

'To save your bacon, just add celebrity'. *The Dominion Post*. Television. Jane Clifton (21 May 2009).

DOMINION POST, TUESDAY MAY 21, 2009

# To save your bacon, just add celebrity

**I**T CAN be hard to credit the brute power of the television-created celebrity – greater, it turns out, than the power of television itself.

As TV's *Campbell Live* reminded viewers on Tuesday, the now infamous footage of suffering pigs that TV One's *Sunday* programme made so much of this week is absolutely nothing new.

*Campbell Live* screened footage of the same sort of suffering at the same piggery back in 2006, and that time, too, an official investigation was promised, and took place – and all of a sudden, nothing happened. This was just one of many times sundry television programmes have brought us horrific pictures of the routine suffering of animals in intensive farming operations. Green politicians, the SPCA, animal rights guerrillas, ethical farmers – all have told us time and time again what's going on, to no avail.

What's different this time? The presence of a celebrity. (You might like to put the C-word in inverted commas, but inverted comma overuse is as pernicious as celebrity overuse, so we'd be no further ahead.)

It turns out that a man who parlayed a middling career as a stand-up comedian into the mighty



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sway of a man who cooks sausage balls on a television commercial can trump all.

To give *Sunday* its full due, this was a great story. Mike King, who for years accepted the money of the pork industry to promote its products, recently received information from friends about the cruel practice of sow-crating, got the shock of his life, and has now turned animal-rights campaigner.

Roads to Damascus were never so righteous as this. King – though stopping short of flinging money back in the pork industry's snout – was abject in his apology to consumers, and by implication, to pigs. You could ask yourself, where had he been that he didn't know there was a fierce controversy about intensive pig farming in this country – and overseas, from where a high

proportion of our pork comes? But that'd be a silly question, because it's not a celebrity's job to ask why, when money and extra lashings of television exposure are being offered. Better late than never to realise that associating oneself with cruelly-treated animals is a big mistake.

Suffice to say, offered live on television the chance to accompany more cameras to more pig farms, he practically leapt out of his trousers with avidity.

The television-led animal welfare debate, King's epiphany touched off has been riveting. The Pork Board's chairman Chris Trengrove, who channelled another species to embody the stunned mullet, found himself the prisoner of inherent contradictions, live on television: no, he had no idea such cruel treatment went on and the treatment in the King footage looked pretty illicit; and yes, the way this particular farmer is treating his pigs is not at all illegal and this week's Ag and Fish investigation vindicated him utterly.

The poor guy had no rational choice but to agree to *Close-Up*'s demand on TV One that its reporters be made welcome with cameras at any piggery, anywhere, anytime, forthwith – otherwise making his



**Pigs' champion:** Mike King has done an about-turn on his support for the pork industry in New Zealand.

members look shifty. The next night he was made a monkey of, by footage of a piggery physically barricading itself against *Close-Up* reporters with giant machines, and another saying it couldn't let *Close-Up* in because of bio-security restrictions (the latter a plausible ar-

gument, considering how much hair product some television reporters use). Poor old John Campbell, furiously aggrieved, held out until Tuesday when he had no choice but to follow up the TV One-created story. He was perfectly correct: the

sheer gimmick of Mike King having turned turtle on the industry should not obscure that it is not a new story. Farmers have been keeping pigs in this horrific way, with the full blessing of the law, for years, under governments of all stripes. He also interviewed university lecturer Peter Sankoff, an expert on animal welfare law, who explained how economic considerations were embedded in law-making process in such a structural way as to overwhelm welfare issues.

And there was a telling interview with animal rights activist Mark Eden, whose footage touched off the 2006 investigation. Mr Eden said an official who initially intended to prosecute the piggery later phoned him back and said his boss had said such a prosecution would now not take place.

TV One news, understandably revelling in its channel having set the news agenda for the week, took a gloating trip to the supermarket chillers, to record women tut-tutting over the poor suffering pigs, the woeful labelling of bacon as "made from domestic and imported ingredients" and even saying that although they couldn't really afford it, they'd be prepared to pay more for ethically farmed pigs.

The farmer whose unhappy-looking pigs have been the star of this whole debate – secondarily to Mike King, of course – gave a couple of cameo appearances, pointing out that he had never broken the law, and accusing King's film crew of having deliberately rarked the pigs up, to make them look unhappy when they weren't really.

Alas for his PR chances, you can't rark a pig up if it's dead, as one of his pigs incontrovertibly was.

And frankly, if you lived for weeks on end in a filthy cage, unable to move, developing deformities and having to sit in your own excrement, you'd probably get a bit excited by the novelty of a film crew in the dead of night too.

The most extraordinary thing about this phenomenon is that it's win-win, all the way round – save for the pork industry.

King, whose career is hardly pumping, gets a boost; the animal rights toilers finally have serious cut-through for the cause; consumers gets a comprehensive reality check about what they're eating; and best of all, the poor pigs might finally catch a break.

The recipe for all this success: just add a celebrity, and stir.