
Defending Animal Rights

BY ROBERT GARNER

IN the two decades after the second world war, animal welfare was largely absent from public discourse. Even the burgeoning environmental movement in the 1970s, in so far as it touched upon animals at all, focused upon wild species and, more specifically, the plight of whales. Many animal protection societies still existed but they tended to be dormant, engaging in little active campaigning and relying financially on bequests rather than subscriptions from an active membership. The position of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) was a symbol of this inertia. Founded in 1824, it had by the 1960s become a respected charitable organisation, but it was inactive on most animal welfare issues, concentrating on pet animals and, in particular, the development of its inspectorate which polices existing legislation. The climate was summed up by the Littlewood Committee, set up by the Conservative government in 1962 to look into the case for reforming the law on animal experimentation, which found, in its 1965 report, no evidence of extensive public demands for reform, let alone pressure which might be electorally significant.

Animal rights and animal welfare

The revitalisation of the animal protection movement, which was well under way in Britain by the 1970s, can be measured in terms of new groups, increased membership of older organisations and, as both cause and effect, much greater public interest in animal protection issues.¹ It took on a radical hue. The previously dominant language of animal welfare, whereby animals were to be protected from unnecessary suffering, was challenged by the new language of animal rights or liberation.² Animal rights activists called for an end to, rather than the regulation of, the raising of animals for food and the use of animals for medical research and product testing.

The revitalisation of the animal protection movement has been partly due to the failure of the party system to address increasing public concern about the treatment of animals. No mainstream political party, concerned with building a coalition of support, can take on board the absolutist demands of the animal rights movement and, by itself, this helps to explain the attractiveness of belonging to a movement which can remain morally pure. (It might be argued in passing that the mainstream parties' focus on the traditional ideological battles centring on the economy now fails to encompass the values of a public

increasingly concerned about moral issues and that the growth of the animal rights movement is one reflection of the moral vacuum in public policy discourse.)

A characteristic of the modern animal protection movement has been the growth of grass-roots activism. Traditional animal welfare groups, and in particular the RSPCA, tend to be elitist and cautious, relying on expert opinions and preferring to leave campaigning to their own paid staff. From the 1970s, local groups proliferated and, including college-based ones, about 300 now exist. A significant part in the development of local activism was played by Animal Aid, an animal rights organisation set up in 1977, who encouraged this development, as did the older anti-vivisection societies the National Anti-Vivisection Society and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection. While some local groups have been set up by a national organisation which provides logistical and, more rarely, financial assistance, more often than not they have emerged independently. The members may belong to one or more national organisation, which may seek to use them as a resource for particular campaigns, but most local groups remain autonomous deciding their own campaigning preferences and methods.

The growth of grass-roots activism is a product of the moral urgency engendered by animal rights. The present ways in which animals are treated—as commodities in factory farms and as our testers in laboratories—are regarded as so objectionable that those involved with animal rights actively seek to change society's views about the subject and show impatience with the failure of the political process to recognise the moral imperative. For some, this impatience has boiled over into a willingness to partake in various forms of direct action. The use of direct action dates back to the formation of the Hunt Saboteurs Association in 1963, but is particularly associated with the Animal Liberation Front formed in 1976 and, subsequently, various splinter groups.

The Hunt Saboteurs Association was formed when a number of activists left the League Against Cruel Sports as a result of the new chairman's success in steering the organisation towards less confrontational activities. Now based in Nottingham, it remains extremely active in the field during the hunting season, employing a variety of methods (e.g. diverting the attention of hounds through the use of horns or the masking of the quarry's scent) to disrupt hunts. Hunting was an ideal target for animal rights activists. Not only was it a minority pursuit for which there was little public support, but it was also relatively easy, as an outdoor activity, to disrupt.

By the late 1960s some Hunt Saboteurs activists, disillusioned with the limited impact of non-violent civil disobedience, formed a breakaway faction, which began by damaging the property of hunt participants and supporters before moving on to target research laboratories and factory farms. In 1972, this group renamed itself the Band of Mercy

and four years later became the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). Since then, ALF 'cells' have been responsible for thousands of actions, ranging from small-scale damage inflicted on butchers, meat wholesalers and furriers to laboratory break-ins where equipment may be destroyed, information taken and the animals released. In the 1980s, direct action began to take a different and more dangerous form, with some activists prepared to target politicians and scientists with letter or car bombs and to plant incendiary devices in department stores selling fur. It was claimed in a *Brass Tacks* television programme shown in 1986 that annually since 1982 there had been 2,000 actions causing £6 million worth of damage.

