How do the political parties stack up against vets’ wishes?

EVER since Theresa May called the General Election last month, political pollsters have been predicting a Conservative victory.

However, if recent political history has taught us anything, it’s that political polling is not reliable and it would therefore be foolhardy to be complacent about the result.

So, with less than two weeks before election day, it might be helpful to review the political parties’ positions on the key issues that matter to the profession.

This week we publish the BVA’s manifesto (see p 508). With 11 out of 20 recommendations being written into the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat priorities for the next Parliament, it has clearly been influential.

These main parties have published proposals for a range of issues, some pressing, some long outstanding and some that just keep reoccurring. So how do they compare?

Number 1 on the BVA’s manifesto is to secure the veterinary workforce for the future. Part of that means guaranteeing the working rights for non-British EU vets and VNIs working and studying in the UK, at the existing level with no time limit.

As this editorial argued a few weeks ago, our reliance on non-UK EU vets is significant but their future here has been thrown into question following the EU referendum.

All the main parties support the BVA’s position and promise to press ahead with it unilaterally except the Conservatives, who have consistently stated the requirement for reciprocity – the need to secure the same rights for British workers in the EU at the same time.

Interestingly, the Conservatives also make a pledge to toughen visa requirements for students as part of an ambition to cut annual net migration to the tens of thousands. Given that universities generate significant revenue from overseas students, this may not be a welcome step for the higher education sector. But it is also questionable whether drawing on a narrower student recruitment pool would be a fit for the veterinary profession, which is, by its nature, outward-looking, internationalist and invested in the global transfer of knowledge.

There is one issue that doesn’t seem to go away and that is banning the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. Given the level of support, this is perhaps surprising. Labour is the only party to offer something here – it says it would proceed with a ban. It is something that the Conservatives promised in their 2015 manifesto but it still hasn’t happened and they have now dropped the pledge from their current manifesto. It’s not clear why the rest of the UK can’t follow Scotland’s lead here – would anyone argue that a ban would be a bad idea?

There are some issues that are noticeable by their absence; one is non-stun slaughter – evidently too much of a political hot potato for anyone to touch. The profession’s view is that all animals should be rendered insensitive to pain before they are slaughtered. The BVA has even suggested a helpful interim measure – the introduction of immediate post-cut stunning to reduce the welfare harm – but across all the manifestos seen to date, there is nothing on this issue.

Respect for the slaughter preferences of the Muslim and Jewish communities (dhabihah and shechita, respectively), whereby an animal is killed while fully conscious and left to bleed to death, saw the Conservative Party making a specific pledge to retain non-stun slaughter in its 2015 manifesto. No mention in this year’s manifesto could, I guess, indicate a softening of this Conservative position but with no explicit mention, it is difficult to be certain.

But even if there is a commitment to protect non-stun slaughter in the UK, the BVA will continue to push for pragmatic solutions, like mandatory food labelling to ensure consumers can at least make informed choices about what they eat. This would tell them about the method of production and whether it supports a good life and humane death for farmed animals.

This, again, has not been picked up by any of the major parties. Perhaps, it is seen as something that does not require regulation? After all, labelling of eggs was an initiative taken up by retailers independently in response to consumer concern on battery farming and now 50 per cent of eggs supplied to the UK market are from non-caged birds. But setting up a labelling scheme would certainly be quicker and more effective with government backing so to see this option ignored is a disappointment not only for the profession, but also for the consumer.

It is something that could be more easily achieved post-Brexit, so it feels like a bit of a missed opportunity for the Conservatives. (It would obviously be harder to agree a system of production labelling across the EU but the UK could reasonably achieve this independently.) The party has committed to providing better ingredient labelling so it could easily work-up a joint labelling scheme that provides information on both ingredients and method of production.

One positive step forward from the Conservatives is a pledge to make CCTV recording mandatory in slaughterhouses. Of course, this is welcome and credit to the party for taking this step. However, it is really only half the story because CCTV is useless unless it is viewed by experts. Hence the BVA would also want to see Official Veterinarians granted unrestricted access to all footage.

There are some issues where all parties have a position and there is real choice. One example is badger culling. Here the parties spread themselves on more traditional lines with Labour proposing a ban, the Conservative Party continuing to support culling and the Lib Dems promising to develop an evidence-based way of controlling bovine TB. This last pledge is broadly in agreement with the BVA’s view that badger culling is a kind of necessary evil, part of a toolbox of measures to combat the disease.

There are some animal welfare issues that fall outside of the BVA’s manifesto. One is fox hunting. Here, the Conservatives are a lone voice and they state they will give parliamentary time and grant MPs a free vote to decide the future of the Hunting Act. Another is tougher sentencing for animal cruelty – here both Labour and the Lib Dems promise to introduce tougher penalties for animal abusers. This should draw popular appeal.

Unfortunately not all parties had published their manifestos at the time of this analysis so next week we’ll publish a full comparison table so you can judge each one on the key issues before you vote on June 8.

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