

Admit it. Mike Baird has finally done something right with his greyhound racing ban

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DAILY LIFE



Sydney Dogs and Cats home has been a central drop off point for abandoned racing greyhounds since the moment scandal engulfed the sport eighteen months ago. *Photo: Peter Rae*

Anyone else feel like they've woken up in Opposite Land this week?

First, the NSW Liberal government - not known for its compassion - dropped a bombshell: greyhound racing will be banned from July next year on account of systemic and widespread animal cruelty.

Given that this is the same government that foisted upon us wildly unpopular lockout and liquor licensing laws, as well as rampant over-development, suspicions that the government had (highrise) plans for Glebe's Wentworth Park were quickly aroused.

Peter Flann with one of the Greyhounds he has rescued at his kennels at Rouse Hill on December 10, 2015 in Sydney, Australia. The Greyhound racing industry dumps dogs that don't perform and Peter and his wife save them from being killed. He is now caring for up to 50 dogs. *Photo: Jessica Hromas*

But after Premier Mike Baird attempted to dispel rumours of ulterior motives, stating that the state-owned race tracks would not be sold off but used for community space, things only got weirder.

If it wasn't a land grab, then it must be an "elitist" attack from inner city snobs on the working class habits of the plebs. Or so said Labor leader Luke Foley, who teamed up with - wait for it - the Shooters and Fishers party and Fred Nile to oppose the ban.

Now, apart from Baird having the support of



The Greens on this issue (unsurprising since animal welfare features largely in their policy platform), I'm not sure how this "elitist" argument works.

Much of the initial opposition to the ban that I saw came from residents of the inner city, who, thinking they'd been placed in a position of having to choose between animal cruelty and residential development, came down firmly on the side of cruelty, collectively recoiling in horror at the thought of more apartments being built in the very area they have so successfully gentrified over the past 20 years.

As for the greyhound trainers themselves, after getting busted killing underperforming dogs in their tens of thousands, as well as using other live animals as bait, they've suddenly located their own compassion, spilling tears at the prospect of having to put down their beloved dogs that are "part of the family". Well sure, if an animal you commodify, extract value from, and then kill when it is no longer financially useful, can ever truly be part of your "family".

To top it all off, it seems the same industry that just can't afford to keep greyhounds who lack "the instinct" alive has unexpectedly found itself in possession of millions of dollars to fight the ban.

Opposite Land.

You would think that, of all people, those on the left would agree that shutting down an industry that systematically abuses and kills animals for profit is not in itself a bad thing. You'd think that, but you'd be wrong. Last week we were classwashing racism, this week it's animal cruelty.

Why is it we so clearly see unjustifiable cruelty towards animals when other cultures do it (see: dog fighting, whaling, and seal clubbing) but make excuses when it is our own?

As someone who sees advocating for animals as an essential part of progressive politics, I am dispirited by the reaction from much of the left and Labor. Perhaps I should be used to it by now, given the traditional left lets us down time and time again in its refusal to acknowledge the central role animal exploitation plays in unsustainable and unethical capitalism.

From live exports to factory farms to palm oil, animals pay the heavy price for our consumerism. This also exacts a devastating toll on the environment and on the workers themselves; those industries that treat animals the worst are not known for their ethical treatment of employees either.

The McHugh report is clear. Greyhound racing is an objectively bad industry that is beyond repair. It has to go. Yes, banning it is going to affect some who are not directly responsible, but if we were to keep every single industry - no matter how destructive - alive, simply because it employed people, there would never be any social progress. Coal seam gas and fracking, anyone?

Supporting "the workers" should not automatically override initiatives that promise a more humane world. Yes, the government is obliged to help those affected transition to other means of employment, but it is not obliged to allow a rotten industry to continue simply because it employs people, and because working class lore has valorised the occasional punt on the dogs.

Nor should two party politics mean opposing the other side just to score points with voters.

Labor's threat to overturn the ban smacks of opposition for the sake of opposition. As former Labor premier of NSW Kristina Keneally exclaimed: "My goodness Luke Foley are you listening?...the NSW Liberal Government is privatising electricity, amalgamating councils, trying to raise the GST — but the issue you want to get up and fight on is this one?"

And even as Labor is up in arms about this elitist-but-not-really ban, Baird has continued his actual elitist policies including gutting TAFE yet again.

We need to be clear about something. Defending dog racing on account of its supposed popularity with the working class is as patronising as it comes. Public policy should not be about defending people's tastes, and, coming as it is at the expense of challenging policies that are actually hurting Australians across multiple demographics, I too wonder what Foley is possibly thinking.

As for my fellow inner city lefties who have slammed Baird for his decision, I suspect their own opposition may stem from a place of misguided entitlement.

Sydney's inner west was not always a boastable address. Living here was once something to be ashamed of because it meant you were almost certainly poor and quite likely a wog with parents who didn't speak much English. Fast forward 20 odd years and Glebe, Marrickville, and even Tempe are coveted addresses. I have watched as wealthy whites who once scoffed at our neighbourhoods have Columbused the joys of inner city living, pushing out the previously close knit, low-income, ethnic communities.

Families that would traditionally have stuck in close proximity to each other have scattered across the sprawling outer suburbs, leaving older immigrant parents largely alone and lonely. To now watch these newer residents get huffy about banning dog racing because it may mean having to share "their" inner city with highrise apartment dwellers is rather something. Not least because they are doing so under the guise of "supporting the working class" who can no longer even afford to live here.

Credit where it is due. Baird, for all his vices, deserves praise for this particular decision. Given it is Labor and the broad left that supposedly operates from a place of compassion, it is telling that they are defending animal abuse even as (some of) those on the right are finally taking a stand against it.

Opposite Land indeed.