

'Let the light shine in'. *The Press*. Mainlander. Philip Matthews (23 May 2009).



Lifelong battler: Hans Kriek, campaign director for Safe, with a model of a pig in a sow crate. Photo: DON SCOTT

# Let the light shine in

**It's been a fantastic week for animal rights campaigners, who have finally got the public interested in the welfare of farmed pigs. PHILIP MATTHEWS catches up with a happy Hans Kriek.**

**H**ans Kriek is on the phone with one newspaper reporter as another walks into his office. In an adjacent room, there are three people taking his calls and trying to reply to his emails. This is the kind of crazy week he's had.

No complaints though. For animal rights advocates like Kriek, the campaign director for Save Animals From Exploitation (Safe), the week just completed has brought his cause the kind of coverage few thought possible. And this public relations masterclass was directed by one astute man from the Safe offices above a bakery in Armagh St.

It began last weekend when TV One's high-rating current affairs show *Sunday* ran an item about intensive pig farming. Those in the business had seen this kind of footage before: sows crammed into narrow crates on concrete floors, unable to turn around, depressed and screaming. The intensive farming in this dark, cramped barn didn't bear much relation to the high hopes of the Animal Welfare Act which stresses the need for animals to be allowed to display "normal patterns of behaviour".

But this time the footage wasn't presented by some earnest, beanie-wearing activist but by a New Zealand everybloe who also happened to be the former front man for pork advertising, comedian Mike King. A depression sufferer himself, King empathised with these miserable animals. He felt guilty, he felt ashamed: it was riveting television.

"We knew it was going to be big," Kriek says. "But this went beyond our imagination. I've been doing this since 1985 in New Zealand and I've never seen anything like it. The response is unprecedented in the history of New Zealand animal welfare."

The *Sunday* report was followed up by newspapers, radio and television. *Close Up* ran stories over three nights. Hundreds of thousands of viewers saw Kriek and King debate pork industry figures.

Kriek took a *Close Up* team to pig farms in the Wairarapa. He had seen pictures taken inside these places. One farmer blocked the roads into his farm with tractors and refused to let the television crew in. That became the instant symbol of an industry in damage-control mode.

Kriek: "The farmer said it was perfectly fine and the pigs were happy. Well, show us your happy pigs. There was no hope in hell."

On the flight back to Christchurch, Kriek was stopped by a farming couple. "Big guy, big hands. I thought: uh oh. Then he said, 'I saw the item on pigs. Good on ya, mate.'"

"And I get comments from workers on farms saying, 'You thought that was a bad farm? You should see the one I work on.'"

How did this happen? Kriek was already working with *Sunday* on an expose of the pig-farming industry. King was a late addition to the story, but a crucial one. Kriek says Safe had tried for years to get hold of King and alert him to the cruel reality behind the product he promoted but it only made contact last year.

Some have suggested that King must have known about sow crates but Kriek is adamant that he didn't. And Kriek knows this because it was Safe that told him.

"Mike actually did not believe us. He thought that the footage we were providing was not from New Zealand."

When King realised that it was, he did more research. Then he was set up with Open Rescue, an animal rights group who took King to a farm near Levin run by former Pork Industry Board chairman Colin Kay. It was pre-dawn and King did his shocked pieces to camera lit only by a camera light, to a soundtrack of distressed animals. The rest is current affairs history.



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Kriek wants to make some important distinctions. Safe does not do this kind of work itself, but Open Rescue's clandestine footage is gratefully received and Kriek admires the people who get it. Safe works strictly within the law, but nor is Open Rescue as radical as the UK's notorious Animal Liberation Front. Open Rescue members are unmasked; they won't break in but will go through unlocked doors.

Then again, is lawbreaking justified? There is a long history of it in the animal rights movement. One of its founding thinkers, philosopher Peter Singer, argues illegal actions are not always morally wrong. Even in a democracy, Singer thinks there can be times when it is morally right to disobey the law.

"If the public is kept largely unaware of what is happening in factory farms and laboratories, then illegal actions may be the only available avenue for assisting animals and obtaining evidence about what is happening," he has said.

If slavery was still legal and you broke the law to free a slave, would that be morally wrong? Many activists feel the same way about suffering animals.

But Kriek is careful to make sure that his organisation is seen as the legal, mainstream, unthreatening face of the movement. Of course the name helps.

And the mainstreaming seems to have worked. A decade ago, Safe had no paid staff. Now it has 12 and is backed by 11,000 supporters who regularly donate (the profile is about 70 per cent female). Kriek expects that this week's coverage should lift numbers greatly. And because of this mainstreaming, Kriek has become the most reliable and articulate spokesperson on animal rights.

How did things use to be? Not long after Kriek arrived in New Zealand from the Netherlands in the 1980s, he saw an anti-vivisection march with activists dressed in black with skeletons painted on their clothes or wearing grim reaper costumes.

