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Zombie Politics and the Lives of Animals

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Summary:

Flying-foxes in Australia are currently undergoing a period of significant decline. Amongst the many threats to their wellbeing as individuals and species are deliberate acts of violent persecution by some human communities. Underlying these acts of cruelty is the deep-seated mentality of a 'persecuting society' and the 'zombie politics' it produces.

Author bio:

Prof. Deborah Bird Rose was an anthropologist and founding figure in the environmental Humanities. She authored numerous award-winning books including *Wild Dog Dreaming*, and *Reports from a Wild Country*. For the last decade of her life, flying-foxes were once of her principal passions. At the time of her death in late 2018 she had just completed work on a book on the entangled lives and deaths of people and flying-foxes in Australia, titled *Shimmer*.

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ZOMBIE POLITICS AND THE LIVES OF ANIMALS

Virtues are easily lost, the cynics tell us, but vices linger remorselessly. Indeed, vice-like habits can take on a life of their own and play significant social roles. Recent events have turned my thoughts toward habits of hatred, fear-mongering and persecution that are entrenched within the harsh histories of western nations. Persecution, vilification and harm are part of today's public discourse and public policy. They have a long history, and are foundational to what the historian R.I. Moore calls a 'persecuting society'.*1

Moore developed this term through his research into Medieval European history. He concluded that around the year 1100 western Europe 'became a persecuting society, and ... has remained one.' He was very clear: it was not just that persecutions happened, it was that they were deliberate and central to society. In Medieval times it was lepers and heretics who were persecuted; later it was witches and freemasons; throughout it all there were eruptions of persecution of Jews, and from time to time 'sodomites' were targeted. Persecution was based on stirring up hatred and fear, and was achieved '*through established governmental, judicial and social institutions*'.

Some scholars have objected to Moore's idea on the grounds that surely all societies persecute those they deem to be outsiders. That may or may not be true, but Moore's idea was that in western Europe persecution became part of the actual fabric of society. European societies became modern states through deliberate use of persecution. Their culture of persecution was flexible and transportable, and in general they took these zombie politics with them to their colonies.

The fact that there is political mileage to be gained from stirring up hatred is a stand-out feature of contemporary Australian politics. Terrible questions arise. Are we so in thrall to our vice of persecution that we cannot imagine a society that is not held together through vilification and exclusion? Are our politics so impoverished that the best way to mobilise large numbers of votes is through fear and its companion persecution?

When we think about society, politics, and the rhetoric of inclusion/exclusion, it seems obvious that we are talking about human beings. So it may come as a surprise to realise that the analysis works equally well in relation to the persecution of animals.

Flying-foxes are having a hard time of it in many urban, suburban and rural areas at the moment. In the language of those who want to get rid of them, they are 'pests'. A pest, it turns out, is a creature who may be vilified, persecuted and killed without compunction, perhaps even with a sense of righteousness. According to educational materials provided on the feral.org website: "The word "pest" is used to describe an animal that causes serious damage to a valued resource. Such a pest may be destructive, a nuisance, noisy or simply not wanted."*2 Pests are creatures you can feel good about getting rid of, although of course not everyone does feel good. Not surprisingly, pests make good political capital when the objective is fear-mongering and persecution.

Let us be clear: the vast majority of people who live in proximity to flying-foxes are managing co-existence just fine. There are good ways to get along with our fellow creatures, and it is totally possible to enjoy the fact that we in Australia live amongst some of the most unusual and beautiful animals on earth. As the journalist James Woodford wrote of flying-foxes (also known as giant fruit bats): 'watching bats silhouetted against the stars is one of the greatest, but little known, pleasures of life'.*3

And yet, in Queensland the government has been unleashing new rounds of violence against flying-foxes. When Queensland re-instated the legality of shooting flying-foxes and decided to reduce restrictions on dispersals, it opened the way for an apparently bottomless pit of cruel and vicious action. This includes enabling greater opportunities for 'dispersals' of flying-fox colonies where, when and how people choose, and for whatever reasons they choose.

