

Prohibiting fur farming

What are human beings? The traditional Judeo-Christian belief, expressed in Genesis 1.26, is that they are the lords of creation. That bit of the Holy Bible tells us God gave mankind dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. It's a nice idea, and was graciously accepted by mankind (which of course includes womankind) for over two thousand years, though it is not known whether the creeping things agreed.

Some in our generation, such as Mr Blair, think themselves wiser than Genesis 1.26. So our Prime Minister (otherwise a devout Bible-reading Christian) has introduced into Parliament a penal measure contradicting it: the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill. This is opposed (surprise, surprise) by the British Fur Trade Association, the Fur Breeders Association of the United Kingdom, and the International Fur Traders Association. The Bill makes it a criminal offence, punishable on summary conviction by a fine not exceeding £20,000, to keep animals solely or primarily for slaughter for the value of their fur or for breeding progeny for such slaughter.

The Bill was given a second reading in the Commons on 15 May. As befits the level of the creeping things concerned, Mr Blair deputed the task of handling it to a lowly Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Elliot Morley. The history of fur farming in the United Kingdom, earnestly maintained Mr Morley, has not been a happy one. It has been dogged (?) by escapes from fur farms resulting in large public sums being spent on eradication. The coyup eradication programme cost £4 million. Attempts to eradicate escaped mink cost £1 million. Mr Morley added that with the associated escapes (he means associated with the escapes) have come damage to the environment, to indigenous wildlife, and to stock and feeding birds.

That is not all. Mr Morley went on to tell a breathless House that concern about how animals are reared and kept in fur farms has been expressed by the Government's very own advisory body, the Farm Animal Welfare Council. There are also, he added, complaints from people who live adjacent to fur farms about smells, nuisance and flies.

I once lived opposite a pig farm in Surrey. I could tell Mr Morley a great deal about the smells, nuisance and flies that issued from that. My family and I suffered agonies, and finally moved away, but it never crossed our minds to demand that pig farming be made a criminal offence in England.

Mr Morley then passed to the moral issue. Mr Blair and his colleagues, forgetting or contradicting Genesis 1.26, believe it is morally wrong to keep animals to slaughter for their fur. Animals should not be destroyed or bred for destruction without a sufficient justification of public benefit. Research shows that the majority of the British public (notoriously sent swooning by little furry animals) share that view.

I interpose to enquire whether Mr Morley has asked the Esquimaux, sorry Inuit, about this. But you don't need to travel to Alaska to know that people of all generations till ours have cheerfully worn animal fur for warmth. They thought it was the sensible thing to do. Out of a thousand examples I think of Gide, travelling not so long ago in Switzerland, attired in what his recent biographer describes as "his new winter wardrobe of fur-lined coat, waterproof boots lined with sheepskin, fur hat etc".

However Mr Morley insisted that fur farming, being distinct from food production, is immoral. He said that if the primary purpose of keeping animals is the production of food, that provides a sufficient public benefit to justify breeding them for slaughter (ask any vegetarian or vegan whether they agree with that). He said nothing about shoe leather. Animals, he assured us, are live creatures. They should not be killed for the sake of it, or just for the business of stripping the skins off their backs - not in the 21st century (do animals check the calendar?). Then came a crushing intervention.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire): The Minister will be aware that because of the current state of the sheepmeat market some sheep are kept specifically for the purpose of producing sheepskin. Will that be banned?

Caught out, Mr Morley did his best for Mr Blair. He said sheep are skinned in the production of wool. Or their skins are a by-product of the slaughter industry. Sheep, he added defiantly, have no bearing on the Bill.

Well there you are. Logic chopping was what it all came to in the end. But the result will be one more addition to the list of penal offences our new rulers impose on people hitherto thought to be blameless good citizens.

Francis Bennion
www.francisbennion.com

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