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Singer Speaks With Spira

Peter Singer

One of the world's leading animal rights activists, HENRY SPIRA, visited Australia in December 1988 to address the Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare on toxicity testing using animals. He also spoke to politicians, advisory committees, bureaucrats and the media on animal experimentation and the available alternatives. Henry Spira has been active in the animal liberation arena in the US for 15 years. He and the Animal Rights International Coalitions of which he is Co-ordinator, have confronted animal users head-on and have achieved substantial successes.

For instance, a campaign to stop the American Museum of Natural History's 20 years of deliberately mutilating cats so as to observe their sexual performance, convinced the public that the experiments were a crude and ineffectual perversion of science. The cruelty was eventually stopped.

The first Animal Rights International Coalition was formed to fight the specific issues of the Draize and LD 50 tests. Now they are moving into the wider area of factory farming with the Coalition for Nonviolent Food.

While in Melbourne, Henry Spira attended a workshop arranged by ANZFAS for animal rights/welfare workers to discuss the strategies adopted by the Coalitions. He advised on how Australian animal welfare groups could use US experiences to devise new approaches for local action.

For *Animal Liberation Magazine* he talked with fellow activist, PROFESSOR PETER SINGER, author of *Animal Liberation*, about animal rights issues and his involvement in the movement.

Singer: Henry, I first met you in 1973 in New York City when I was teaching an adult extension course on animal liberation, but I'd like to go back a little further and ask how you came to be at that class and what brought you into the animal liberation movement. So let me begin by going back not 15 years but 25 years. What were you doing then? What were your main interests?

Spira: I was involved in the civil rights movement, and also in the trade union movement, the rank and file democracy movement. I've been involved in rights movements since I was an early teenager. I've never wanted to be pushed around myself and I don't like to see others get pushed around. I guess that's why I was in all the movements I've been in. I just see a little continuity between all of them. And in the hierarchy of exploitation/domination it's the non-human animals who are on the bottom of the pile.

Even so, it wasn't very fashionable in the early seventies for people who came from the left -- people with involvement with civil rights or the rank and file trade union movements -- to start getting concerned about animals, was it?

No. As a matter of fact, I first heard about Peter Singer in an attack on an essay that had appeared in the *New York Review*, in an article in *National Guardian*, where the thrust was that the animals really didn't matter and humans did. When I read it, I thought that the object of the attack made more sense than the attack did, so I got a copy of your essay and it seemed to be right in line with what I've been into my whole life. In addition, before that somebody had given me a cat and I began to feel uncomfortable about playing with the cat and sticking a knife and fork into another animal.

So it is one of those cases where it's valuable to be criticized because at least it spreads the message around and some people can see through that criticism.

Yes. I also happened to run into the fellow who wrote the attacking article and discussed it with him later, and he could see my point as well!

I hope so! Now, how did you actually get started as an activist, rather than just being someone who was convinced of the point behind animal liberation?

I think what your essay did for me, what the class did for me, was to put the whole issue of animal rights firstly within the context of liberation movements and, secondly, put it on a rational basis that can be defended in public debate on its own merits without reference to whether one does or doesn't like animals. What came out of the course was that animals are being harmed on a massive scale, and that it's wrong, it's an injustice. Clearly, the next thing is, if it's wrong, what are we going to do about it? I suggested to people from the class at the last session that if they were interested in following up on this they could get together and meet at my house. So the small group that got together bounced a bunch of ideas around. We did some computer searches. We went through some material about animal experimentation from United Action for Animals. There were a number of experiments that we thought we might try to target and we started with the American Museum of Natural History. Also, I was particularly lucky that one of the people that attended one of your classes, Leonard Rack, maintained his interest too. He was a professional. He knew science. He's a psychiatrist and he's interested in research, so it wasn't the animal welfare people informing the science community, but rather somebody from their own community who was able to assess the information.

Why do you think that the tactics that you have used, both in that American Museum of Natural History campaign, but still more in your later campaigns promoting alternatives to the Draize and LD 50 tests, seem to have been more successful than the tactics that had been used by anti-vivisection groups and other organisations up to that time?

