

When Gordon Brown sought to define what it is to be British, what unifies us, what we can be proud of as a nation, he might have mentioned a love of animals and concern for their welfare. This does not make the majority animal rights activists, nor does it require that they all damn fox-hunting. Urban and rural Britain may divide on some questions where the latter thinks the other overly sentimental, but such differences only underline the central point: that the British as a whole care deeply about what happens to animals both wild and domesticated. That said, an act passed in 1911 cannot today represent the views of modern Britain on this subject, any more than it could on any other.

While not an issue to rank with globalisation, poverty and the scourge of HIV/AIDS and malaria, nevertheless it is right that there should now be change. For, as Eric Martlew, chair of the All-Party Group on Animal Welfare says, 'the existing legislation is a mess and the world has moved on since the 1911 Act'.

He compares the Animal Welfare Bill to the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 that brought together health and safety aspects of the various Factory Acts, the Office,

Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963, and so forth: it too was an enabling Act. This aspect remains perhaps the only controversial aspect of the bill. The case, of course, is that animal welfare has already been less well served by the protection afforded by legislation than it might have been. Eric Martlew points to the regulation of the sale of animals over the internet, something that didn't exist ten years ago, that will have to be addressed through the enabling provisions of the bill. Already the government intends to introduce a code of practice on tethering in 2007.

The bill will reduce the amount of unnecessary suffering and create a new climate for animal welfare. But for some it does not go far enough. The government has not taken a stance on tail docking, but there will be a free vote on this in parliament and Eric is convinced that tail docking will be banned by the House: and is looking forward to seeing a boxer with a tail for the first time.

The government has also refused to ban wild animals in circuses, but believes that the welfare provisions of the bill will prevent the keeping of wild animals. There will no doubt be an amendment to the bill, 'and we will have to see', he says.

Roderick Crawford is editor of Parliamentary Brief.

After
95 years
it's time
to sort out
this mess
in animal
welfare