Only a tiny proportion of activists are involved in the more extreme forms of direct action: this type of illegal activity should not be regarded as a characteristic of the animal rights movement. In the early 1990s, the Animal Liberation Front claimed that it had 2,500 members, although the police estimate that the hard-core number was only about 250. Some animal rights organisations, such as Animal Aid, are implacably opposed to it on both moral and tactical grounds, while the League Against Cruel Sports has always sought to distance itself from the Hunt Saboteurs Association. Even amongst direct actionists, there has been a running debate about the efficacy and morality of violence, particularly when it is directed at people rather than property.

Most animal rights activity is of the traditional law-abiding variety characteristic of outsider groups: the mass demonstration; the distribution of campaign literature setting out the animal rights position and often inviting the recipients to write to politicians or other interested parties; and the use of celebrities, such as Joanna Lumley or Paul and Linda McCartney, to promote the cause.

The key divide in the animal protection movement is not between advocates and opponents of direct action but is based around the ideological distinction between rights and welfare. Moderate welfare organisations still exist, of course, but the visibility of animal rights activist organisations has undoubtedly had the effect of radicalising the objectives and strategies of older established groups. A special case is the RSPCA which, as a charitable organisation, has to make provision for an elected ruling council. From the late 1960s, animal rights activists fought, with considerable success, to win seats on the council and, as a consequence, the society began to develop policy positions on most animal protection issues, including a commitment to the abolition of hunting.

The impact of protest

The renewed campaigning edge of the animal protection movement has had a considerable impact. Public opinion, for instance, is now much more favourably inclined towards the objectives of the animal rights movement. This has undoubtedly had a knock-on effect on government

policy but its importance cannot be measured exclusively in these terms. Changing consumer patterns have had an impact on commercial enterprises which use animals. A social stigma is now attached to the wearing of fur; the number of vegetarians has increased markedly, creating a new marketing niche; the demand for 'cruelty free' cosmetic products has played an important role in the decision of many manufacturers to seek alternative testing methods.

Laboratory raids have forced research institutions to increase security: video surveillance and windowless buildings enable the animal rights movement to portray the research industry as anxious to hide its activities from public gaze. Given the secrecy, it is very difficult for animal rights groups to find out exactly what is done in laboratories and a great deal of the material used in anti-vivisection campaigns is gained through laboratory break-ins or undercover work by activists disguised as employees. The possibility of an Animal Liberation Front raid has probably made researchers treat their animals more carefully, in case their activities become subject to greater public scrutiny:

On occasions, protest can have a considerable impact, raising public awareness and sometimes leading to changes in government policy. In 1975, for instance, the *Sunday People* published an article, using information provided by an Animal Liberation Front raid, about beagle dogs being forced to smoke tobacco at the Imperial Chemical Industries laboratories in Cheshire. Such was the public outcry that the Home Secretary announced that dogs would no longer be used in smoking research. In 1985, to give another example, a raid on a laboratory run by the Royal College of Surgeons produced evidence of the maltreatment of monkeys (including a photograph of an animal with the name 'crap' tattooed on its forehead). This, and the subsequent conviction of the College for cruelty, was an enormous propaganda coup for the animal rights movement.

Cases like those mentioned above, together with incessant and wider anti-vivisection campaigns, contributed to the Conservative government's reform of the law on animal experimentation in the mid-1980s. The legislation provided for the creation of an Animal Procedures Committee, within the Home Office, which reviews its operation. Consisting of representatives from industry, academia and the animal protection community, it receives 'regular reports of campaigns mounted by anti-vivisection groups, together with copies of reports prepared by these groups about particular aspects of research'.³ Information drawn to the attention of the Animal Procedures Committee can lead to significant action being taken.

