

**PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO THE LABELLING OF PLANT-BASED MEAT
AND ANIMAL PRODUCTS – OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT**

*A biased senate committee exploring the pros and cons of plant-based meat alternatives
encounters an unexpected challenge on the last day of their inquiry.*

CHAIR (Senator Arnoult): I declare open this hearing into the impact of plant-based meat alternatives on our battling dairy, beef, fishing and poultry industries. Accompanying me on this fifth and final day of proceedings are my esteemed colleagues Senator Dr Annabel Whittaker—

WHITTAKER: Good morning.

CHAIR: —and Country Party Senator Mr Barry Boyce.

BOYCE: G'day.

CHAIR: I'm looking at my paperwork here and we have only one witness today, is that right, Rhonda?

Secretariat: [inaudible]

CHAIR: Thanks Rhonda. Ravishing as always. New dress? No? Anyway, we'll wrap this up with Ms Maria Stella from the Plant Protein Alliance. What do you have to offer us, Ms Stella?

Ms Stella: Apologies, but it is *Doctor* Stella. Not Ms. I have a PhD in agricultural economics.

CHAIR: Sure, let's start there. We are here to determine whether it is in the country's interests to allow processed plant products to be passed off as meat, eggs, milk and God knows what else. Please take us through your credentials.

Dr Stella: Of course. But first, please indulge me a little back story. I'm a fourth-generation farmer. My first memory is my dad pulling a calf from one of our breeding cows, and my second is him killing it because it was male. I love the land and never want to leave, but I've always thought there must be a more humane way. I've run organic pig farms, several successful cropping ventures, but it was only after studying agricultural science at Harvard that I—

BOYCE: Hold it there, missy. Harvard? You think because you put on a flannelette shirt and get a fancy degree you know farming? My dad's a cattle man, my brothers are cattle men, my mum runs the sausage sizzle every election day. You know better than them?

Dr Stella: I just wanted to give some insight into what has brought me here. More germane to these discussions is the cooperative I formed with local farmers and companies producing plant-based goods. We do not seek to replace or vilify meat consumption, but we—

WHITTAKER: So you have a commercial interest in the outcomes of these proceedings. You want to be able to call your products meat and use images of livestock to take advantage of the positive associations consumers have with proper food, correct?

Dr Stella: I wouldn't characterise it that way. Our products often have similar packaging to existing animal products so people can identify them as analogues. But we use alternative names—

CHAIR: I've seen these. M-Y-L-K. Isn't that what you are calling it?

Dr Stella: We use a variety of plant proteins—nuts, soy—and combine them with filtered water and supplements to create a product that is comparable to milk.

WHITTAKER: So, why not “nut juice”?

BOYCE: [laughter]

CHAIR: And then there is V-E-E-F, and “sheese”.

BOYCE: And don't forget gluten. We all know how bad that is.

Dr Stella: Gluten is not a plant-based meat alternative. It is a protein found naturally in grains and—

CHAIR: See the confusion this is causing? Let's move on. Earlier this week we received a written submission on the environmental impact of your products. Rhonda, do you have a copy handy?

Secretariat: [inaudible]

CHAIR: Thank you, Rhonda. Love the new perfume, by the way. Almost edible. What's that one called?

Secretariat: [inaudible]

CHAIR: [laughter] Ok then. We'll have to chat about it over a coffee. Now, this report, I'm looking at it here, says the carbon footprint of processing and transporting plant-based food can be greater than for some livestock, such as poultry. Are you disagreeing with the science?

Dr Stella: I have read the report. It is not wrong, but it selects only those findings that support its argument. The science clearly shows that meat production—and beef in particular—has an unsustainable environmental impact through greenhouse emissions, land degradation and water consumption. Plant-based products provide—

CHAIR: Let's break for lunch. Reconvening at 1pm sharp.

Proceedings suspended from 10:23 to 14:45.

CHAIR: Welcome back. Apologies for the delay. My fellow senators and I enjoyed a most remarkable lunch. Beef con carne, dripping in healthy, natural animal juices. What did you have, Annabel?

WHITTAKER: A delicious turkey breast sandwich with bacon trimmings. And may the record show I did not say “facon”.

CHAIR: How you keep your gorgeous figure I will never know.

