



Election Special



BACK IN AUGUST 2009, Animal Aid began contacting political parties, seeking answers to some important questions about their animal welfare policies. Although we contacted most of them several times, some have still failed to respond.

We requested policy details on the following issues:

- Animal farming
- Meat-free initiatives (particularly in the light of climate change)
- Animal experiments
- Hunting
- The production of birds to be shot for sport
- The use of exotic and domestic animals in circuses
- Horse racing
- The culling of wildlife

Of the three main Westminster parties, the Liberal Democrats were the most willing to focus on our specific questions, whilst the Labour Party did not bother to reply at all. Almost all the responses we received were largely rhetorical, with little focus on specific policies that might be implemented. However, it was possible to gain a general overview on where the main parties stand.

Fox hunting and badger culling

It has been widely publicised that the Conservatives intend to offer MPs a free vote on whether to repeal the Hunting Act – a vote that would probably legalise hunting. The Labour Party has been clear that it will campaign for retention of the Act, led by a Hilary Benn-inspired initiative called *Keep the Ban*.

Regarding the controversial badger cull (that has already been approved in Wales), shadow Defra secretary, Nick Herbert, has said that the Conservatives would implement a cull immediately.

Shooting

None of the main parties are seeking, or even considering, a ban on the production or killing of birds for sport. Currently, around 47 million pheasants and partridges are reared annually for this purpose.

Animal experiments

Both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats claim to be committed to the 'refinement, reduction and replacement' of animal

experiments, yet both still insist that some animal experiments are necessary. The number of experiments on animals has increased markedly under the current Labour government. None of the three main parties is prepared to make any concrete commitments towards an end to vivisection.

Animal farming

Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are both eager to emphasise the importance of high animal welfare standards, without committing to specific policies. The Conservative Party mentioned its strong support for a ban on battery cages for egg-laying hens, while the Liberal Democrats want 'ongoing training [for] people who work with farm animals'. Neither offered any more concrete proposals than this. When it came to meat-free initiatives in the fight against global warming, both explicitly stated that they do not support this line of thinking. The Tory's Nick Herbert is particularly adamant that eating less meat will have no beneficial impact on the environment. Labour, in government, has been more amenable to the idea.

TRACK RECORD

Looking at the main parties' past performance in parliament, a good test is to see which members of the House of Commons have supported animal-friendly Early Day Motions (EDMs). Animal Aid conducted a survey prior to the 2005 General Election, which showed that the Liberal Democrats had the best track record on animal issues. Taking into account the respective number of MPs for each party, Lib Dem MPs were ten times more likely to support the proposed animal welfare measures than the Conservatives. They were also significantly more animal-friendly than Labour MPs. Labour Members, however, had a far better record than the Tories.

These findings are borne out by three recent EDMs in which Animal Aid has played an important part: namely, those on horse racing, the 'game bird' industry and zero grazed livestock. These attracted little support from Conservative MPs. Greater percentages of Liberal Democrat MPs signed the horse racing and zero grazing EDMs than their Labour counterparts, whereas Labour Members were more prominent regarding the shooting EDM.

IN GOVERNMENT

The Conservatives were keen to point out that they introduced a ban on close-confinement veal crates and established the Farm Animal Welfare Council when it was last in government. Labour emphasises the hunting ban, the ban on fur farming and cosmetics testing on animals and the refusal to give permission for a badger cull.

Neither party is well disposed towards animal rights activists. We have seen Labour introduce draconian laws to crack down on campaigners,

With the General Election looming, where do the political parties stand on animal welfare issues? Ashley Owen has been trying to find out



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and it is unrealistic to expect anything better from a Conservative government.

INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES

When considering who to vote for, it is also worth looking into the merits of the individual candidates, who may hold more sympathetic personal views on animal welfare issues than the party line. For instance, Ann Widdecombe is a Conservative MP and yet she has signed all three of the animal-friendly EDMs mentioned earlier. Unfortunately, she is not standing for re-election.

GREEN PARTY POLICIES

While the Green Party does not yet have Westminster representation, its policies stand out as the most progressive of any major party on animal issues. These include a pledge to prohibit the use of animals in circuses and opposition to all blood sports. It would also similarly ban shooting and snaring. The Greens also oppose the use of the whip in horse racing. While it does not currently have specific policies on the culling of wildlife, the Party opposes badger culling – unlike the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

On animal farming, the Green Party told us that it is 'against all forms of intensive and battery farming, including... zero grazing regimes'. It would prohibit live exports and abolish the 'piece rate' system in abattoirs (where workers earn more money the more animals they kill). It also intends to phase out fish farming.

The Green Party 'is opposed, on scientific and ethical grounds, to the harmful use of animals in research... and would ban all research... which harms animals, including harmful procedures to obtain animal

derived materials'. A Green Party representative told us that the Party would transfer government funds from animal tests to 'superior non-animal technologies' and would make issues such as diet and lifestyle central to its health policies.

NATIONALIST PARTIES

We also sought the views of nationalist political parties. While the Welsh and Irish Assemblies and Scottish Parliament enjoy limited legislative power, it is important to know where they stand. Although Plaid Cymru gains a black mark for its support of a badger cull, it also provided some positive responses. It was the only party openly to state its support for a ban on battery cages for breeding game birds, and also declared its opposition to intensive farming, including zero grazing of dairy cows.

The Ulster Unionist Party informed us that it allows a free vote to its elected representatives on animal welfare issues. However, it added that any members elected in the forthcoming election 'will take the Conservative whip' on hunting, even though David Cameron is promising a *free* vote. It does not support the promotion of meat-free diets as a means of tackling climate change.

The only concrete policy offered by Northern Ireland's Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) was its opposition to hunting. The Party also mentioned support for 'regular, thorough inspections of farms' to ensure animal welfare standards, as well as legislation to provide minimum standards for the treatment of animals in circuses. Nobody from the Scottish National Party, Sinn Fein or the DUP responded to our questions.

SPECIALIST ANIMAL PARTIES

There are two small political parties – Animals Count and Speak Political – set up to focus wholly on animal issues. They both emerged as a result of the inadequate protection offered to animals by the main political parties and the frustration generated when they fail to live up to the promises they have made on animal welfare.

Animals Count states on its website that it aims to 'establish a voice for the animals through a dedicated political party that focuses on respect and compassion for all living beings'. It seems to be willing to work with other parties and encourage them to become more animal-friendly. Full details of their policies can be viewed at www.animalscount.com or you can contact the party by email on info@animalscount.org

Speak Political emphasises what it identifies as the problems with the current political system and talks about giving control back to the people. Its website states that the party will not compromise on its beliefs, though it does not set out specific policies. You can contact them on **0844 800 9031** or via info@speakpoliticalparty.org