One of the reasons is that for 46 years I've been involved in rights movements and I've learned what works, what doesn't work, and what the real world's all about. One of the first things that I learned in earlier movements was that nothing is ever an all-or-nothing issue. It's not a one-day process. It's a long process. You need to see the world – including individuals and institutions - as not being static but in constant change, with change occurring one step at a time. It's incremental. It's almost like organic development. You might say, for instance, that a couple of blacks going into a lunch counter and demanding to be seated at the lunch counter really doesn't make a hell of a lot of difference because most of them don't even have the money to buy anything at a lunch counter. But, it did make a difference, it was a first step. Once you take that first step and you have that same first step in a number of places, you integrate a number of lunch counters, you set a whole pattern, and it's one of the steps that would generate the least amount of resistance. It's something that's winnable, but it encourages the black struggle and it clearly leads to the next step and the next step. I think that no movement has ever won on the basis of all or none. I also think movements that have been successful have not had the self-righteous stance of 'We're the good people and they're the bad people.' People can change. I used to eat animals and I never considered myself a cannibal. A lot of us are into movements -- not just in animal rights but in other movements, because we've put ourselves in the position of the others -- if I were a black, how would I want to be treated, or if I were a woman, or if I were a non-human animal ... ? The same is true for politics. You put yourself in the head of the potential adversary and figure -- if I were in that person's shoes, what would cause me to change my behaviour? How would I generate the least resistance? Then, when they do start changing, hopefully you can look upon them as allies.

So you don't think going out and chanting at vivisectionists that they're murderers is a constructive way of going about it?

I wouldn't want to put people who do that down, it's not my style. But I think there also has to be the position that says, 'Hey, there's a better way. Looking at it from your point of view, there's a better way to go.' If you're an animal researcher, presumably what you really want to do is get an answer to a question that's going to be of consequence to, say, human health. So we who are anti animal experimentation might suggest there may be better ways of looking for that answer, we might suggest an alternative. I think it's crucial not just to put them down, but to suggest a better way to go, and to the utmost extent possible it should be in sync with their own philosophy. For instance, it's supposed to be part of the scientific attitude not to do what's traditional, but to do what's best and to suggest that if there's a new state of the art, let's go with it.

So, your approach has involved you in negotiations with people who are carrying on experimentation on animals, rather than suggesting to them that the only thing they can do is stop all experimentation tomorrow?

I think what we're saying is that there's a universe of pain and suffering: what's the fastest way of bringing it down? The idea of all or nothing hasn't worked anywhere that I've ever heard of. We're asking them to see where they can reduce the numbers and the pain today, and to reduce more tomorrow, and so on, down the line. I want to abolish the use of animals as much as anybody else, but I say, let's do today what we can do today and then do more tomorrow down the line.

Nevertheless, following this strategy has led you to speak in defence of companies like Proctor & Gamble, the number one household products manufacturer in the -United States, when they have been criticised by some other animal liberation groups. Some people might find it hard to understand why you're defending an organization that is still conducting tens of thousands of experiments on animals each year. What do you say to those criticisms?

I think the criterion is, has there been significant reduction; have they pushed significant resources into alternatives; have they pushed ahead a whole field of moving from animals to non-animal systems? If somebody does put significant effort into reducing the use of animals, you should encourage them to do more of it and you should encourage other companies to go along the same road. If you're going to hit a company with a two by four club on the side of the head when they are being responsive, there's really no incentive for them to be responsive, nor is there any incentive for any other company to be responsive either. It isn't realistic to think that major companies are going to totally eliminate the use of animals tomorrow. Companies like Proctor & Gamble, Avon, Bristol-Myers and others, may possibly have led to the reduction of a larger number of animals than the total number they use themselves, because their initiatives have had a ripple effect on other industries that are not vulnerable to campaigns.

What is it that Proctor & Gamble or Revlon or Bristol-Myers have done that you consider has made a major contribution to reducing animal suffering?

