Different challenges, common themes

ELECTIONS, on the whole, tend not to be won or lost on the strength of policies on animal health and welfare, although animal health and welfare can certainly intrude into politics, as happened in 2001, for example, when the UK was in the grip of a foot-and-mouth disease crisis and when, for the first time since the Second World War, local elections and the General Election were postponed because of the outbreak. Nevertheless, animal health and welfare are important to the voting public; letters on the subject form a significant element of many a politician’s postbag and it is in everyone’s interests that more attention is paid to it. It is therefore appropriate that, with elections for the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly due to take place on May 5, the BVA and its branches in each of the three devolved regions should have produced manifestos calling for action on animal health and welfare, with each manifesto being tailored to the situation in the relevant region (VR, April 9, 2016, vol 178, p 357). Aimed at candidates standing in the elections and other interested parties, the manifestos build on the success of a manifesto produced by the BVA before the General Election in 2015 (VR, February 14, 2015, vol 176, p 158) and seek to raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding animal health and welfare while also emphasising the part that vets can play in this.

The manifestos are well worth reading, and not just by those standing for election or who are interested in what might be happening in their own particular patch. First, animal health and welfare is not just a local issue, and there are some common themes that apply throughout the UK. These include, for example, the importance of disease surveillance, which is highlighted in each of the manifestos, along with a call for all animals to be stunned before slaughter, an issue on which the BVA has been campaigning for some time. Similarly, all three manifestos call on governments to continue to support a One Health approach to tackling antimicrobial resistance, and to lobby in Europe to protect the veterinary surgeon’s right to prescribe and privilege to dispense veterinary medicines, as a means of improving antimicrobial stewardship.

At the same time, activity relating to animal health and welfare in the UK has been devolved for many years now, and each administration has its own legislation and particular concerns. This is reflected in the manifestos with, for example, the manifesto for Scotland including recommendations relating to aquaculture and on the importance of the Highlands and Islands Veterinary Services Scheme in supporting veterinary provision in areas where services are hard to reach, while the manifesto for Wales draws attention to, among other things, the pivotal contribution of vets to the Wales Animal Health and Welfare Framework and the need to monitor the provision of OV services under the tendering arrangements introduced in 2015. Meanwhile, the manifesto for Northern Ireland notes that the agri-food industry is the cornerstone of Northern Ireland’s economy; it points out that the economic benefits of good animal health and welfare are crucial to the development and maintenance of a sustainable and competitive industry and emphasises the importance of partnership working between government, farmers and vets.

Reading the three manifestos together is interesting because it not only identifies challenges that exist across the devolved administrations; it also highlights differences between them. One result of all this is that, as well as providing a useful summary of the situation as things stand in relation to efforts to improve animal health and welfare across the UK, it also gives an indication of just how far devolution has progressed. While there are clearly benefits in tailoring policies to local requirements and circumstances, this in itself can present challenges, as discussed in a recent Comment in this journal (VR, April 2, 2016, vol 178, p 326).

Discussing the role of veterinary surgeons, the manifestos note that vets carry out a variety of roles for the public good – from disease surveillance and eradication, to service delivery and education in the community, to frontline research. They call on governments to recognise this, and consider ‘how best to maximise the unique skills, knowledge and expertise of our veterinary resource’. At a time when budgets are being reduced and when, despite the need to safeguard animal health and welfare, the focus of our politicians all too often seems to lie elsewhere, this is an important message and one which, along with many of the more specific recommendations in the manifestos, is likely to remain relevant long after the elections on May 5.


doi: 10.1136/vr.i2128