Time to ban non-stun halal & kosher meat

Religion is not the issue. The method of slaughter is what makes people feel uncomfortable

Introduction

Recent revelations in the press have revealed that Britain’s major supermarkets and restaurant chains are selling halal meat without labelling it as such. Reports suggest that as much as 70% of New Zealand lamb sold in the UK is from halal abattoirs.  

Animal rights and Muslim and Jewish groups have called for better labelling, to ensure that halal and kosher meat are identified as such, but David Cameron has ruled out labelling meat with its method of slaughter.

A conscious death

However, the emphasis on religion is somewhat missing the point, since the bigger issue here, and the reason for the public outcry, is the method of slaughter itself.

During some halal and Shechita (kosher) slaughter, animals are not stunned before their throats are slit; they are still conscious. This means a slow and agonising death.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council, the Humane Slaughter Association and the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe all call the technique “cruel”.  

The EU

Under European law, animals have to be unconscious before killing.  However, slaughter according to religious practices circumvents this law. As a result, millions of animals have been killed without being ‘pre-stunned’, to facilitate compliance with all faiths.

A report by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in 2003 concluded that the level of restraint for the slaughter of conscious animals without pre-stunning was far greater and that animals suffer “very significant pain and distress”.

The report urged the Government to repeal the exemption for religious communities.  

The numbers

Not all halal and Shechita slaughter involves conscious butchery. In September 2011, the Food Standards Agency Animal Welfare survey reported that a significant proportion of cattle and calves receive pre- or post-slaughter stunning, suggesting that stunning itself is not completely at odds with religious practice.

Figure 1 (next page) shows the FSA's figures for a single week.

As the reader will note, a huge number of animals are slaughtered, so a large number suffer the distress of non-stun slaughter.

Based on the FSA’s figures, we estimate that the total animals dying in this way in a year amounts to:

- 108,628 cattle and calves
- 1,548,560 sheep and goats
- 33,445,568 poultry

This amounts to more than 35m animals a year.

Other countries

In February 2014, after years of campaigning by welfare groups, The Danish Government banned the religious slaughter of animals.  

“[The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated.]”

Gandhi

Slaughter without pre-stunning is also illegal in Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Sweden and Liechtenstein, while Latvia, Finland, Estonia and others require stunning immediately post-cut. There are calls for the UK to do the same.
There are several hundred halal- and kosher-compliant slaughterhouses in Britain and the Government should take steps to compel these abattoirs to end the practice, by enforcing pre-slaughter stunning for all animals.

However, since retailers could source this meat from overseas where we have no control over welfare standards, the ultimate legislation, therefore, would be a complete ban on the sale of non-stun halal and kosher meat in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

A compassionate society

Britain and its people are progressive and compassionate and recognising that relaxing animal welfare standards for the sake of cost, operational simplicity or religion is retrograde.

Some Muslim groups claim that focussing on religious slaughter is the right wing of British politics attacking Islam. Indeed an outright ban on all halal meat (stunned and non-stunned) could be perceived in that way.

However, the Muslim think tank, the Quilliam Foundation, set up to challenge extremism, says, “all halal meat in the UK should be pre-stunned.”

Labelling

While opposed to pre-stunning, Jewish groups have long been in favour of labelling food as halal or kosher. Shechita UK’s chairman Henry Grunwald and Dr Shuja Shafi, Deputy General Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, wrote a joint letter to the Daily Telegraph on 8th May stating that “comprehensive labelling should be supported by faith communities and animal welfare groups alike,” saying it would offer consumers “genuine choice”.

Better labelling would certainly improve consumer choice, but would do nothing to improve welfare standards for those animals selected for non-stun religious slaughter.

The only way to progress and to meet the welfare requirements of the animals in our charge is to remove cruel practices altogether.

The argument isn’t about choice; it’s about development and respect.

A strong move

A ban on the sale of non-stun kosher and halal meat would be a strong move, but a popular one amongst the British public, who, in the main, want to be sure that the meat they eat comes from animals treated with the utmost respect before and during slaughter.

References


8. Letters: All meat should be labelled with details of its slaughter The Telegraph 8 May 2014, www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/10814564/All-meat-should-be-labelled-with-details-of-its-slaughter.html

About the Bow Group

Founded in 1951, the Bow Group is the oldest conservative think tank in the UK and exists to publish the research of its members, stimulate policy debate through an events programme and to provide an intellectual home to conservatives.

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