

In Focus: Halal Slaughter and Food Labelling

2014



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There has been a stark growth in UK [public interest on religious slaughter](#) and food labelling, driven to some extent by pervasive and often prejudicial media coverage of halal slaughter methods and political campaigns, by far right parties principally, on the welfare of animals - that is how animals are kept, treated and methods by which they are slaughtered.

The issue that has been a recurrent feature in election campaigns in recent years leading to discussions at the domestic and European levels on the question of introducing pre-stunning of animals as a statutory requirement. [Denmark](#) is among EU Member States which has moved to implement this pre-condition effectively banning methods of slaughter which comply with some Islamic opinions on halal slaughter (that which requires non-stunned meat).

A [House of Lords debate](#) on religious slaughter and animal welfare earlier this year, prompted by a question posed to Government by Lord Trees, heard arguments about the “unnecessary suffering...- caused to a very substantial number of animals by slaughter without stunning”.

Lord Trees [asked](#) whether the British Government would “support measures to label meat appropriately to enable consumers to make informed choices?”

Similarly, the newly elected President of British Veterinary Association, John Blackwell, has [stated](#) that the BVA “would like to see un-stunned slaughter banned in the UK on the grounds of animal welfare. There is scientific evidence which says that animals do feel pain if they are slaughtered without any stunning.”

Important issues which arise from these developments are:

1. How is the UK dealing with the EU directive on animal welfare and religious slaughter and what implications does campaigning on this issue have on the practice of halal slaughter and the availability of halal meat in the UK?
2. Media coverage of religious slaughter
3. The far right and the exploitation of minority religious rights for electoral gain
4. European Parliament elections 2014 and the future of halal

1. How is the UK dealing with the EU directive on animal welfare and religious slaughter and what implications does campaigning on this issue have on the practice of halal slaughter and the availability of halal meat in the UK?

[Implementing Council Regulation \(EC\) 1099/2009 on the Protection of Animals at the Time of Killing](#)

On 1 January 2013, the Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009 on the Protection of Animals at the Time of Killing automatically [came into effect](#) in the UK and all EU member states. The regulation concerned animals to be [spared avoidable pain, distress or suffering](#) during killing and related operations. Exceptions apply to religious slaughter, halal and kosher, but the Regulation allows individual Member States to impose further conditions to safeguard animal welfare through domestic legislation. Denmark has already moved to introduce pre-stunning of all meat effectively banning halal and kosher slaughter methods that are predicate on non-stunned meat.

Denmark has not banned the import of halal or kosher meat, so Muslim and Jewish communities can meet their demand for meat slaughtered according to religious traditions but the cost of imported meat effectively means that these minority groups are discriminated against in the marketplace.

The issue of labelling the method of slaughter on food products is a further dimension to the issue of religious slaughter with animal rights campaigners seeking enforced labelling of non-stunned meat so that consumers are given adequate information about the provenance of meat products and their method of slaughter. Again, religious communities argue that singling out halal and kosher products

for labelling would place a discriminatory and costly burden on smaller communities making products more expensive. Muslim and Jewish communities have called for labelling to be extended to the whole sector, so that consumers are better aware of welfare concerns arising from stunned slaughter and non-stunned slaughter.

A Department for Food and Environmental Rights Agency (DEFRA) Consultation in 2012 found differences of opinion between religious groups and welfare groups. While there was a strong pressure from welfare groups, veterinary interests and sections of the public for a prohibition on all slaughter without stunning, religious community representatives expressed concerns about the way the proposed provisions were redefining halal and kosher slaughter, and, importantly, undermining the right to religious freedom and belief, protected under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights grants. Article 9 states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”

The EU Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015

The European Commission (EC) established the [EU Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015](#) following the adoption of the [Lisbon Treaty](#) in 2009. Accordingly, policies of the Union should have,