Take Proctor & Gamble. A fairly recent example is that they've challenged the regulatory agencies on flexibility towards accepting new methods. The issue itself is not very significant -- it's basically that they've got a method of doing the eye test with one-tenth the concentration -- but the fact is that they've publicly demanded that the regulatory agencies develop clear guidelines as to what is necessary in order to substitute one test for another so that it will be acceptable to the agencies. They've also demanded that the agencies get involved in the whole process and provide guidance to companies as they develop the alternatives. They've been instrumental in developing major meetings on these tests, together with the

regulatory agencies and industry, to get this show on the road. In-house they've developed a whole system of accountability so that people can't just order a batch of animals for testing. They've had enormous reduction in the use of animals over the past 5 or 6 years.

How many animals?

Something like 50 or 60 percent. They still use an enormous number of animals, but the point is, P&G has, within their own publications and elsewhere, publicised the fact that they're working towards reducing animals. That helps us legitimise it within the corporate community. They publish papers within the scientific literature on alternative methods, on their own research into alternatives. It's not something that's just a PR exercise.

What you're talking about is making the whole area of alternatives respectable, isn't it? Something that the companies do themselves.

More than just that -- it's leading to structural change, which comes with being respectable, and legitimising it. Although one always would want things to go faster and not even see one animal get harmed, I think one of the things that's happened which is fairly remarkable is that within the past 6 or 7 years there's been a whole new field of science -- in-vitro toxicology. It involves scientific journals, a major symposium, major workshops, all of which include sections on alternatives. The fact that the major professional organisations are involved in the issue, the fact that it's almost become routine that any meeting of industrial toxicologists will address the issue of alternatives, is not because we're hitting them on the side of the head, but because it's become part and parcel of the whole toxicology community. It's not just the fact that there are all these liberation movements. It's also the fact that there's new technology coming on. But it is also the fact that we've amplified what the possibilities are; and what people within their own community are saying, and we're urging [the toxicologists] to move faster along that track.

Let's move now to your current visit to Australia. What brought you here?

I got a phone call from Robyn [Sullivan – ANZFAS Animals in Research Division representative] saying that there was a ticket available and 'come over and talk to some of these government people about some of the initiatives that have been pushed around the US.'

You haven't yet talked to the Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare, which was perhaps the major reason why the Australian and New Zealand Federation of Animal Societies wanted you to come over, but you have talked to some government officials here in Victoria. Tell us about that.

I talked to them about the momentum in the US in the field of alternatives. Specifically, we showed them a film made recently by Mobil Oil -- *Risk Assessment* -- in which Mobil tell you what the objectives are and then indicate how they've developed. In earlier days they would have used an enormous number of animals. Now they've developed methods that don't use animals, that are faster, cheaper and more predictive. Here is one of the country's top corporations involved in a search for alternatives, publicising their efforts. We also showed your people a number of other things, including a book on benchmarks for alternatives, which was funded by a combination of animal protection groups, major corporations, government agencies and the US Department of Agriculture. In it some of the major corporate toxicologists discuss efforts to promote alternatives. We showed them a paper from the Environmental Protection Agency suggesting that submissions with the classic LD 50 may be rejected. We also gave them information on an effort by a number of major corporations to join forces in promoting alternatives. I think the point I tried to put across was that the movement for change in the US has an enormous amount of energy, that it's being backed by major corporations, that it is in the mainstream. You do not have to be defensive about promoting alternatives, but rather it's a case of those who want to keep the traditional

methods being on the defensive. I tried to show them that this is the direction in which toxicology is moving. If you're going to set up a centre for toxicology here, for instance, the thing to do would be to do it in the state-of-the-art with in-vitro systems rather than with the methods that are currently being replaced.

Are you hopeful for the development of alternatives here in Victoria?

