

# Is animal welfare on election agenda?

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**Andrew Knight** summarises and analyses UK political parties' policy statements on animal welfare issues

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**THE UK holds an international reputation as a nation of animal lovers. The vast majority of its citizens either have a companion animal – or are close to someone who does – and consider themselves generally caring toward animals.**

Accordingly, animal welfare should be an issue of mainstream political concern, and our political party, Animals Count, was created to remind politicians that voters do care about animals.

In the approach to the general election, we sought a series of meetings and discussions with serving MPs and MEPs in the Labour Party, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the Green Party. We sought to discern their policies on animal issues, and to encourage the adoption of pro-animal policies.

## **Labour Party**

Political scientist Dan Lyons – a University of Sheffield honorary research fellow – has analysed each of the major political parties' level of support for 16 key early day motions (EDMs) that have called for improved animal protection, in the House of Commons since the 2005 general election<sup>1</sup>. Topics included the establishment of an animal protection commission, animal experimentation and the banning of foie gras – a culinary delicacy produced in some European countries from the

enlarged, fatty livers of force-fed geese and ducks (the production of foie gras is banned in the UK, but its importation is not).

EDMs serve to demonstrate the level of support among MPs for the initiative proposed. Those receiving a high level of support may progress to debate, and possibly action, within parliament. Hence, EDM signatures provide an impartial, quantitative indication of the level of support of MPs and parties for animal protection initiatives.

Labour MPs comprise 55 per cent of the parliamentary total, and provided 59 per cent of the support for these key EDMs. This was 1.07 times the average support provided by the three main political parties: Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Labour's 2010 election manifesto does include a single, brief paragraph on animal welfare within its 76 pages, contained within the environmental section<sup>2</sup>. It states that Labour will "campaign internationally to end illegal trading in ivory and to protect species such as polar bears, seals and bluefin tuna", and, in addition to existing bans on fox hunting and animal testing for cosmetics and tobacco, "will bring forward further animal welfare measures". No further details of these are provided.

At the time of writing, animal welfare was not clearly listed within the Labour policy guide<sup>3</sup>. Only through use of the search function did I locate a brief page on animal welfare within the environmental section<sup>4</sup>. However, most of this statement was dedicated to legislation passed since Labour first rose to power in 1997. Labour claims credit for banning: fox hunting; hare coursing; stag hunting; fur farming; drift-net fishing; testing of cosmetics, toiletries, alcohol and tobacco on animals; and the EU trade in seal fur. The party states it is committed to ensuring that fox hunting remains banned<sup>5</sup>. It also claims credit for: the 2012 EU ban on barren "battery" cages for chickens; increasing penalties for cruelty toward animals; improving the lives of racing greyhounds; and halting the decline in farmland birds, while increasing rare and woodland bird populations.

Perhaps its most significant achievement was the passage of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which substantially updated the Protection of Animals Act, first passed in 1911 and designed to prevent outright cruelty to animals. Under the new act, animal owners and keepers also have a duty of care to take all reasonable steps to provide for the needs of their animals. Should they fail to do so, they commit an offence. This potentially includes the provision of veterinary care, insofar as animal guardians now have an explicit duty to protect animals from pain, suffering, injury and disease. However, only domestic animals are defined as "protected animals" under this act. Therefore, animals subjected to scientific procedures and actions that occur in the normal course of fishing are excluded, and the act appears to not be designed to encourage welfare reforms for farm animals. Nevertheless, these achievements are indeed significant, and are not matched by the other parties surveyed. However, given that Labour has been in power for 13 years, other parties have had very little opportunity to do so.

Little space is allocated to the party's planned future initiatives for animals. Labour states it is consulting on the banning of cages for gamebirds and circus animals. Indeed, Jim Fitzpatrick – minister of state at DEFRA – has stated he is “minded to consider a ban” on the use of wild animals in circuses<sup>6</sup>, following public consultation demonstrating 95.5 per cent of respondents would support such action<sup>7</sup>.