"I thought, s... that's stupid. That just scares people. You are not winning the hearts and minds of the public by doing it like that.

"We have to look at animal rights as a business. We have to package it in such a way that it will be palatable for people to digest because it is a big thing. Animal cruelty takes place wherever animals are used for our convenience. A lot of people would rather not know."

An example of making it palatable: years ago, when he was working for the SPCA in Hamilton and doing volunteer work for Safe, Kriek set up an anti-vivisection stall. He borrowed live rats, mice, guinea pigs and rabbits from people who had them as pets, put them in cages and surrounded the cages with anti-vivisection literature. People were looking at the animals and crying and Kriek realised that the public is sensitive to these issues too, if only it could be reached.

Which is how Green MP Sue Kedgley has long felt. Before Kedgley was an MP, it was Kriek who told her how some farm animals are treated. She was researching a chapter about meat for her book *Eating Safely in a Toxic World*. "He educated me. Like everyone else who discovers this, I was horrified.

"Hans is absolutely dogged. He's just been plugging away at this issue."

When Kedgley took her concerns into Parliament as animal welfare spokesperson for the Greens, "MPs would roll their eyes and crack jokes and sneer". She spent years fighting through legal channels, frustrated that no progress was being made. Until now: "If consumers actually went into these pig farms and saw for themselves the misery that these pigs endure, they wouldn't be allowed to continue. The conditions are so hideous that you cannot fail to be repelled."

Which happened last weekend. Another alarming feature of the *Sunday* report was the revelation that agriculture minister David Carter, already in Safe's sights over plans to resume live sheep exports, knew nothing about the use of sow crates in New Zealand.

"It stretches my credulity that he didn't know this is a widespread practice," Kedgley says.

"We were surprised at how badly he came across," Kriek adds.

But public opinion and consumer demand will take over where political will has failed or been stymied by the industry's lobbying. That happened with battery hens. Kriek began the battery hen campaign for Safe. Soon there were supermarket managers coming to Safe meetings and telling Kriek that a demand for free-range eggs had been created. Now he says that 300,000 chickens per year don't have to live in cages.

"But you will not see Safe promoting free range," Kriek says. "We are an animal rights group and that means we do not advocate the farming of animals at all."

It's about baby steps. Safe would advocate a fully vegetarian or vegan diet but they aren't intending to declare war on meat-eaters.

"I can't tell you to go vegetarian. We don't want to alienate people who eat meat. I used to eat meat. When I found out about factory farming when I was 16 years old, I decided I wasn't going to support it."

He was told about factory farming by his high-school biology teacher. None of his friends was vegetarian; his parents thought it was a phase. About a year later, he discovered a Dutch translation of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. "It said everything I could not verbalise at that age. I was amazed it existed and there were other people feeling like me."

Singer argued against "speciesism". Coming after civil rights, gay rights and women's rights, this was the last frontier of discrimination. Just as racism stresses differences rather than shared characteristics, so speciesism ignores the abilities of animals to suffer, to feel pain or pleasure, or exhibit intelligence.

In the three decades since Singer first published *Animal Liberation*, there has been obvious progress. Who now tolerates performing animals in circuses? Or believes that a few square metres of concrete in a zoo could resemble an animal's natural habitat? Who would wear fur?

These are the visible signs of changing attitudes. But behind the scenes, there have been setbacks. Kriek has concerns

about the use of animals in cloning and genetic engineering research. Factory farming has intensified as worldwide food demand has increased. It was estimated that 10 billion birds and mammals were raised and killed for food in the United States alone in 2002.

And when public opinion frowns on factory farming in one place, it simply goes elsewhere. The US's largest pork supplier, Smithfield Foods, made a big show of responding to public opinion by announcing it would phase out sow crates, but in Mexico Smithfield is half-owner of the intensive pig farm that was investigated during the recent swine flu outbreak.

In New Zealand, the phase-out that the pork industry has talked about this week isn't a phase-out at all. Kriek emphasises, but a reduction. Under the best possible outcome, not due to be introduced until 2015, sows will still spend 20 weeks a year in stalls and farrowing crates.

"Almost half their life in a crate where they can't turn around," Kriek says. "That still breaches the conditions set out in the Animal Welfare Act."

The problem in the past is that the industry has successfully argued for exemptions to the act. Any animal rights body in this country is up against a formidable opponent.

"Their lobbying power and advertising power far outstretches what we have," Kriek says. "The only advantage that we have over them is that we're right and they're wrong."

"It sounds like an arrogant statement but it's actually not because if people could be confronted with the practices that they carry out on a daily basis, they would not accept it. If battery hen farmers had to farm them behind shop windows on a main street, it would not happen. Can you imagine pigs in crates there the whole day? People would not tolerate it."

"It's only because it happens behind closed doors. So we know that the public is with us."

■ For more information on the Safe campaign, visit [lovepigs.org.nz](http://lovepigs.org.nz)