Comment

Voting for animal health and welfare

READING election manifests can be a mind-numbing experience and it seems fair to say that the General Election on May 7 is unlikely to be won on issues relating to animal health and welfare alone. Nevertheless, it is worth looking at the manifests of the main political parties to see how much space they devote to the subject and how their policies compare. For the 2015 election, there is relatively little direct reference to animal health in the manifests of the main parties, as was the case during the elections of 2005 and 2010. This could be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how you look at it. The situation today is certainly very different from that in 2001, when election campaigns were being waged in the midst of the foot-and-mouth disease crisis (and the election had to be postponed because of it), and in 1997, when political battles were being fought over food safety and BSE. Having said that, some of the manifests for this year’s election make reference to bovine TB, mostly by referring to the pilot badger culls, again demonstrating that, while eliminating TB requires a comprehensive approach, arguments about culling badgers continue to overshadow all of the other efforts being made.

For this election, comparison of the main parties’ policies is complicated by the fact that, as the brouhaha surrounding the televised leaders’ debates has illustrated, not one seems sure any more which the main political parties are. In addition, most of the media coverage over the past few days has focused not so much on individual parties’ policies, but on who might be prepared to work with whom in a hung Parliament. Teasing out what all this might mean for animal health and welfare and for the work of the veterinary profession is difficult, not least because things will inevitably be affected by the parties’ wider economic and other policies. The changing political climate in the UK presents more of a challenge for interested voters: if reading three manifests was mind-numbing, reading seven or more is likely to result in total anaesthesia.

With much of the UK’s legislation relating to animal health and welfare being based on EU legislation, a great deal will depend on the next Government’s position on EU membership. The Conservative Party’s manifesto promises an in-out referendum on Europe by the end of 2017, while UKIP would hold a referendum to leave the EU at the earliest opportunity. The Labour Party says it believes membership of the EU is central to the UK’s prosperity and security and that it will work to change the EU in the country’s best interests. The Liberal Democrats are also in favour of continued EU membership, as are the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party; the SNP goes so far as to say it would oppose a referendum on membership. Not unexpectedly, UKIP takes a tougher line on immigration than the other parties, although, interestingly, there is no mention in its manifesto of tighter controls on cross-border movement of pets.

All of the parties seem keen to protect the environment, support farmers and rural economies and ensure future food supplies (it would be hard to think of a party seeking immigration than the other parties, although, interestingly, there is no mention in its manifesto of tighter controls on cross-border movement of pets. However, they sometimes end up being so and they can clearly be affected by wider Government policies. It is interesting to see what the different parties have to say about the subject in their manifestos, but, with so much else at stake in this election, the pledges being made clearly have to be considered in the context of the wider policies on offer.

Among various comments in the manifests relating specifically to animal health and welfare, the Conservatives state that they will protect animal welfare and that they will continue to implement their 25-year strategy to eliminate bovine TB. Labour, meanwhile, says it will ‘build on our strong record on welfare — starting with an end to the Government’s ineffective and cruel badger cull’. The Conservatives promise to give Parliament an opportunity to repeal the Hunting Act, while Labour says it will defend the hunting ban. The Conservatives state that, while they will always make sure the Food Standards Agency properly regulates the slaughter of livestock and poultry, they will protect methods of religious slaughter, such as shechita and halal. Of all the parties, the Green Party devotes most space in its manifesto to animal welfare issues, calling, among other things, for a move away from the intensification or industrialisation of farming, an end to the badger culls, an end to grousing and other ‘sport’ shooting, a review of dog legislation, and an end to animal experimentation.

Animal health and welfare should not be party political issues. However, they sometimes end up being so and they can clearly be affected by wider Government policies. It is interesting to see what the different parties have to say about the subject in their manifestos, but, with so much else at stake in this election, the pledges being made clearly have to be considered in the context of the wider policies on offer.

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