Significantly for veterinarians, Labour claims to be “taking action to get the scourge of weapon dogs off estates and streets and to make sure that people can properly manage their dogs”, but details of the action taken are not provided.

More significant for animal welfare, however, is Labour's postponement of the ban on the debeaking of laying hens, which was due to come into force on January 1, 2011.

Despite the Government's stated commitment to alternative research and testing methods, scientific procedures conducted on animals annually have risen from 2.6 million in 1997, when Labour came to power, to 3.7 million in 2008 (the most recent figures available)<sup>8</sup>.

However, significant support for animal welfare does exist within some sectors of the Labour Party – as evidenced by the 1992 establishment of the Labour Animal Welfare Society, for party members and supporters. The group provides a detailed local authority charter for the welfare of animals<sup>9</sup>, and proposes a 10-point plan for the advancement of this<sup>10</sup>. Those most likely to provide significant welfare benefits include: food labelling indicating animal welfare standards; increased implementation and enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act 2006; and a new Protection of Mammals Act, to provide mammals with the same protections currently afforded to birds.

## Conservative Party

Conservative MPs were the least supportive of the key animal protection EDMs, by a wide margin. Although comprising 31 per cent of all MPs, they provided only 10 per cent of signatures supporting these EDMs. This was 0.32 times the average level of support provided by the three main political parties.

The 131-page 2010 Conservative manifesto<sup>11</sup> pledges to “promote high animal welfare standards”, but few additional details are provided. Wildlife protection and habitat conservation are emphasised – particularly wildlife trafficking, whaling, ivory sales and the creation of marine conservation zones. While these issues are undoubtedly important, and while elephants and whales enjoy iconic status, some may consider that, in welfare terms, they pale into relative insignificance, compared to the welfare problems faced by nearly a billion UK farm animals.

The only details provided of any programme to address farm animal welfare is a commitment to a “carefully managed and science-led policy of badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of [bovine tuberculosis]”.

The Conservatives have previously committed to culling badgers<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, they promised to dedicate government time to providing a free parliamentary vote on repealing the Hunting Act 2004. More positively, they stated their intention to work toward a reduction in scientific animal use, and to promote responsible pet ownership via codes of practice under the Animal Welfare Act, and through targeting of irresponsible owners of dangerous dogs.

At the time of writing, neither animal welfare nor protection was included within the list of policy areas on the Conservative Party website<sup>13</sup>. However, a booklet on farming<sup>14</sup> (accessible from the “Countryside and Farming” section) includes some animal welfare policies. While primarily focused on the promotion and protection of British farming, the booklet states the Conservatives “remain committed to upholding and improving welfare standards” for farm animals. The party asserts its support for welfare reforms, such as the 2012 ban on conventional cages for laying hens, with the proviso that such standards are raised equally across the EU.

Significantly, it states its intention to work toward the inclusion of production standards within World Trade Organisation negotiations. To date, countries seeking to ban the importation of cruelly produced animal products have risked falling foul of free-trade agreements, and incurring severe financial penalties. Allowing such bans would be likely to significantly assist animal protection campaigns within the UK and abroad.

Most of the booklet, however, focuses on disease control among agricultural species. The Conservatives would develop an animal health policy in partnership with farmers and veterinarians, and would seek to share, with the farming industry, the responsibility and cost of tackling animal disease. They place particular emphasis on border controls. No obvious mention is made of the overwhelming majority of animal welfare policy areas, however, including most farmed species, long-distance animal transportation, religious slaughter, companion animals, animals in laboratories, and animals in sport and entertainment (including zoos and circuses).

Additional insights into Conservative policy on animal welfare were provided to us during a meeting with Roger Gale MP, president of the Conservative Animal Welfare (CAW). Since 1994, CAW has offered a focal point for Conservative Party members interested in animal welfare. Its policies on animal welfare appear to have been provided by a veterinary advisor<sup>15</sup>. A positive example is: “The conditions in which all farm animals are reared, grown and slaughtered should be considered, and particular attention should be given to stocking densities, transport and slaughter. Animals should always be slaughtered as near to the point of production as possible, and the means of slaughter should always cause as little psychological or physical trauma as possible. Where the means of slaughter is dictated by religious traditions, this should not be a valid argument to disregard trauma to the animals concerned.”

