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comment

Make your vote count



ANYONE WITH A SERIOUS ambition to improve the world doesn't look to politicians to act as the agents of change. Politicians invariably place themselves in opposition to movements for social progress ... until the groundswell for positive action becomes irresistible, at which point they will usually claim the credit. Excuse my cynicism but I've experienced a number of general elections, along with the torrents of syrupy rhetoric and false promises that are their dismal accompaniment.

As you read this, Brown, Cameron and Clegg will be shifting to a higher gear, as will the key players in the regional and smaller national parties. How is a dedicated animal advocate supposed to respond? Animal Aid has always refrained from telling our supporters which party to vote for (you'll go your own way, in any case). In our election guide on pages 12 and 13 we simply attempt to marshal some principal considerations that will aid your judgement.

Labour has been a grave disappointment these past 13 years, with its avid promotion of vivisection, its crackdown on legitimate protest and its tacit support for ever more pernicious developments in factory farming. Against that, it banned fur farming and hunting, came out against a badger cull, and is prepared to recognise the merits of reducing meat consumption. Two of its Defra Ministers, including the Secretary of State

Hilary Benn, are vegetarians. By contrast, the man likely to replace Benn in a Conservative government – Nick Herbert – seems to regard vegetarians as dangerous 'militants' and would immediately order the killing of badgers to pacify a callous and incompetent cattle industry. David Cameron, meanwhile, is itching to wipe the Hunting Act from the statute books. In the positive column, past Conservative governments have banned sow stalls and veal crates. Objectively speaking, however, the Tory record on animal welfare is lousy and I wouldn't bet on an improvement should they win the election. The animal-unfriendly postures adopted by all the main parties' front benches are, to some extent, made more bearable by the pro-animal instincts of some of their backbenchers. The Hunting Act was kept alive and eventually received Royal Assent not because of Blair's Labour government (which came to see the thing as troublesome and wanted it buried) but because of the staunchness of (mainly Labour) backbenchers. All backbenchers regularly have the opportunity to lend their name to parliamentary motions focusing on issues of animal cruelty and exploitation. When we tally up the performance of ordinary MPs in that regard, the Lib Dems come out on top, followed by Labour, with the Tories nowhere to be seen. The Greens might well have their first MP after the coming election in the shape of Caroline Lucas. No other major party leader comes remotely close to Lucas in word or deed when it comes to animal advocacy. But is a vote for the Green Party, in seats that it cannot win, a wasted vote? The same question can be asked of votes for wholly animal-centred parties such as Animals Count and Speak Political? It's a vital question, given what's at stake in post-election Britain. And yet, if the British electorate voted throughout history only for winners, the country would still be governed by Whigs and Tories; there would be no Labour Party, let alone Lib Dems or Greens. It's your choice, your vote, don't waste it.

Andrew Tyler



Dormouse

The common or hazel dormouse is the only British mammal, other than bats, who truly hibernates. When the temperature falls below 15°C, dormice curl up in a nest of leaves and grass and sleep. Their body temperature drops to that of their surroundings and their heart and breathing rate are greatly reduced. They normally hibernate from October to April or May. No surprise then, that their name is derived from the French verb *dormir* – to sleep. When they are not hibernating, these fascinating rodents are largely nocturnal and spend most of their time in shrubs and trees, eating fruit, berries, nuts, flowers and insects. They are about 2 inches long and weigh about 17g – but they can double in weight when preparing to hibernate. They can live for up to five years. Females generally have one litter a year of up to seven babies, born between May and September. At 40 days old, the young are ready for life on their own. Dormice are found mainly in southern England, but are occasionally also found in Wales. Populations have been declining over the past 100 years, largely because of the loss of woodland habitat and changes in management practices. They are now one of Britain's most endangered mammals.