

Snaring foxes and gassing badgers: what our politicians really think about animal welfare...

A HORRIFIED gasp floated toward the rafters of the majestic, slightly crumbling edifice that is Westminster Palace.

Stuart Agnew had just suggested to a meeting packed to bursting with welfare aficionados and cameras that the best way to control tuberculosis in badgers was to gas them in their setts.

As pointed out by Angela Smith, Shadow Animal Welfare Minister, and the originator of the gasp, one rather important problem posed by this “final solution” was that it was, in fact, illegal. Another was that Stuart Agnew is the animal welfare spokesman for UKIP.

No one questioned whether gassing badgers was humane or not, but the horrified expression from Caroline Allen, the animal welfare spokesperson for the Green Party, suggested that she was struggling to comply with an edict not to speak at that point.

The animal welfare campaigner and actor, Peter Egan, chaired this important meeting of the Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare on 17th March, and was trying hard to keep things in order.

A difficult task, given that his job was to allow representatives from five political parties to answer 17 questions on animal welfare matters, previously submitted by parliamentary colleagues and the general public, in around 60 minutes. This was *Question Time* for the political parties with respect to animal welfare and their upcoming manifestos.

Mr Egan did manage to get through roughly half of the questions posed. We were fortunate enough to attend this

fascinating event. The proceedings began with the vexing question of religious slaughter.

Labour asserted that religious sensibilities and animal welfare can be balanced by appropriate use of pre-



ANDREW KNIGHT and IAIN MCGILL went to the Houses of Parliament to hear the views, and in some cases policies, on animal welfare of people from a number of the political parties contesting this month's election



stunning. The Conservatives, represented by Neil Parish, MP (on behalf of Lord de Mauley, Minister for Animal Welfare), placed greater emphasis on respecting religious tradition, but did state their support for the use of cameras to monitor animal welfare in abattoirs.

The Greens supported cameras, and emphasised the importance of labelling meat as from stunned animals, or otherwise. They also emphasised a more holistic focus on farm animal lives overall. Surprisingly, UKIP described religious slaughter as more humane, claiming that it occurred more slowly, in quieter environments.

They opposed a ban, due to fears this would lead to a black market in meat imported from Europe.

Live exports were supported by the Conservatives and Labour, and opposed by the Greens and UKIP.

The Liberal Democrats would not reveal their position prior to their manifesto release, and seemed reluctant to commit themselves to any manifesto promises on animal welfare.

It was almost as though, scarred by their disastrous tuition fee u-turn after the last election, their spokesperson for animal welfare, Baroness Parminter, had been instructed to avoid making party commitments.

Similarly, the Conservatives and Labour mouthed opposition on principle to live exports, but cited the illegality of banning it under EU legislation. This posed no problem for UKIP as they intend to exit the EU. They would ban live exports, as would the Greens indirectly, by passing legislation allowing ports to decline shipments.

Either way, the difference was clear – the Greens and UKIP would stop it

one way or another, but Labour and the Tories support the *status quo*.

Breeding opinions

The most extensive answer on dog breeding was provided by the Greens.

Given that Caroline Allen is a highly experienced London veterinarian, this was unsurprising. The Greens were the only party with any veterinary representation.

Ms Allen proposed significantly greater regulation of breeders, including licence requirements for breeding two or more litters, and bans on the sale of puppies below eight weeks of age, or with the dam absent.

The Liberal Democrats and Labour spoke of reviewing legislation, and the

Conservatives had little to offer, other than encouraging us to “all work together”. UKIP blamed the problem on the importation of foreign dogs by immigrants, and asserted that the RSPCA, with so much “free time on its hands” should conduct undercover investigations to solve the problem. This statement was one of the most ill-judged of the evening, and

Stewart Agnew looked like a startled rabbit in the headlights of audience opprobrium.

Review proposed

With respect to exotic pets, Labour and the Lib Dems proposed a legislative review. As usual, the most detailed measures were provided by the Greens, who emphasised the unsuitability of many exotic species, and especially

primates, as pets. They would take “tough action” in this area. The Conservatives, in contrast, emphasised the need for “persuasion”.

Notably, UKIP proposed legislation against exotic pet-keeping, and planned to triple current sentences for animal welfare abuses. UKIP were Jekyll and Hyde, occasionally coming up with startlingly refreshing animal welfare policies (sometimes, but not always, because they won't obey EU dictats) only to ruin it with ill-judged rants about immigrants or the RSPCA, or promises of outright animal abuse (e.g. snares and gassing), without seeming to comprehend the sensitivities of the audience.

Invasive animal experimentation was supported by the Conservatives and UKIP. Greater transparency, including greater publication of information about experiments, was supported by all other parties. The Greens were also keen to force a reduction in the number of animals used.

In reply to UKIP's Stuart Agnew, who defended the use of snares by farmers for “fox control”, the Greens' Ms Allen stated that the use of snares was an issue she had studied in detail. After describing their effects on wildlife (some of whom chew off their own limbs to escape), she concluded that these “mediaeval torture devices” have no place in the modern UK. Mr Agnew had no reply, but the response was spontaneous applause from the audience.

Labour was particularly critical of the Conservative failure to ban the use of wild animals in circuses, despite a full five years in which to do so. They and the Greens were the only parties committed to a ban. A similar divide appeared in relation to badgers: the Conservatives would continue to cull them, Labour and the Greens would not, and UKIP would apparently gas them.

The take-home message is that if you want good animal welfare policies from an incoming government, vote Green, followed by Labour. If you want hunting, snares, badger culls and business as usual, vote for the Tories or UKIP and, if you want non-commitment, vote Lib Dem.

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Andrew Knight, BVMS, PhD, BSc, MRCVS, is a European veterinary specialist in animal welfare science, ethics and law, and a Professor of Animal Welfare and Ethics at the University of Winchester. He is an election candidate for the Animal Welfare Party and is frustrated that the AWP were not similarly invited to speak. Iain McGill, BVetMed, BSc, MRCVS, is an independent veterinary scientist and clinician who actively campaigns on animal welfare issues. Formerly a scientist at MAFF and ZSL, he is also one of the co-ordinators of scientific veterinary opposition to the badger cull.

Malvern vet standing for UKIP

RICHARD Chamings, principal of White House Vets in Malvern, Worcs., is standing in the general election for the UK Independence Party in the constituency of West Worcestershire.

Mr Chamings reports that he joined UKIP some years ago because he was convinced that the UK would be better off outside the EU – “making our own laws, setting up trade deals worldwide, and saving ourselves about £10 billion a year”.