While, as local NGOs dedicated to wildlife conservation have pointed out, there are indeed 'genuine problems with urban camps', these problems 'are outweighed by perceived, imagined or concocted problems, often promoted by irresponsible fear-mongering.'*4 They go on to assert the basic truth that 'concoctions or imaginings are not a proper basis for good public policy'.

The corrosive effects of all this hatred, and the thought of all the suffering that flying-foxes are being subjected to, were weighing me down, and as I thought of toxic zombies I began thinking about antidotes. That was when I remembered Jenny McLean's backyard. The [Tolga Bat Hospital](#) is located in the north Queensland heartland of anti-flying-fox politics. In need of sustenance for my spirit, I went for a visit.

Jenny Maclean, a dedicated carer and advocate, founded the Tolga Bat Hospital and visitor centre. Her back yard includes a large enclosure where individuals of all four Australian *Pteropus* species live. They have arrived through misfortune,

and are not able to be released back into the bush, but their injuries do not detract from the quality of life. So there are flying-foxes who have been rescued from barbed wire, but whose broken bones mean they will never fly again. Some have come in with electrical burns, others were injured in cyclone Larry. Still others have been rescued from cages where they were living lives of misery, and a few have been rescued from dogs and cats.

The Hospital was actually founded in response to a recurring disastrous local situation. The main species of flying fox in this region is the endangered spectacled flying-fox (*Pteropus conspicillatus*). They are pollinators and seed dispersers for the world heritage rainforest located in this region, as well as for other ecological communities. In this part of the Atherton Tablelands, they forage on the berries of *Solanum mauritianum* (a weed from South America) in October, November and December of each year. Their foraging brings them close to the ground and they are then prey to paralysis ticks. They have not developed resistance to the ticks, and so they become paralysed. Jenny and her team of dedicated volunteers walk the forest floor looking and listening for flying foxes in distress, rescuing them, and bringing them back to the Bat Hospital. Some can be saved, many cannot, and many babies are orphaned. The purpose of care is to sustain those with a chance of survival, and return them to their forest homes as soon as they are ready for release. At times up to two hundred orphaned babies are being fed every four hours by the team of volunteers. Most of them will be released back into the bush.

Not so long ago, release meant a return to a life of relative safety. Queensland had shown its progressive side and had banned the shooting of flying-foxes because it is inhumane. Dispersals were subject to external oversight and were meant to be accomplished without long-term impacts on the species or specific cruelty to individuals. This meant that there would be no dispersals while the females were in the later stages of pregnancy and no dispersals while the young were dependent on their mothers. But this situation has changed. Queensland has reinstated shooting, and has had to exempt flying-foxes from the Animal Care and Protection Act in order to do so. Current 'dispersal' work is also amplifying the suffering experienced by flying-foxes. Increasingly, rescue and release may mean saving vulnerable creatures from one fate only to return them to an extremely chancy life as long as they are anywhere near humans.

In spite of these uncertainties, the Hospital is a wonderful antidote. Jenny puts food out for the resident flying-foxes every afternoon, planning for them to come down to eat around the time that the Hospital is open for visitors. Tourists arrive daily, and their faces light up with joy and amazement as they come into close but

safe proximity with flying-foxes. Fear and hatred not only evaporate but suddenly seem incomprehensible.

It is a great gift to be able to look a wild animal in the eye and see the glow of intelligence. Sometimes one encounters a reciprocating glow of interest. It is a privilege to be close to members of endangered species, and to know that outside the enclosure the full and rich life of flying-foxes continues. And so it shall continue, unless humans decide to get rid of them. Such decisions are political. They take no notice of ecological relationships, and nor do they concern themselves with cruelty and abuse. They are driven by the zombies of hatred and persecution, and they aim to win elections. They do no credit to anyone.

References:

1. Moore, R. I. (2007). *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250* (Second ed.). Malden: Blackwell.
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3. Woodford, J. 2003. "The Swingers," in *Sydney Morning Herald*. Sydney.
4. <http://caf nec.org.au/download/submissions/Joint%20Groups%20submission%20new%20urban%20camp%20policy%20Old%20June%202013.pdf>

For a short video about Jenny McLean and the Tolga Bat Hospital see:
<http://vimeo.com/31001848>



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