Additionally, CAW states that: “The Conservative Party is the first political party in the UK to designate a specific front-bench spokesman for animal welfare.” This is currently Andrew Rosindell MP, the shadow home affairs minister, with special responsibility for animal welfare.

Other aspects may be considered disturbing. An example is the statement: “[It is a] biological fact that man is an omnivorous animal and, as such, needs to eat meat. It follows... that there is a need to farm, kill and eat other species for our own biological needs... A vegetarian diet... is not optimal for humans.”

While this may once have been considered true, we believe this demonstrates ignorance of current nutritional knowledge. Balanced vegetarian diets are well established as offering the potential for significant health benefits. Ample published medical papers and the positions of relevant professional associations support this<sup>16</sup>.

Another statement suggests: “If we did not rely on animal cultivation for a major food source then there would theoretically be no need for any other mammal to be preserved except for aesthetic purposes... It is easy to envisage a planet virtually devoid of other animals if they did not provide a biological advantage for us.” Statements such as this may be considered to demonstrate a lack of awareness of:

- the intrinsic value of other species and individuals, which provides a fundamental ethical basis for attempting to conserve them, and of considering their interests, independent of possible human benefit; and
- the ecological interdependence of most (if not all) species, and their role in supporting the planetary life-support systems on which we all depend – surely a planet “virtually devoid of other animals” would be similarly devoid of humans?

Additionally, CAW appears to be more interested in ensuring good welfare for laboratory animals, rather than in finding alternatives to their use: “We should be prepared to accept that it will not be possible to eliminate the use of live animals for the development and testing of some procedures, pharmaceuticals and equipment.”

CAW does not necessarily support additional regulation: “Over-enthusiastic regulation on research animal conditions does not always produce the best conditions for those animals.”

## **Liberal Democrats**

The Liberal Democrats were easily the most supportive major party regarding the 16 key EDMs. Although comprising only 10 per cent of MPs, Liberal Democrats provided 25 per cent of the total parliamentary support for these EDMs. This equated to 2.5 times the average level of support from Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats combined<sup>1</sup>.

This was reflected by the strong majority (54 out of 63) of Liberal Democrat MPs who signed EDM 92, which opposed any dilution or postponement of the 2011 ban on beak trimming of laying hens. However, the Labour Government has now indefinitely deferred this previously agreed ban. In

other cases, Liberal Democrat support for animal welfare has been weaker. Only 26 Liberal Democrat MPs voted for the 2004 hunting ban, with 18 voting against it. The party would also implement badger culling as part of its strategy to tackle bovine TB<sup>17</sup>.

The 57-page Liberal Democrat election manifesto<sup>18</sup> includes a very brief section on animal protection, which excluded most animal welfare issues. A central pledge was to “merge existing quangos to establish an Animal Protection Commission to investigate abuses, educate the public and enforce the law”.

Encouragingly, the Liberal Democrats state their belief that ownership and use of animals is a “responsibility that should not be abused”. They pledge to end the testing of household products on animals; however, as the party is doubtless aware, the vast majority of animal experiments occur for other reasons.

Similar to other major parties, Liberal Democrat policies focus primarily on mainstream social issues, such as the environment, economy, health, law and order, education and transport. At the time of writing, animal issues were hardly mentioned on the party’s website<sup>19</sup>. This was exemplified by the Liberal Democrat policy guide<sup>20</sup>, from which animal welfare, animal protection and related topics were entirely excluded (a search for “animal” yielded zero hits).

The closest the Liberal Democrats came to upholding animal welfare was in the context of biodiversity or wildlife preservation, within their relatively strong environmental policies. For example, they proposed the establishment of a “green national grid” to link the habitats of rare species, and proposed to strengthen regulations to protect the marine environment<sup>21</sup>.

## **Green Party**

The 50-page Green Party election manifesto<sup>22</sup> includes the most detailed policies on animal welfare of any political party, other than Animals Count.

