

Which party would animals vote for?

ANIMAL welfare issues such as hunting and animal experimentation are an important election issue for 41% of the British public, according to a recently-published YouGov poll¹. Yet, rarely do political parties have strong policies to protect animal welfare. Our political party, Animals Count, was therefore created to remind politicians that voters care about animals.

In the lead-up to this UK election, we sought a series of meetings and discussions with serving MPs and MEPs in the main political parties. We sought to discern their policies on animal issues, and to encourage the adoption of animal-friendly policies.

Labour Party

Since the 2005 General Election, some 16 Early Day Motions (EDMs) in the House of Commons have called for improved animal protection². EDMs attracting significant support may progress to debate, and possibly action, within parliament.

Labour MPs comprise 55% of the parliamentary total, and provided 59% of MP signatures for these EDMs. This was 1.07 times the average support provided by the three main political parties.

Labour included a single paragraph on animal welfare within its 76-page election manifesto³. They would “campaign internationally to end illegal trading in ivory and to protect species such as polar bears, seals and bluefin tuna”, and would “bring forward further animal welfare measures”. No further details were provided.

Similarly, animal welfare was not prominent within the Labour Policy Guide⁴. One brief page mostly claimed credit for legislation passed since Labour rose to power in 1997, including bans on fox hunting, hare coursing and stag hunting, fur farming, driftnet fishing, the testing of cosmetics, toiletries, alcohol and tobacco on animals, and the EU trade in seal fur. They also claim credit for the forthcoming 2012 EU ban on barren cages for chickens; and for increasing penalties for animal cruelty, improving

greyhound welfare, and halting declines in bird populations.

One of Labour’s most significant achievements was the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which confers upon animal owners and keepers a duty of care to take all reasonable steps to provide for the needs of their animals – but only domestic animals are

“protected”. The Act fails to protect animals subjected to scientific procedures, excludes anything occurring in the normal course of fishing, and was not intended to encourage welfare reforms for farm animals.

Very little space was allocated to future plans to advance animal welfare. Labour claimed 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 no further details were provided.

More significant for animal welfare is Labour’s postponement of the ban on the de-beaking of laying hens, which was due to come into force on 1st January, 2011. Animal experiments have also risen significantly under Labour.

Conservative Party

Conservative MPs were easily the least supportive of animal protection EDMs. Although comprising 31% of all MPs, they provided only 10% of supporting signatures – 0.32 of the average level of support provided by the three main political parties.

The 131-page Conservative election manifesto⁵ pledged to “promote high animal welfare standards”, but few details were provided. Wildlife protection and habitat conservation were emphasised.

The only details provided of any programme to address farm animal welfare was 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 badger culling within their bovine TB strategy⁶.

Additionally, the Conservatives promised to dedicate time for a free parliamentary vote on repealing the Hunting Act. However, they also 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 animal welfare and related topics were mostly excluded from online Conservative Party policy⁷. However, a booklet on farming included animal welfare policies in a few limited areas.

The Conservatives “remain committed to upholding and improving welfare standards” for farm animals, and support welfare reforms such as the 2012 ban on conventional cages for laying hens, with the key proviso that such standards are concurrently raised across the EU.

They 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.

Liberal Democrats

Liberal Democrat MPs were easily the most supportive of animal protection EDMs. Although comprising only 10% of MPs, they provided 25% of supportive parliamentary signatures – or 2.5 times the average level of support provided by the three main political parties.

The 57-page Liberal Democrat election manifesto⁸ included 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.”

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

At the time of writing, animal issues were hardly mentioned on the Party’s website. This was exemplified by the policy guide⁹, from which animal welfare and related topics were entirely excluded. However, they did strongly promote biodiversity and wildlife preservation within their environmental policies.

Green Party

The 50 page Green Party election manifesto¹⁰ included 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 animal transport.

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.

The Green website also included a detailed policy on animal rights¹¹, which stated that: “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.”

With respect to companion animals, the Greens stated: “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.”

Dramatic increases in their vote shares in recent years have placed the Green Party in a strong position to contest three constituencies and it is quite possible that Dr Caroline Lucas, the party leader, could be its first member of Parliament.

