

How the Conservatives can use Brexit to improve animal welfare governance – and their image



Through re-shaping animal welfare policy in light of Brexit, the government has an historic opportunity not only to preserve the UK's position as a [global leader](#) in this area, but also to give the Conservatives a name as a progressive party, writes [Steven McCulloch](#). He explains how the government ought to navigate the matter.

Michael Gove, currently the Minister at the helm of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has been [described](#) as having been instrumental to Vote Leave's success, and his political career will be judged in large part by the success or otherwise of Brexit. But the success of Brexit should not be measured only by its impact on human society: the many sentient nonhumans also have [much to lose](#). It is therefore fitting that at a time of great risk to the welfare of billions of animals in Britain, a man who was instrumental to Brexit has so much responsibility for them.

Yet of the two main parties, it is Labour that is generally considered the more progressive on animal welfare. It was a Labour Government that, after a centuries-long debate, passed the Hunting Act in 2004 to outlaw foxhunting. And it was again a Labour Government that passed the Animal Welfare Act 2006, shifting animal protection policy from a cruelty to a welfare paradigm. In contrast, the Conservative leadership has been criticised for pledging a [free vote](#) on foxhunting in its 2017 general election manifesto, despite [84% of the electorate being opposed to foxhunting](#).

Since the 2017 election, and the resulting loss of 13 seats, the Conservatives have embarked on an active [programme](#) to improve their animal welfare image, with Michael Gove, as the Defra Minister, at the [centre](#) of this activity: the government has pledged to prohibit the use of wild animals in circuses, to ban the sale of ivory, to make CCTV in slaughterhouses mandatory, and to ban plastic microbeads.

Still, with Brexit now posing [great threats](#) to animals in the UK, how can the government best mitigate these threats and capitalise on the opportunities? This question can be considered both in the context of the government's duty to sentient animals, and through the lens of electoral politics. The [Farm Animal Welfare Council](#) has recommended that government act as 'guardian' of animal welfare. It further proposed that all farm animals should have a *life worth living*, and an increasing number should have a *good life*. Such a strong message from a respected government advisory body can be implemented by committing to a mandatory Animal Welfare Impact Assessment, as described below.

In terms of electoral considerations, the opportunity here for the Conservative Party presents itself both for the short and the long political game. The [Animal Welfare \(Sentencing and Recognition of Sentience\) Bill](#) is of absolutely fundamental importance to animal welfare. Clause 1 of the Bill seeks to replace the recognitions and duties of the UK government as a member state of the EU under [Article 13](#) of the Treaty of Lisbon. The Bill recognises animals as sentient beings and confers a duty to pay full regard to animal welfare when formulating and implementing policy.

The government is now faced with the decision of whether to draft the Bill to retain the commitments in the original Article 13, to strengthen them, or to weaken them. The decision it takes on this key question is likely to influence the reputation of the Conservative Party on animal welfare policy for several decades. It is a question of the political long game that the leadership and strategists in the Party should consider carefully.

First, the Animal Welfare Bill should state that governments must '[pay full regard](#)' to animal welfare. Anything that is less than a true equivalent in meaning to 'pay full regard' is a diminution of the government's responsibilities to animal welfare. Secondly, the government must have an accountability mechanism fit for purpose to 'pay full regard' when it is formulating *and* implementing policy. How can the government actually pay full regard to animal welfare, in both the formulation and implementation stages of policy? Ordinarily, government uses impact assessments at the policy *formulation* stage to assess how options under consideration impact human society and the living environment.

The government already conducts [Environmental Impact Assessments](#) to ensure policy does not have negative impacts on the environment. The government should similarly provide for a mandatory [Animal Welfare Impact Assessment](#) into the draft Bill. If the government drops the Animal Welfare Bill altogether and tables an amendment to include Article 13 provisions in the EU Withdrawal Bill, it should likewise commit to Animal Welfare Impact Assessment in that amendment. Animal Welfare Impact Assessment can be conducted in government or in a newly-established external body for a post-Brexit UK, such as an Animal Protection Commission.

The Conservatives have an historic opportunity to outflank the [Labour Party](#) on animal welfare and give themselves a name as a truly progressive party. An Animal Welfare Bill or EU Withdrawal Bill amendment that waters down Article 13 simply won't be sufficient to show that the Conservative Party has genuine animal welfare credentials. Likewise, a provision for the minister to report annually to Parliament, in the Bill or amendment, for instance, simply won't cut the political mustard.

Theresa May, Michael Gove, and the Conservative Party have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to firmly take the [progressive ground](#) on animal welfare policy. If the government makes genuinely progressive policies now, the Conservatives will be able to claim for decades to come that their government introduced a mandatory Animal Welfare Impact Assessment; that it established the Animal Protection Commission; and that their party genuinely protects British sentient animals. Given that both the Prime Minister and Michael Gove spoke of the need to modernise the Conservative Party, what better way to do so than to demonstrate genuinely progressive animal welfare policies during the political turmoil of Brexit?

About the Author



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