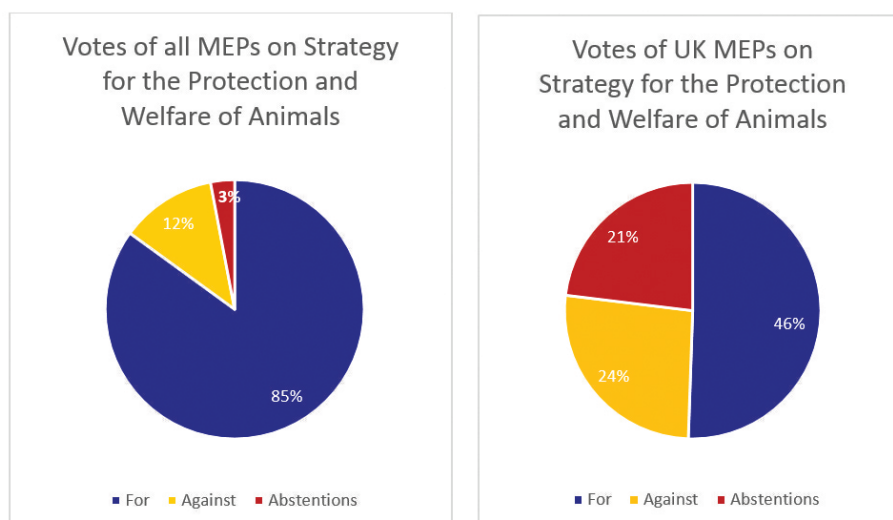
“...full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, while respecting the legislative or administrative provisions and customs of the Member States relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage.”

-Official Journal of the European Union C 115, 09.05.2008

The 4 year Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals was adopted in the form of a Commission Communication to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee.

There is ongoing debate within the European Parliament concerning the strategy for compliance regarding a clear decision on un-stunned slaughter for religious purposes, with EU citizens’ concerns emanating from petitions to the European Parliament.

The debate on the Strategy in the European Parliament on 4 July 2012, calling for [Motion for a Resolution](#) on the European Union Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015, saw a majority of UK MEPs, 33 out of a total 72 voted against the call for a resolution, with 24 for, 9 not voting, 6 absent and 1 abstaining.



The motion overall was passed with future debate within the European Parliament set to clarify the issue.

Concerns raised by religious communities that will continue to have an influence on the way in which the issue is discussed in public and parliamentary debate include the media's portrayal of religious slaughter as 'barbaric' and the conflict arising from rights to religious freedom and animal welfare groups advocating bans on non-stunned slaughter.

2. Media coverage of religious slaughter



Media coverage on the issue of halal meat in the UK has been extensive ranging from a [front page article in the Mail on Sunday](#) about the serving of halal meat in schools, hospitals, pubs and sporting venues, such as Ascot, Twickenham and Wembley, to regular coverage on the preparation of halal meat in abattoirs and how halal now accounts for a growing segment of the UK meat industry.

A Mail on Sunday front page feature article dubbed 'Britain goes Halal (but nobody tells public)' the story claims halal meat is "secretly" served across the country and "being sold to unwitting members of the public". The article takes issue with the prevalence of halal meat in the food chain and the lack of labelling which, it is assumed, would put members of the public off eating meat that is prepared using non-stunning methods.

Further coverage has focused on [graphic illustrations](#) taken from inside abattoirs depicting brutal and bloody images. The use of incendiary language to refer to halal slaughter methods as 'barbaric' and inflicting 'needless suffering' on animals.

Media coverage has tended to focus more on halal meat than on kosher meat, illustrating a clear degree of bias against Muslim communities. It has also displayed a disregard for the extent to which halal meat production actually makes use of pre-stunning in preparing meat.

Moreover, the disproportionate focus on halal meat as a proxy for more [deep seated anti-Muslim prejudices](#) is evident in comparison of the volume of meat involved.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) [published figures](#) in 2012 based on a survey of slaughterhouses showing that 84% of cattle, 81% of sheep and goats, and 88% of poultry was pre-stunned before halal slaughter. The results indicate that the number of animals not stunned prior to slaughter is relatively low, accounting 3% of cattle, 10% of sheep and goats and 4% of poultry.

A New Statesman feature article in 2012 shed light on the exploitation of the halal meat issue to further anti-Muslim prejudice. The matter remains particularly salient for Muslim communities in light of the far right's disingenuous campaigning on animal welfare as a convenient vehicle to further its own entrenched anti-Muslim prejudice.

3. The Far Right and the exploitation of minority religious rights for electoral gain

The British National Party has made no secret of its [proposal to ban religious slaughter](#) with its 2010 general election manifesto including its intention to “ban the burka, ritual slaughter and the building of further mosques in Britain”.

Its populist campaign against halal meat has seen the political party [organise protests against abattoirs](#) preparing halal meat in Sunderland and Skegness, to give two examples.

[Liberty GB](#), another far right party which is contesting seats in the South East region in the 2014 election, refers to instances of ‘halal-only meat in public institutions’ and stated its intention to [‘Oppose the Islamisation of Britain’](#).