The Greens would phase out intensive farming, would ban the production and sale of eggs from hens kept in “battery” cages (including “enriched” cages), would end live animal exports, and would limit journey times for all transported animals. They would immediately ban harmful scientific animal use, and invest in the development of non-animal alternatives. They would regulate the companion animal trade, including a ban on the importation of exotic pets. They would enforce strict animal welfare standards generally.

However, consistent with the general focus of the three major political parties, the major Green policy areas included the economy, healthcare, employment, education, crime and the environment. At the time of writing, there was no direct mention of animal issues on its main policy page<sup>23</sup>.

However, more detailed examination revealed a detailed policy on animal rights<sup>24</sup>, which stated: “The Green Party believes that animals have the right to live in safety, without fear or pain caused by human exploitation. We seek a more peaceful world, where all life is respected and all cruelty challenged.”

To justify its position on intensive farming, the party stated: “Much of the livestock industry relies on intensive farming methods, which are cruel to animals and harmful to the environment. Current levels of meat consumption are not sustainable. Globally the meat industry contributes to soil erosion, deforestation and climate change. It takes much more land and water to produce meat than it does to feed people on a vegetarian diet. In a world where 800 million people go hungry, reducing consumption of meat is necessary to protect human as well as animal rights.”

They also cite the major contribution to greenhouse gases of methane produced from enteric fermentation by ruminants.

With respect to animal experimentation, the Greens cite differences between human and laboratory animal outcomes, and a range of alternative research and testing methods, toward which they pledge to redirect research funding. To tackle human degenerative conditions, such as heart disease and cancer, they advocate a greater role for preventive care, focused on dietary and environmental factors, in place of animal research.

With respect to hunting, the Greens state: “Studies have shown that hunted animals can die from the simple stress and terror of the hunt. The question is whether individuals should be ‘free’ to inflict that on another living creature. While we welcome the ban on hunting with hounds, the Green Party believes that all hunting is barbaric and must be outlawed immediately.”

With respect to companion animals, they state: “The party is opposed to the wholesale breeding, manipulation and destruction of those animals who are chosen as companions to the human race. We will introduce measures to regulate the care and conditions for such animals including a two-tier system of dog licensing (breeding and non-breeding), licensing of all animal breeders and dog owners, subsidised spaying and neutering, the implementation of good animal warden schemes and a prohibition on the import of exotic animals for the pet trade.”

Green policies on animal welfare are clearly much stronger than those of any of the three major parties<sup>25</sup>. However, the “first-past-the-post” voting system used in UK general elections prevents allocation of seats according to national vote shares (or proportional voting), which could allow smaller parties to win seats. Instead, only the overall winner in each constituency gains a parliamentary seat.

Hence, the Greens have not yet won seats in a UK general election. However, Green votes have risen dramatically in the 2009 EU elections and in county council elections in recent years, and the Greens are now in a stronger position to contest the constituencies of Brighton Pavilion, Lewisham

Deptford and Norwich South.

## **Animals Count**

Our political party, Animals Count, was established in 2006 from the Dutch Party for the Animals. The latter has two MPs (with more expected in the forthcoming Dutch national elections), one senator and 23 elected representatives at provincial or local level. Political parties for animals now exist in some 10 countries worldwide, including Austria, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain.

Our objective is to introduce serious, rational consideration of animal welfare into politics and policy making. We encourage other political parties to improve their policies on animal welfare, by cooperation and pressure, which may include directly contesting elections. We seek to demonstrate that voters care about animal issues, and that votes can accrue to parties that prominently promote good animal welfare.

We have achieved respectable numbers of votes when contesting strategic constituencies in the 2009 EU and 2008 London Assembly elections.

We believe Animals Count offers the most progressive and detailed policies on animal issues of any UK political party. Our 47-page election manifesto covers farming (for example, intensive farming, particularly of chickens and pigs, dairy and veal farming, foie gras production), fishing and marine conservation, importation of fur products, breeding and husbandry procedures, live animal transportation, disease control, slaughter, food labelling, companion animals (such as abandonment, breeding and sale, identification and registration, health care, aggressive dogs, neglect and abuse, exotic species), animal experimentation, animals in sport and entertainment (including hunting, racing animals, circuses and zoos), wild animals and conservation.

