

# Feeding the fears of what might lurk in shadows at MLA

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## OPINION

One person's witch-hunt is another's accountability. Such will be the fine balance facing those scrutinising the actions of Meat and Livestock Australia.

As is often the way, such a fine balance will be hard to maintain at a time when the word "scandal" is attached to the distressing images of cattle mistreated ahead of their slaughter in Indonesia.

But does a manifest failure in animal protection in another country signal that the entire edifice devoted to the marketing, research and development of livestock in Australia needs to be rebuilt from the ground up?

On the accountability front, it is becoming very clear that people, and probably lots of people, within MLA knew of the problems associated with the slaughter of cattle in Indonesia.

To MLA's great credit it has, since 2000, been developing boxes that attempt to reduce the kinds of problems exposed on *Four Corners*: cattle heads slapping on concrete and multiple cuts to the throat, leading to prolonged deaths.

To MLA's great discredit, the so-called "mark 1" boxes have, despite the acknowledged failings in their design, become the dominant MLA-endorsed method of slaughter in Indonesia. About 100 boxes are now used in abattoirs across Indonesia, despite the boxes not doing what they are supposed to do.

In fact, on the evidence of the RSPCA and internal MLA reports, the boxes perpetuated and increased some of the painful practices experienced by cattle.

In this example of MLA's activities there is an ability to mitigate harsh views: it was attempting to do something about the issue. There is also an ability to condemn MLA: it has taken the organisation more than 10 years to address the issue with little positive progress to report. (It is now up to mark 4 boxes).

MLA's manifest knowledge of the problems in Indonesia and long-term failure in dealing with them also allows the words cover up and cock up to be added to the list of charges it has to face.

But is such a substantial failing - remember a trade worth \$550 million last financial year has been suspended - symptomatic of a broader malaise within MLA?

Not on the available evidence, it has to be said. Or, from a more sceptical perspective, not on the incomplete and therefore flawed available evidence.

Part of MLA's governance is under a 2007 deed with the federal government, which includes compliance audits to ensure research and development dollars are being spent appropriately.

Neither the Department of Agriculture nor the MLA will provide copies of these audits, but they would make pretty boring reading. The audits are unqualified, meaning the MLA has been given a tick on how it handles its research and development spending.

This favourable impression has been further endorsed by an independent review by Arche Consulting, which gave the organisation an overall positive endorsement as it assessed MLA's governance documents.

That's the good news. The problem, as advanced by the Australian Beef Association, is that on a dollar-by-dollar basis the destination of MLA's research and development funding is almost completely opaque.

Yes, there is a database of research projects and final reports. Yes, the MLA is providing details of every completed project (although only since 2009-10).

But who gets what in dollar terms is a complete mystery. And even some of the projects, involving companies, are kept completely confidential.

Adding to concerns is that about 20 per cent of research and development funding in the past financial year went to organisations associated with MLA directors. Those concerns are ameliorated to a degree when some of the recipients are august research institutions such as CSIRO and Charles Sturt University.

But still, it's not a great look.

Given the other governance structures, it's not fair to say, as the beef association claims, that \$700 million in research and development spending is unaccounted for.

But the beef association is right in saying there is limited public visibility about the spending.

And once you have seen one cock up, cover up and scandal, such a lack of public accountability feeds fears there may be more in the shadows.

Accountability draws nearer. Let's hope all those favourable audits and consultant reports keep things at the accountability level; a witch-hunt is never pleasant.