

Hollywood's Johnny Depp and Animal Rights

Ending the War on Terriers: Pistol, Boo and Judging Hollywood

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"At the end of it we've got a message that is going all around the world right now, it's going off like a frog in a sock telling people that if you come to this nation and you don't obey our laws, you're in trouble." -Barnaby Joyce, ABC News, Apr 19, 2016

Johnny Depp was happy to feign ice cool, valium laced casualness when talking about it last year. His pet Yorkshire terriers, named Pistol and Boo, have been the ongoing subject of disagreement with the bio-security minded Australian authorities. Their interest in the canines was sparked last year when Amber Heard, his wife, attempted an act of smuggling into the country via private jet. Husband Depp was engaged with yet another Pirates of the Caribbean project, and wife Heard did not deem it fitting to worry about the myriad quarantine regulations that characterise Australia's border controls. The dogs were none the wiser.

In September last year, Depp, when cast a question on whether he was going to take his dogs for a gondola ride in Venice, answered with dismissive aplomb: "I killed my dogs and ate them, under direct orders of some kind of, I don't know, sweaty, big-gutted man from Australia." [1]

As easy as it is to be dismissive of Australia's paunchy current deputy prime minister, crimson-red from sun, stress, and a suggestion of imbibing, a serious note prevails. Barnaby Joyce should not be cast aside as a relic of a provincial backwater indifferent to the fine lines of the law. If anything, he has come across as a crafted caricature, noisy about the egalitarian nature of the Australian spirit in the face of Yankee rough riding. This is Hollywood getting all too cute.

The ecological wars fought in Australia tend to be of a savage sort, cruel, merciless and genocidal in intensity and tendency. The fears are always the same: agro-economic threats, and the assault on biodiversity (more a secondary matter).

It is not necessarily that Australia's quarantine and border controls are sensible, well-informed or decently applied. Feverish and arbitrary, they reveal a quotidian manner when it comes to concern about porous borders: some will be allowed through, while others won't. By in large, they are determined to make sure as few species and agents get through on their watch.

The premise is purely sovereign and patriotic: if we are going to destroy a country with unseen and undetected bacteria or viral phenomena, then let us be the ones to introduce it. Let Australian scientists and sagacious wise men and women of agriculture and the biosecurity field introduce the next malignant strain against resilient rabbits, or the next technique of destruction for the Indian Mynah Bird. Such killing and destruction is entirely a

matter of Queen and country.

The overview by Joyce, who uttered his comments in the holy position of agriculture minister, was unvarnished in its simplicity. In foreign presses, such a statement would come across as almost childish. “There is a process if you want to bring animals: you get the permits, they go into quarantine and then you can have them.” Exemptions for “the sexiest man alive twice” would be corrosive to the rule of law – or at the very least the rule of quarantine.

Much of this sounds mindlessly corrosive, but Depp and Heard had to make their case clear. Hollywood had come up against an ecological test. And however egalitarian Joyce may claim to be in the business, the standards towards the dream factory are different to those afforded an asylum seeker who arrives by boat, or the Chinese visitor replete with swallow nests.

Some get the accommodation of a cruel detention centre, or a savagely punitive fine; wealthy actors, playing on innocence and a lack of malice, fare better. This is exactly what Heard and Depp found: feign and dissimulate in recording a video of apology for their actions, and get off virtually scot-free. “Australia is a wonderful island with a treasure trove of unique plants, animals and species,” begins Heard.[2]

Depp then chimes in: “It has to be protected.” What follows is a half-baked effort at condescending anthropology: “Australians are just as unique, both warm and direct... When you disrespect Australian law they will tell you firmly.”

Joyce’s response to this act of cinematic idiosyncrasy? “What I can say is although I don’t think he’ll get an academy award for his performance, the fact that he did it... he looked like he was auditioning for the Godfather.”

In what has become a prolonged episode of fancy and fame, Joyce dotted his interviews during the day with suggestions on how he might have actually filmed the effort more appropriately. Joyce the environmental protector had become a pseudo-director. “Do it again Johnny, do it with gusto mate, a little gusto.” To the *Sunrise* show on Channel Seven, he observed that Depp should “rise to the camera”.

An otherwise serious biosecurity matter that might have seen a ten year prison sentence had become cinematically farcical. No conviction was recorded against Heard’s name, despite her admission to one charge of falsifying border protection documents in smuggling the dogs into the country. The worst she had to deal with was a one-month good behaviour bond. As Joyce had to observe after the ruling, “The court determines the punishment of the court so I’m not going to start being in contempt of court.” Thus ended the war on terriers.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-05/johnny-depp-jokes-he-killed-and-ate-dogs-pistol-and-boo/6752206>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-19/depp's-apology-like-'an-audition-for-the-godfather'-joyce>

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