One case in 1990 involved an 89-year-old researcher at the Medical Research Council's Institute for Medical Research. An undercover operation by activists produced evidence that he caused animals to suffer through, among other things, the incorrect application of anaesthetics. The publicity generated resulted in severe embarrassment for

the government which subsequently acted to revoke the researcher's licence and initiated stricter rules for those over retirement age.

Campaigns by animal rights activists in the 1990s have also brought to the Committee's attention cases of illegal animal abuse at a number of animal supply and contract research establishments. Home Office investigations resulted in severe reprimands for these companies, the revoking of some licenses and compulsory training for staff. While the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, primarily responsible for the campaigns, argued that stronger action was necessary, it did have its first meeting with Home Office officials as a result of these cases. Furthermore, the companies 'have been deeply wounded by the whole affair, receiving widespread negative media coverage and losing business from a number of their client companies'.⁴

Protest against hunting has also had an impact. The disruption caused by Hunt Saboteurs Association activists has proved to be newsworthy and, coupled with the gathering of evidence revealing the suffering inflicted on the quarry, this has been crucial in raising public awareness of the issue. Public opinion has been against hunting for many years and this opposition has hardened. Gallup polls between 1972 and 1987, for instance, revealed that opposition to fox hunting had increased from 52% to 68%.⁵

The effectiveness of the campaign against hunting is reflected in the reputation the League Against Cruel Sports has among MPs. An Access opinion poll in 1994 revealed that 73% of MPs knew the League very well or fairly well, while over half had very favourable or favourable impressions of it.⁶ An increasing number of MPs are prepared to support anti-hunting Private Members' Bills in the Commons. In the latest example, a bill introduced by the Labour backbencher Michael Foster in November 1997 (fulfilling Labour's manifesto promise of a free vote, which led to a £1 million donation from the International Fund for Animal Welfare) provoked high-profile campaigns by the animal protection movement and the hunting community. The bill received a massive 260-vote majority at second reading (this followed party lines, with 99% of Labour MPs for, 94% of Conservatives against), but it subsequently ran out of time as a result of filibustering by its opponents.

Labour's general antipathy to hunting undoubtedly reflects a perception that it is the preserve of wealthy rural people; one might not expect much sympathy from a party steeped in the urban working class. This provides an interesting contrast with the first animal welfare campaigns in the nineteenth century which focused on middle-class efforts to outlaw working-class urban practices such as bear baiting and cock fighting.⁷

The impact of anti-hunting campaigns has also been felt outside of the conventional political system. Hunt 'sabbing' undoubtedly enables some animals to elude capture. The League Against Cruel Sports now

owns about 2,000 acres of land in 30 separate sites in the West Country, strategically placed to hinder deer hunting. Not only does this prevent some animals from being killed by hunters, it also can lead to extensive publicity whenever a hunt trespasses on the land. In addition, the League provides legal assistance to those who have been affected by a hunt through the killing of a family pet or the destruction of private property.

Even more important has been the successful campaign to persuade the National Trust to ban deer hunting on its land. This decision, confirmed in April 1997, severely restricts most of the West Country deer hunts and puts their future in doubt. It was followed, in November 1997, by a similar decision from the Forestry Commission which owns land used for hunting in the West Country and the New Forest. For several years, so-called 'Hunt Monitors' from the League have been collecting footage from meets of the New Forest Buck Hounds. Some of this—film showing hounds attacking a live deer, hunters standing on a buck's neck and of hunters pushing the head of a buck under water before it was shot—was influential in the Forestry Commission's decision.

Another important impact of animal rights protest has been the reaction it has provoked from the movement's adversaries. Agribusiness interests often disguise the grim realities of factory farming and proclaim their concern for animal welfare in their sales promotion. The animal research community—including universities and the pharmaceutical industry—has also had to change its tactics. Rather than focusing on traditional lobbying, it now seeks to challenge the animal rights movement in the public arena. Organisations such as the Research Defence Society and the Animals in Medical Research Information Council now produce glossy information packs countering claims that their work is both immoral and ineffective. This battle is also fought in the classroom, where emotive anti-vivisection messages are now countered by heart-tugging cases of sick children kept alive by drugs developed and tested on animals.