WHITTAKER: [laughter] Mr Arnoult, stop it.

BOYCE: I had the steak. With chips, not salad. Didn't even touch a plant.

CHAIR: Do you feel full, Senator Boyce? You look like a man who often eats his fill.

BOYCE: You better bloody believe it.

CHAIR: And Ms Stella, what did you have for lunch?

Ms Stella: *Doctor* Stella. I had a three-bean salad with toasted almonds.

CHAIR: Maybe that is why you look so underfed. Which takes us to our next discussion. Yesterday we heard from a nutritionist. Annabel, as the only actual doctor in the room, would you care to recap? I do love having cause for you to put on those reading glasses.

WHITTAKER: [laughter] My pleasure. I have been a doctor in general practice for some thirty years. I have seen the harm that processed, sugary, and sodium heavy foods can do. It's a health disaster. Pure animal products avoid these risks. But plant alternatives? You just can't get all the minerals and vitamins you need. Dr Stella, where do you get B12 from? A lozenge?

Dr Stella: Well, mushrooms have—

WHITTAKER: You don't need to answer that. Now, many of the *ersatz* foods these plant-based fake meats are based on were created to satisfy religious restrictions. The Jews, the Arabs, the buddhas. It is ridiculous to suggest we determine a healthy diet based on *ideology*. God already created the perfect nutritional vessel in animals. And it is no coincidence they taste so great. Dr Stella? Are you going to refute any of this?

Dr Stella: I honestly don't know how to respond. Plant-based mock meats are not a replacement for a healthy diet, that is true. But they can form part of one. Most of the meat people eat is highly processed and from stressed animals. If meat consumption was reduced we would see far lower incidence of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and many forms of cancers.

BOYCE: Are you trying to tell me that my diabetes is because I don't eat enough of your products? I should sue you for saying that.

Dr Stella: I am not trying to—

BOYCE: And what about boobs?

Dr Stella: I'm sorry?

BOYCE: That stuff in soy. I hear it is turning boys into girls. Read a headline about it once.

Dr Stella: Do you mean estrogen? This is a common misconception. Soy, like many plants, contains phytoestrogen, which has milder effects. Compared to the hormone levels found in most meat—

CHAIR: I'm going to stop you right there, Ms Stella. We've heard enough. Your products don't look like meat, don't smell like meat, and certainly don't taste like meat. The only similarity is the confusing names you've given them. One would have to be an idiot to be fooled by any of it. I will be recommending to Parliament that plant-based products be banned from using meat-like names or images of livestock, and that health and environmental harm advisories be attached to your packaging.

Dr Stella: You've tried it, then?

CHAIR: What?

Dr Stella: Mock meat. Have you tasted it?

CHAIR: I can proudly say I have never touched it. Annabel? Barry? The same, I see.

Dr Stella: Then how can you comment in these formal proceedings on taste?

CHAIR: I am starting to dislike your tone.

Dr Stella: You said only an idiot would be fooled.

CHAIR: Look, sweetheart. Let me put this in a way your toffee head will understand. If you could convince me that something made of 80 per cent cardboard and 20 per cent garlic tastes anything like meat, I would dissolve this inquiry immediately. But until that day comes, I am sorry to say—

Dr Stella: But you enjoyed your lunch, yes?

CHAIR: I'm sorry?

Dr Stella: Your beef con carne. You said you liked it?

CHAIR: Uh... uh...

Dr Stella: And Senator Whittaker, it never *a curd* to you that you were actually eating tofu? Your meal was no mis-steak either, Senator Boyce. But the beef con carne, that was a new recipe, just for you. I'm glad you didn't find it medi-okra.

CHAIR: Uh... uh...

Dr Stella: Everything you ate came from my farms, my companies. Mr Chair—

CHAIR: Stop right there. Cut her mike off. Rhonda, please strike all that from the record.

Secretariat: [inaudible]

CHAIR: I am the chair of this committee, I decide—

Secretariat: [inaudible]

CHAIR: This is outrageous. I, uh... uh... Annabel? Barry?

WHITTAKER: We will take a brief recess.

Proceedings suspended from 14:58 to 15:01.

CHAIR: Upon reflection, the panel has decided to dissolve these proceedings. We will not be making any recommendations to parliament at this time. Inquiry adjourned.

End transcript