The reception was encouraging. I think it was almost something that they hadn't been aware of. We weren't just talking, we were actually giving them copies of the documents, showing them the film. That makes it possible for them to be a lot more comfortable with in-vitro. In other words, it's not like they're sticking their necks out, but rather this is the direction in which things are going. I felt they don't have a vested interest in being linked or wedded to the use of animals in research, but rather to finding answers to questions.

You've only had a few days in Australia, but you've been in fairly intensive contact with people in the animal rights movement. What sort of impressions do you have about how the movement in Australia compares with, differs from, that in the United States?

I'm very impressed with what I've seen down here -- the fact that you've got a Federation of all the societies which is something that we in the US could certainly attempt to emulate -- a variety of groups who may have their own programs, their own priorities, but they still work together instead of slicing each other up. The submissions from the Federation to the Senate Select Committee on Animal Welfare that I'd seen when I was in the US were impressive, and could set the standards for animal movements around the world. A professional submission is something that governments and other authorities have to take seriously, because it is a document, because it is researched, planned. But it has to be in addition to actions. There seem to be a lot of action here as well. The activities of Pam [Clarke] on the battery hens is real courageous. It's the type of action needed to shake things up, I think your activities such as in the anti-duck-hunt -- particularly where you've an area that's totally indefensible -- have been good use of the media.

The people I've met seem to be hard-working and productive and there doesn't seem to be the move down here towards empire building that we're seeing in the United States. Also, one of the things I'd like to take back to the States is information on the change in the farm animal area, on the [livestock sales] where instead of pushing the animals into auctions which is an area of enormous stress, you do the whole thing electronically.

Although you're perhaps best known for your work to do with experimental animals you have been trying to put together a coalition concerned with farm animals, haven't you?

Yes. The point you made in *Animal Liberation* in the first place, and the point that's been made over and over again is that 95 per cent of the animals' suffering is in the farm animal area and even a one per cent reduction in their pain and suffering would reduce the total universe of pain and suffering more than all other campaigns put together. One of the things that we were tempted to do was to encourage Ralston-Purina to push some money into researching methods that are less stressful to farm animals. I think in the farm animal arena the concept of the three Rs -- reduction, replacement, refinement -- is also applicable. The big advantage is that you can involve everybody. Whether people do or don't eat animals, everybody can agree that we should reduce the pain and suffering. Clearly, it's inconsistent to be an animal protectionist and eat the animals, but from the point of view of involving everybody one can push first for reduction and use a lot of the findings, particularly in the United States, that eating less meat is better for your health. There are a number of other areas one can focus on. Ralston has made money available for a project at Texas AM University. We had hoped that this might be something like the Revlon-Rockefeller

liaison, where one starts legitimising the search for methods that are less painful. But in the process of attempting to reduce the pain and suffering of the animals while they're still being eaten, one also raises awareness that [animals] aren't inanimate things that come from a factory in cellophane, but rather are living, breathing, feeling beings who are similar to ourselves, want to avoid pain and get some pleasure out of life.

Do you have any final words for the animal liberation movement in Australia, like where you think we should be going, what we should be doing? What do you see for the future?

Sitting here talking to you is like -- well, bringing coals to Newcastle! If similar energies to those pushed into the anti-duck hunting campaign were to be pushed in support of fighting the battery cages, that could have an enormous impact, way above and beyond just Australia. It could energise the world animal movement to focus on that, particularly as in Australia there seems to be an atmosphere conducive to free-range chickens. One of the things that we have found is that if you do one half of one percent of the work you tend to make it easier for others to follow. For instance, on the issue of the rabbit overpopulation, maybe you could develop this idea of urging the government to do something by collecting all the information, all the expertise, to see what can be done in order to cause less pain and suffering.

Like setting up a centre to do fertility control research?

Yes!

Probably you've been the most successful activist in the United States in reducing what you call the universe of pain and suffering. The methods that you've used should be able to work in Australia and anywhere else in the world. That has to be the way forward for us, to try and make progress, as you say, on a whole range of issues. I share, obviously, the view that factory farming is such a large area that this is one that we really have to tackle as hard as we can. Henry, thank you for sharing your ideas and views with us.

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