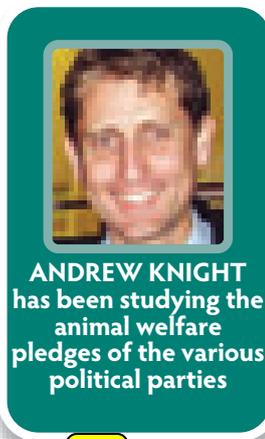
Animals Count

Political parties for animals now exist in some 10 countries. Our own party, Animals Count, aims to encourage serious political consideration of animal welfare. Our manifesto¹² provides the most progressive and detailed policies on animal issues of any party. However, we are not a single issue party, and also propose a range of other socially and environmentally responsible policies.

In this election we’re contesting the London seat of Islington South and Finsbury, where the Labour incumbent leads her main LibDem challenger by the narrowest of margins. By publicising the animal-related policies (or lack, thereof) of the various candidates and parties, we will increase the likelihood that the candidate ultimately successful will have better policies for animals.

Conclusions

Our meetings with politicians from the major political parties were revealing. Animal welfare will be a very low priority for any incoming government. Instead, most parties are focusing on



ANDREW KNIGHT has been studying the animal welfare pledges of the various political parties



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Dr Caroline Lucas, leader of the Green Party

issues such as the economy, health, education, defence and policing.

We were strongly advised that any policy suggestions must be politically desirable, realistic, and virtually cost-free, given current political and economic climates. We therefore provided a range of appropriate suggestions in a wide range of animal protection areas. Unfortunately, the responses to date have been lukewarm.

However, elections provide a window of opportunity to ensure that animals receive a basic level of political consideration. For this to occur we need to clearly demonstrate that the animal-related policies of parties and candidates are of interest and concern, and will carry weight when determining

our voting preferences.

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Veterinary show in Leeds this month

THE Northern Vet Show is to be held in the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds on 23rd and 24th May. Organised by E-Myth UK Ltd of Leeds, the event includes a substantial exhibition and two days of CPD.

“What makes this showcase different is the genuine mix of business, clinical and commercial speakers from both the veterinarian industry and the business community where prominent wealth builders will bring fresh business content to the industry,” the organiser states.

Delegates can choose from over 50 seminar topics, including an equine stream, and there will be five wetlabs as well as a programme for veterinary nurses. The price per person is £149 (plus VAT). Improve International is running the clinical programme and Vet Learning the non-clinical programme.

A two-day business conference will include speakers such as John Sheridan, Mark Moran, Steve Dean, Alison Lambert, Steve Beddall, Paul Jackson and Professor John Thompson.

To book tickets, telephone 0113 250 0355 or e-mail events@e-mythuk.co.uk.

Exhibitors at the event will include: Animalcare, Ashdown Vet Services, Askham Bryan College, Avacta Animal Health, Axiom Veterinary Laboratories, Barber of Sheffield, Bayer Animal Health, BDSI, Bishopston Vet Group, Blackdog Software, Burgess Excel, Burtons, Ceva Animal Health, Celtic SMR, Companion Care, Company of Animals, CTDS Labs, Direct Medical, Dorwest Herbs, Dunlops, Eickmeyer, 4 Seasons, Hill's Pet Nutrition, Idexx Laboratories, Idis Pharma, Jacksons Auction House, J A K Marketing, Kruuse, Lami Doors, Lighthouse GP, Lloyds TSB, MC Medical, NVS, Nottingham University Press, PALS, Pet Cremation Services, Performance Finance, Pet-ID, Pfizer Animal Health, PLH Medical, PPL Pharmaceutical Packaging, Prior Clave, Processing Imaging Equipment Services, Protexin, Rig Vet Recruitment, Roots Vet Dental Supplies, Rx Works, Safavets Direct, Supreme Petfoods, Thames Medical, The Moore-Scarrott Partnership, Vet Direct, VBD, Veterinary Endoscopy Services, Veterinary Instrumentation, Vet-One Practice Management Software, Vets4Pets, Vetscope Software, Virbac and Westcoast Animal Rehabilitation Equipment.

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