Hunters have been organised for many years, the British Field Sports Society, formed in 1930. Faced with increasing public opposition to hunting and the election of a seemingly unsympathetic Labour government in 1997, it has sought to mobilise rural support for hunting. It played a leading role in the creation of the so-called Countryside Alliance which organised two major demonstrations in London. The second of these, on 1 March 1998, attracted an estimated quarter of a million people. While supposedly concerned with a whole range of rural issues—such as farming, the right to roam, the development of the green belt and the state of the rural infrastructure—opposition to Foster's anti-hunting bill was the primary objective.

The counter-mobilisation of agribusiness, the animal research community and hunting has probably reduced the effectiveness of animal

rights campaigns. The publicity given to the Countryside Alliance demonstration, for instance, has made it less likely that the Labour government will introduce its own measure to abolish hunting. What the counter-mobilisation does reveal, however, is a recognition by vested interests that the politicisation of animal welfare issues threatens their ideological hegemony and their privileged position within decision-making arenas. Indeed, the animal protection movement (including both welfare and rights factions) has gradually become a valid spokesman for a legitimate set of interests, involving consultation, negotiation, formal recognition and inclusion.⁸ Many MPs, who receive more mail from their constituents on animal issues than on almost any other subject, take the movement as an important player in the pressure group world. More significant is the greater access now accorded to animal protection lobbyists by the government, an access regularised by animal welfare participation on the Farm Animal Welfare Council (Ministry of Agriculture) and the Animal Procedures Committee (Home Office).

Surprisingly, perhaps, there is little evidence that even the most extreme forms of direct action have alienated public opinion or politicians. The campaign against fur in the 1980s, for instance, did not seem to be greatly damaged by incendiary devices in department stores. The tabloid press has generally found material revealing animal abuses more newsworthy than the methods by which it was obtained. It can also be argued that representation of the Animal Liberation Front activist as a dangerous urban terrorist has provided a much harder image for an issue which was once regarded as the preserve of eccentric old ladies. There are still widespread reservations about the objectives of the animal rights movement, but it is harder to ridicule it. An important caveat is that, so far, no innocent member of the public has been killed as a result of animal activism. This outcome, sometimes owing more to luck than judgement, has undoubtedly prevented a more hostile public reaction.

The limitations of protest

A key goal of protest, and the purpose of seeking access to decision-makers, is to influence public policy. From an animal rights perspective, this is the weak link in the chain. Since 1979, all of the major parties have included animal welfare commitments in their manifestos. However, these have rarely satisfied any but the most moderate animal welfare advocates, and even these limited concessions usually have a very low priority. As far as animal welfare has troubled decision-makers, it has traditionally, with the notable exception of hunting, been regarded as a cross-party issue. By and large, the policy commitments of the two main parties, and their actions when in government, have not differed much. There was cross-party support for the 1968 legislation on farm animal welfare, while both Labour and Conservative committed themselves in the 1980s to reform the law on animal

experimentation. The Conservative government's eventual bill was not opposed by the Labour front-bench, nor by most Labour MPs.

As we saw, Labour has always been much more antagonistic towards hunting than the Conservatives and it is also true that the most committed supporters of animal welfare reform in the Commons also tend to come from the Labour benches. With the party's large majority after the 1997 election, the prospect of legislative progress looked bright. Successful legislative initiatives in farm and laboratory animal welfare are almost always executive-inspired, however, and none of the Labour MPs who have shown a past interest in animal welfare are in senior positions in the government. As a consequence, there is considerable doubt whether the government will introduce a bill to ban hunting—especially since the strength of opposition to such a measure was revealed—let alone take steps to improve the welfare of farm and laboratory animals significantly.

A number of the Labour MPs known for their interest in animal welfare are on the left and have little influence on the agenda of New Labour. The link between left-wing Labour and animal welfare is no coincidence. The representation of minority causes was reflected in much of the left's strategy in local government during the first half of the 1980s, particularly in London where a number of boroughs (such as Lambeth and Islington) adopted 'animal charters'.

