

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON NON-STUN SLAUGHTER

A parliamentary Westminster Hall debate was held on 23 February to consider BVA's e-petition relating to ending non-stun slaughter to promote animal welfare, which had been signed by over 116,000 people to date. The three-hour long debate, led by Philip Hollobone, MP for Kettering, was well attended with over 30 MPs from all the main parties contributing to discussions. Defra Minister George Eustice gave the Government's response and BVA Honorary Associate and Shadow Minister Huw Irranca-Davies outlined the opposition's position. Several other BVA Honorary Associates participated in the debate, namely Simon Hart, Caroline Nokes, Neil Parish, Sir James Paice and Bill Wiggin; Sir Roger Gale was also present. EFRA Select Committee Chair Anne McIntosh was also active in the debate.

In his introduction Philip Hollobone said he hoped the debate on this contentious issue would 'generate more light than heat' and contended that an overwhelming number of people want non-stun slaughter in this country to come to an end, drawing attention to the recent RSPCA and YouGov poll which indicated that 77 per cent of people surveyed agreed that the practice should be banned.

Despite the strength of feeling from both sides the debate was conducted in a calm, measured - and, for the most part, animal welfare-focused - manner. BVA was mentioned five times and it was evident that many MPs had taken note of our parliamentary briefing. We are hugely grateful to all those BVA members who engaged with the campaign by signing the e-petition and contacting their own MP.

There was a consensus amongst many MPs that slaughter without stunning allows animals to feel pain and compromises animal welfare; to others religious tolerance was of paramount importance, particularly with the unease felt by some religious communities in the current climate.

There was interest on both sides in restricting supply of non-stun slaughtered meat to the communities for which it is intended under the derogation. There was a consensus that more animals are slaughtered without pre-stunning than are required to meet the demand of the religious communities concerned. In this regard, the German system of more rigorously assessing the needs of religious communities was discussed. A strong case was made for post-cut stunning as a culturally acceptable refinement of current practice. Much discussion centred on labelling as a key issue with suggestions from simply using stunned or non-stunned (as advocated by BVA) to further include Halal or Kosher, through to including all methods of slaughter. The Minister reported that the long-awaited European Commission labelling report is 'still some months away'.

There was also discussion on the related issue of the use of CCTV in slaughterhouses and enforcement of welfare regulations and, with regard to the latter, the Minister confirmed that the FSA has already begun a series of unannounced inspections of GB slaughterhouses.

Both Government and Shadow Ministers stressed that they would prefer for all animals to be pre-stunned and accepted the mainstream scientific consensus that pre-stunning was more humane; but the Minister made it clear that 'the Government have no plans at all to ban religious slaughter' reiterating David Cameron's pledge to protect the exemption.

Far from marking an end to the campaign the debate shows more engagement and awareness at Westminster. And with another e-petition, this time to 'protect religious slaughter in the UK and EU'

also exceeding 100,000 signatures, it is likely that there will be another debate, perhaps even before the general election.

BVA will be pushing the next parliament to make changes: if an end to non-stun slaughter is not going to be an option in the foreseeable future, then every effort must be made to introduce clearer slaughter method labelling; to give consideration to a system similar to the German practice where abattoirs have to prove the religious needs and number of animals to be slaughtered to satisfy the need of the religious community concerned before being granted a licence; and to introduce immediate post-cut stunning where appropriate.

As Mr Hollobone concluded, “this issue is not going to go away”.