However, we are not a single-issue party, and also propose other socially and environmentally responsible policies, on the economy and employment, housing, education, culture and science, health, community and sports, law, policing and security, transportation and foreign policy.

As a fledgling political party with limited resources, we can only afford to effectively contest a single constituency in the elections. Accordingly, we have chosen the marginal London seat of Islington South and Finsbury, where the Labour incumbent beat her main Liberal Democrat challenger in the 2005 general election by less than 500 votes.

Into this closely contested forum we are inserting consideration of animal issues. We plan to publicise the animal-related positions of the various candidates and parties, and to increase the likelihood that the winning candidate will have better policies for animals. Through such strategies, we hope to positively influence the policies of parties and candidates on animal issues.

## **Animal Protection Party**



The Animal Protection Party similarly aims to represent animals politically. Although claiming to take strong, uncompromising positions, to date it has not actually provided written policies on animal or any other issues.

Its strategy is clearer, however. It intends to stand against a few incumbent MPs who are outspokenly anti-animal, or who hold small majorities. It seeks to “lose some of these people their seats in order to gain genuine political influence and move human and animal rights to the top of the political agenda”.

The party is standing in the Meon Valley, Huntingdon, and Oxford West and Abingdon constituencies (sites of major existing or proposed animal laboratories), and in Vauxhall against Kate Hoey (a Labour MP who is also the chairman for the pro-hunting Countryside Alliance)<sup>27</sup>.

## Advancing policies

At the time of writing, Labour remained the only major political party with which we had been unable to meet.

We shall continue to seek to provide MPs with reasonable, low-cost animal welfare policy suggestions. Within the area of companion animals, for example, such proposals include:

- Purchasers of animals should be of adult legal age.
- Breeding of companion animals to meet breed standards, or for other purposes, that result in hereditary anatomical, physiological or other impairments likely to significantly compromise good welfare, should always be prohibited.
- The profound benefits of microchip identification, when compared to its minimal costs, justify making microchipping a compulsory preventive healthcare measure for dogs and cats.

A YouGov poll – carried out for the Protecting Animals in Democracy campaign and published in March – revealed animal welfare issues, such as hunting and animal experimentation, were an important election issue for 41 per cent of the British public. As Dr Lyons – the political scientist referred to earlier – states: “This is the first time the enormous political significance of animal welfare issues has come to light. It’s a clear warning to the parties that support for cruel practices like hunting could prove politically disastrous.”<sup>28</sup>

However, our meetings with politicians from the major political parties indicated that although strategists may advise MPs there are “a million votes in animal welfare”, many also feel voters’ commitment to animal issues is “soft”. They believe the big political issues are the economy, health, education, defence and policing, and that voters are unlikely to give much weight to animal issues. The impression given was that, in the current economic climate, animal welfare was likely

to be a very low priority for any incoming government. Accordingly, we were strongly advised by the MPs we met that any policies promulgated needed to be desirable and politically realistic, and must not incur a financial cost.

Therefore, we tailored a range of policy suggestions to closely match these requirements, in the areas of overall responsibility for animal welfare, farm animals, fishing, whaling, companion animals, and the use of animals in sport, entertainment, zoos and science. Unfortunately, to date the responses have been lukewarm at best, and it remains to be seen to what extent any of these may eventually be implemented.

In contrast, opponents of animal advocates, such as the Countryside Alliance, do not have a reputation for being “soft”. The politicians we spoke to considered them much more likely to leaflet, campaign and canvass for votes. Such an imbalance would appear to explain their disproportionate political impact, compared to the overwhelming majority of voters who would like to see good animal welfare standards implemented.

Animals are the most vulnerable and exploited members of our society. To ensure they receive a basic level of political consideration, we believe voters need to demonstrate to parties and candidates that their records and policies on animal issues are of interest and concern, and will carry weight when determining voting preferences.

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