It is questionable, anyway, how far elected politicians can alter the direction of long-standing and insulated policy communities within which those with vested interests in the use of animals are influential. The research community and pharmaceutical industry are an important influence on government policy on animal research. Likewise, the relationship between the National Farmers Union and the Ministry of Agriculture is usually regarded as the classic example of a closed policy-making network which excludes those (such as environmentalists, consumers and animal advocates) who challenge intensive agriculture.⁹

There are signs that the privileged position of these interests has begun to decline. Evidence may be legislative reforms. The passage of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act in 1986 has already been noted. In terms of farm animal welfare, the findings of a governmental committee in 1965 (the Brambell Report) led, in 1968, to a law which, for the first time, specifically protected farm animals from unnecessary suffering and established the Farm Animal Welfare Council, a committee, with representation from the animal protection community, which advises the Ministry of Agriculture on welfare matters. Moreover, it empowers the Secretary of State for Agriculture to make regulations for the welfare of farm animals, and most of the animal protection movement's successes in this area—such as the abolition of the veal crate or sow stalls and tethers—have come through this route.

While they should not be belittled, the improvements in farm and laboratory animal welfare that have occurred do look suspiciously like

managed concessions. Few have seriously damaged agribusiness or research interests: no specific scientific procedures are outlawed and animal husbandry is still dominated by factory farming. Nevertheless, the need for government to demonstrate an interest in animal welfare, however superficial, is by itself an indication of the politicisation of the issue in recent years brought about largely by animal rights protest.

Recruiting activists

The difficulties of persuading decision-makers to adopt an animal rights agenda are acute. One only has to compare the feverish approach adopted by recent governments in the face of the BSE ('mad cow') crisis, where human interests were at stake, with the rather supine attitude to the controversy about the export of live calves and sheep. The recruitment of animal rights activists would also seem to be disadvantaged by the nature of the cause. Despite the growth of the animal rights movement over recent years, membership remains very small compared to animal welfare and wildlife conservation organisations (the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the World Wide Fund for Nature have 770,000 and 124,000 members). In terms of finance, the difference is as great.

That the animal rights movement has prospered in recent years, despite recruitment problems, is the result of various compensatory devices. There are many examples of individuals prepared to pay the costs, as well as playing a crucial role in launching organisations and keeping them going. Animal Aid was set up in the house of a Kent housewife; LYNX, the anti-fur group, was almost entirely the responsibility of Mark Glover who paid a heavy financial cost when his organisation was successfully sued by a furrier; the International Fund for Animal Welfare is inextricably linked with Bryan Davies.

It remains the case that a fair number of people have been recruited by animal rights organisations and a proportion of them are prepared to protest actively against the exploitation of animals. This can involve considerable costs in time and money, as well as emotional pain for those who have to confront the often grim reality of animal exploitation. At the extremes, the cost can be a lengthy prison sentence. An exploration of the motives of such individuals reveals that animal rights ideology performs a useful recruitment and mobilisation function. The goal of animal rights and the identity activists gain through belonging to a movement espousing it are undoubtedly linked. The ideology of animal rights is also central to organisational maintenance, uniting activists and separating them from others. The development of such an exclusive collective identity is important for movements with no common geographical, social or occupational base. The 'them' becomes the 'sadistic' scientist and the 'money-grabbing' farmer common in animal rights literature but can also include those members of the public who refuse to accept the ideology.

This collective identity can, however, be dysfunctional for the achievement of movement goals. It is difficult enough to generate concerted opposition to abuses of factory farming or animal research, let alone concerted demands for a complete prohibition of raising animals for food and the use of animals for medical research. There are, on the other hand, welfare goals—such as the prohibition of particular practices or the tightening up of enforcement—which have potential public support and therefore a greater likelihood of acceptance by decision-makers. The ability of reformist national groups to pursue their more moderate goals successfully can be hindered by the organisational need of animal rights groups to maintain an uncompromising position, since any dilution of that reduces their exclusiveness.

The literature of the animal rights movement is hard-hitting, condemning those directly concerned but also, by default, the politicians who allow it and the public who accept it. There is a tendency to pillory humans for unnecessarily causing animal exploitation. Anti-vivisectionists regularly argue that animal research is only necessary because of the need to cure diseases caused by easily avoidable human life-styles—poor diet, smoking and drinking. Activists often leave themselves open to the charge of being ‘people haters’. There have also been elements of sexism in some campaigns (the poster labelling the fur wearer a ‘rich bitch’ was not designed to please feminists, nor were the female models in the ‘I’d rather go naked than wear fur’ campaign). Such strategies may be useful recruiting and fund-raising devices since they provide the moral shocks which motivate activists and help set them apart. They may also make it more difficult to generate a dialogue with decision-makers and build a coalition of public support behind achievable objectives.