Britain First, which has also declared its interest in contesting seats in the 2014 EP election, has [posted material on its website](#) concerning the creation of halal meat counters in supermarkets in the UK and in relation to one such counter at a Tesco store in Blackburn, says, “Consumers who are concerned about animal welfare and the spread of Sharia might care to take note when next deciding where to do their shopping.”

In regards to UKIP, Lord Pearson of Rannoch, former leader of UKIP in a question posed to the Government in 2012 asked “why there is no requirement to label halal meat in shops and restaurants; and what steps they propose to take to inform consumer choice in this area”. It is noteworthy that the labelling requirement is raised in relation to halal meat only.

Moreover, UKIP’s London region MEP, Gerard Batten, in a [draft document](#) he authored some years ago, titled ‘Confidential draft – Dismantling Multiculturalism’, wrote “Repeal the act of parliament that gives exception for ritual slaughter for religious reasons.”

Bringing the issue of religious slaughter and minority rights into election campaigns is evident in other European countries too with the French National Front leader, Marine Le Pen, [using the issue](#) in the 2012 presidential elections. Following the French local elections last month, Le Pen has [vowed to revoke non-pork based menu options](#) from French schools claiming that the religious dietary needs of Muslim and Jewish pupils go against the ethos of France’s secular republic.

As election victories in France and [Hungary](#) have shown, coupled with strong poll showing for UKIP, the far right is expected to be a big winner in the European Parliament elections this year as voter turnout drops and disillusionment with mainstream parties grow. The implications of greater far right representation in the EP and of a possible political grouping being formed in the next assembly, are discussed below.

4. European Parliament elections 2014 and the future of halal

UK Prime Minister David Cameron [recently vowed](#) that: “while I am Prime Minister of this country, halal is safe in Britain”. Speaking at the Muslim News Awards for Excellence ceremony, the PM reiterated a promise made during a visit to Israel in which he vowed to protect kosher slaughter in the UK in much the same words.

The PM’s assurances have been matched with departmental statements to the same effect. Following the remarks of the President of the British Veterinarian Association, and further coverage of halal in last week’s papers, a spokesperson from DEFRA stated:

“Although we would prefer animals to be stunned before slaughter, we respect the rights of Jewish and Muslim communities to eat meat in accordance with their beliefs...the Government has no intention of banning religious slaughter”.

The UK government standpoint is clear, that a total ban is not set for halal or kosher meat. The European Convention on Human Rights permits the free practice and observation of religion but this

has not prevented Denmark from making use of derogated powers under Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009 to introduce a ban on non-stunned slaughter with the Danish Agriculture Minister, Dan Jørgensen, saying “animal rights come before religion”.

Similar restrictions also apply in [Poland](#), Norway, Switzerland and Sweden.

On the issue of food labelling The European Commission is set to study labelling as provided for in the agreement reached on the Food Information for Consumers Regulation.

Members of the public and wider interests group [continue to campaign](#) for the labelling of slaughter method on food products based on the ethical dissemination of information for consumers. Enabling consumers to make informed decisions is certainly to be commended but food labelling requirements that are designed to discriminate against a small section of the meat industry, or religious groups in particular, are to be avoided.

Muslim and Jewish groups have argued that the burden of labelling applied to religious slaughter methods alone effectively discriminates against religious minority groups and places an unfair economic burden on Muslim and Jewish food suppliers.

The preponderance of tendentious commentary on the issue of religious slaughter, due to both negative media coverage and far-right campaigning, as a means of dispersing anti-Muslim sentiment by linking halal meat consumption with the immoral abuse of animals, deters a reasoned and respectable debate on protecting religious rights and protecting the welfare of animals.

The composition of the new European Parliament after the elections on May 22 will have a tremendous impact on the way in which the debate on protecting religious rights and protecting the welfare of animals progresses. With some far right parties already arguing in favour of banning religious slaughter and certain EU Member States enacting laws requiring all meat to be stunned before slaughter, how many far right MEPs take up seats in the EP chamber will no doubt influence the European Parliament’s contribution to this debate.

We are therefore asking parties to pledge to:

Uphold the right of citizens to freedom of religion, as protected under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, including in the provision of food (halal slaughter); in dress (hijab and niqab); and in religious observance (places of worship and circumcision).

But the most effective way of ensuring that halal is safe for the future, is to register to vote before 6 May (the deadline for voter registration) and to turn out on polling day, 22 May, to keep the far right out of the European Parliament.

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