseworthy in the protest.

Civil disobedience isn’t the same as non-violence

Civil disobedience is traditionally identified with the non-violent campaigns of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King junior. But as I explain in my book on this subject, this has had the unwelcome result of suggesting that “civil” means “non-violent”.

After 39 activists were arrested, Superintendent David Clayton explained yesterday that Victoria Police:

...respect the right of people to protest peacefully.
This statement suggests the Melbourne protest was not peaceful, despite the fact protesters were holding placards that read:

This is a peaceful protest.

What many found despicable in this protest was the disruption of public traffic. They think the right to protest does not imply the right to cause others to remain stranded on their way to work. From this standpoint, the activists’ disruptive conduct constituted an act of violence and, as such, was incompatible with the principles of civil disobedience.

The danger of neutralising dissent

But this reasoning is misguided and dangerous. It’s dangerous because it risks neutralising the potential of civil disobedience as a form of dissent. When the government claims that only non-disruptive protests are “civil”, it’s also implying that those who seek to go beyond mere symbolic actions, and to have some impact on others through their protest, are censored as “criminal” and uncivil.

Sociologist Herbert Marcuse captured this risk with the notion of “repressive tolerance”. He argues that a government may successfully neutralise dissent by persuading citizens that there are “good” and “bad” ways of protesting. The good ones are those that cause no disruption, the bad ones are those that do – and citizens should engage in the good ones only.

But it is no coincidence that protests that cause no disruption are also the least likely to have an impact on public opinion and therefore force the government to take action.

This is exactly what occurred in Melbourne yesterday. After many non-disruptive protests that led to no answer from the government, the activists resorted to a disruptive act to force society to face the moral issue of animal treatment in the food industry. This was necessary to ensure their view, for once, was not ignored by the public.

What civil disobedience is and isn’t

I describe civil disobedience as an act of communication (albeit illegal). It is a way for citizens to “persuade” others of the necessity of changing a law, policy of practice. Its civility lies in the fact it shows respect and consideration for those it addresses.

But this need not be done in strictly non-violent ways. For example, in some cases forcing others to face our opinion (even against their will) is not uncivil, insofar as they remain free to decide whether to endorse or reject our view.

The conduct becomes uncivil when it seeks to “coerce” others to accept one’s view – for example, via threats. This is why terrorism is inherently uncivil.
Many people defended Edward Snowden’s whistleblowing as a form of civil disobedience, since he claimed to have leaked classified documents to the public “so what affects all of us can be discussed by all of us in the light of day”.

The same could be said of the Melbourne protest. One of the protesters explained:

*All we want is for people to watch the documentary and understand what goes on in Australian abattoirs.*

The protesters sought to persuade others to take action to promote animal welfare, not coerce them.

Of course, these activists resorted to an illegal act to carry out their protest, and for that reason they may be answerable to the law. Yet, I would argue, as civil “disobedients”, they should be treated with more leniency in comparison to standard lawbreakers.

**Not all peaceful protest is civil**

There is another important reason why we should resist the idea of civility as synonymous with non-violence. When right-wing groups decide to organise a peaceful protest in support of their racist views, their action may certainly be described as “non-violent”, insofar as it causes neither injury no disruption to others.

But this protest could never be considered “civil”, despite its non-disruptive nature, because at its heart lies an inherent disrespect for some segments of society.

Claiming that some people are less worthy than others, simply because they belong to a certain race or religion, is inherently uncivil. Those who engage in protest, even non-violent ones, to advance those claims should appropriately be condemned as uncivil disobedients.

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