The dysfunctional role sometimes performed by animal rights campaigns, should not be exaggerated: they are tendencies, the worse-case scenarios of what can happen. Some activists, of course, are more pragmatic than others. However, the movement does face a severe problem because of its non-human focus, and alliances with other social movements for specific short-term ends are essential. There are many opportunities. Factory farming, for instance, has environmental and public health implications, while there is a strong case against the reliability of animal experimentation which puts it at odds with consumer and public health interests. The benefits of a broad and all-inclusive strategy were clearly seen in the campaign against live exports. Although animal rights activists were centrally involved in the Colchester campaign, the language of animal rights was conspicuous by its absence. Indeed, a large poster outside a pub read ‘You Don’t Have to Stop Eating Meat to Care—Ban Live Exports’. Moreover, some of the participants did not see animal welfare as the major issue at stake and few saw it as the only one. The campaign also drew in those concerned about local democracy, civil liberties and police powers.

Conclusion

Over the past twenty years or so, the animal protection movement has made considerable progress. The institutional exploitation of animals — on factory farms and in laboratories — has become an important political issue. Many animal protection organisations, including some which would regard themselves as animal rights groups, have become recognised by decision-makers as speakers for a legitimate set of interests. In addition, some public policy goals, albeit of a moderate nature, have been achieved. Much of the credit for this progress must be accorded to the reorientation of the movement, which has produced a harder campaigning edge and a greater willingness to engage in grass-roots activism.

It has also been argued, however, that the animal protection movement faces severe political and organisational problems. In the first place, vested interests stand to lose a great deal as a result of extensive animal welfare reforms, let alone the more far-reaching objectives of animal rights. Animal exploitation is central to many important public policy areas, in particular food and health policy. As a result, established government-centred policy networks, within which vested interests are extremely influential, have evolved. There is evidence that the political and social influence of agribusiness, pharmaceutical and scientific interests has begun to wane, and public protest has played no small role in this. It is doubtful, however, that this marks a decisive shift towards an alternative policy paradigm which takes much greater account of the interests of animals. A more persuasive explanation is that it represents a spoiling tactic by existing power structures to co-opt the moderate wing of the animal protection movement and to satisfy public pressure for reform, thereby avoiding the need for more far-reaching change in the future.

It is a truism that a public protest movement is strengthened by unity and an ability to forge alliances with other causes. The animal rights movement has problems on both counts. Animal rights is unique for the altruism required of its adherents, an altruism which limits its ability to attract widespread public support. Moreover, the process by which individuals are recruited into the animal rights movement and mobilised to act appears to be related to the exclusivity that membership provides. This, in turn, tends to produce an unwillingness to build bridges with other social movements, even when such coalition building increases the prospects of achieving particular objectives. There are, nevertheless, great potential benefits to be had in the forging of alliances between animal rights advocates and environmentalists, consumer groups and public health interests.

1 For this and other matters discussed here see R. Garner, *Animals, Politics and Morality* (Manchester University Press, 1993) and *Political Animals: Animal Protection Politics in Britain and the United States* (Macmillan, 1998).

- 2 The best known academic exponent of animal rights is T. Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Routledge, 1984), while P. Singer, *Animal Liberation* (Cape, 2e, 1990) provides a utilitarian challenge to animal welfare.
- 3 *Report of the Animal Procedures Committee for 1994*, p. 5.
- 4 British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, *Campaign Report*, Autumn 1993.
- 5 'Hunting and Public Opinion', League Against Cruel Sports leaflet.
- 6 *Blood Sports, Lobby Groups and the Criminal Justice Bill: A Survey of MPs* (Access Opinion Limited, 1994).
- 7 H. Ritvo, *The Animal Estate* (Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 8 W. Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Dorsey Press, 1975), p. 28.
- 9 See M. Smith, *The Politics of Agricultural Support in Britain: The Development of the Agricultural Policy Community* (Dartmouth, 1990).