

# Editorial

## An end to animal testing – is Labour serious?

WITH talk of a general election looming, it is incumbent on parties to publish their programmes for government, including animal welfare plans. These will hopefully be coherent, but we'll see (*Vet Record* plans to scrutinise such plans as and when they're published).

First out of the traps in terms of animal welfare is Labour. The party has already published a special manifesto setting out what it intends to do for animals (see p 248).

Some of its policies appear uncontroversial. Its proposed ban on the keeping of primates as pets echoes noises made by the Conservatives. Labour's commitment to enshrining into law animal sentience is, on paper at least, also shared by the current government. Other policies include wanting to ban live exports and preventing landlords from restricting tenants from keeping pets.

Labour would also expand the legal definition of 'animal' to include decapod crustaceans and cephalopods – thereby ending the practice of boiling lobsters alive. This would be in line with other countries such as Norway, New Zealand and Switzerland, which already have this welfare at slaughter protection.

The party says its proposals arose from a consultation involving thousands of respondents.

The manifesto is politically canny because UK voters appear to be increasingly thinking about parties' stances on animal welfare at election times. Animal sentience was one of the most tweeted about issues of 2017, Theresa May's expressions of support for fox hunting were credited by some politics watchers for costing her an absolute majority at the last general election, and one of the most popular petitions on the gov.uk website as of last week was entitled 'Make "netting" hedgerows to prevent birds from nesting a criminal offence.'

Voters evidently care about this stuff.

That said, aspects of Labour's animal welfare manifesto – such as its proposed ban on the use of 'cages' on farms and a planned end to the badger cull – will likely prove to be more controversial.

Perhaps the party's most eyebrow-raising proposal is to 'phase out animal testing entirely' – not just adhere to the 'three Rs' principle (Replacement, Reduction and Refinement) but, ultimately, end all animal

experimentation full stop. Whether imports of drugs tested on animals would still be allowed is not clear.

Ending animal experimentation would at the very least lead to a significant reduction in biomedical research and development in the UK because the Declaration of Helsinki – an international agreement – requires that certain types of biomedical research be based on animal testing. For vaccines in particular, animal trials are required so as to ascertain the 'systemic response' in an organism.

The end of animal testing would not be brought in overnight, Labour says. Rather, it's for the 'long term' – which could, of course, mean 'never'. Yet the fact remains that Labour is now officially committed to ending animal experimentation.

Aside from the practical issues concerning how medicines (human or veterinary) would be shown to be efficacious in such a scenario, some humanist philosophers would no doubt take issue with any policy that seems to value animals' lives above the lives of people. As Joseph Garner, associate professor of comparative medicine at Stanford (and critic of some traditional elements of animal testing), put it recently (see VR, 13 July, v 185, p 37): 'There are some irreplaceably valuable things [in science] that we can do with animals that we cannot do with humans.'

Has Labour thought this through?

To be fair, Labour also says it wants more 'transparency' around licensing of experiments involving animals, and it is 'concerned' about the legal definition of 'severe' suffering. All fair points.

But ultimately voters expect complete internal logical consistency in parties' manifestos – otherwise they are entitled to conclude that those wishing to govern them are not really serious.

The proposal to end all animal testing – even only as a vague 'long term' aspiration – appears naive.

At very least Labour has a duty to explain what it means by this.

**Josh Loeb**

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