

## Cat and Dog Fur Trade

1 pm

**Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe):** I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, which has aroused widespread concern. An early-day motion calling for a ban on the use of cat and dog fur in Britain was signed by 223 hon. Members from all parties. That number is one of the largest for any issue in this and the previous Parliament. A recent public opinion survey showed that a massive majority supports an outright ban on the use of cat and dog fur and those findings are not necessarily based on widespread recognition of the extent and severity of the fur farms involved.

I acknowledge the input of the leading campaign in this matter—the Nottingham-based Respect for Animals. I shall quote from its research and from work done by undercover investigators employed by the Humane Society of the United States, which is the American equivalent of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I am also grateful for input from Charles Tannock, Member of the European Parliament for London for the initiative that he and others have taken in the European Parliament.

It is estimated that 2 million cats and dogs are slaughtered annually as part of the trade. Typically, around 50 cat or dog skins are used to make one full-length fur coat, although skins are also used for trimming and on coats made of fur from other animals.

Animals are generally kept in a long row of wire cages, like battery chickens, in an open-sided shed. The environmental impact is significant even in well-regulated countries such as Denmark and Finland and even more so in the generally less regulated developing world. Under the World Bank's industrial pollution protection system—IPPS—fur dressing and dyeing rank among the worst five industries for toxic metal pollution. Some products used in the process are banned in the European Union—for example, arsenic, which is a multiple carcinogen. In practice, furs are not biodegradable despite being natural products because the chemicals, including the carcinogens, needed to preserve the coat are not degradable and so add to the issues surrounding landfill sites when coats are discarded.

Fur farms in China and the Philippines were filmed by undercover investigators and showed cats and dogs being treated in ways that the United States Congress report on the subject recently described as gruesome. I shall not go into detail, but animals were filmed in appallingly

cramped conditions and being beaten and skinned alive.

With that background, there is no reasonable doubt that very few British consumers would knowingly wear cat or dog fur. However, the fur is often disguised with fraudulent labelling and there is often no description of fur trimming on cloth coats or it is described as "other fur". Furs are bleached and dyed to make them resemble more expensive fur, and that process also uses carcinogens such as benzene.

The trend to using cat and dog fur is increasing for two reasons. First, the intense trapping of wildlife has greatly reduced the supply of other fur. Secondly, the pressure of cost has pushed more and more of the trade

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to the far east where wages are lower and there is less regulation. The Hong Kong trade and development council noted that most firms in Hong Kong have moved production to the mainland because of its less stringent environmental regulations.

There is a tradition in China of eating cat and, in particular, dog meat and people there are more de-sensitised to the issues involved than those in other countries. The trend to move fur production to China, the Philippines and other east Asian countries increases the likelihood that low-cost cat and dog furs will be used. The current estimate is that around 2 million cats and dogs are being used.

I have several concrete questions. First, does that affect Britain? In 2000, more than 21 metric tonnes of "other fur", which is the category that includes cat and dog fur, was imported into the UK from China and Hong Kong. As the figure is not broken down further, and as we know that there is substantial evasion of labelling, it is difficult to be more precise than that, but we are discussing a substantial block.

Secondly, is this an issue for the European Union or for us? We have had a ruling on that from Pascal Lamy, the relevant Commissioner, who says that it is a matter for subsidiarity—in other words, that each country should decide for itself. That has been borne out by the Italian Parliament's recent decision to ban fur imports.

It is important to consider whether a ban would be legal. Britain, as a major trading nation, has an interest in ensuring that we do not set a bad example by violating international trade agreements and that we support the need for sensible and responsible free trade. World Trade Organisation rules specify that we may not interfere in the way in which a product is produced, but we may ban a particular product. The classic example of that is battery hens: we could ban eggs, but we cannot ban battery hen eggs. In this case we are, however, discussing a specific product that we do not produce in Britain, and there is no question of attempting surreptitiously to protect our home

industry in cat and dog fur because we would be banning an entire product range. In addition, no countries openly admit to the trade. The likelihood of someone bringing an action under the WTO rules is small because they would first have to admit that they conducted the trade.

The United States, which is as sensitive to the issue as we are, has implemented a full ban with stringent regulations covering what happens if one attempts to evade it. We can reasonably ask whether there is a need for a ban given that the British Fur Trade Association has promised not to deal in cat and dog fur. As Baroness Symons noted in another place, some traders are outside the BFTA and are not bound by its rules.

A "Newsnight" investigation showed a reputable member of the fur trade who was prepared systematically to mislabel dog fur imports. We must be careful about accepting the word of a trade association on behalf of its members and all non-members. With the best will in the world, such an association is unable to back up such statements in practice.

I welcome Baroness Symons's comments in another place on 11 December in which she described the trade in domestic dog and cat fur as "abhorrent", and said:

"It is not illegal per se to import cat and dog fur...we are exploring what proportionate and enforceable steps we might take to ban any such imports."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 December 2001; Vol. 629, c. 1234.]

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That is what people who are concerned were anxious to hear. I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to the widespread feelings on this matter and to tell us more.

**1.9 pm**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Nigel Griffiths)** : I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) for securing this Adjournment debate and for his interest in the trade in domestic cat and dog fur. I am of course aware that he is the primary sponsor of early-day motion 11 on the subject.

My noble Friend the Minister for Trade and Investment recently answered an oral question and subsequently wrote to all hon. Members explaining how the Government propose to proceed. As she said, the Government share people's concerns about cruelty to animals overseas and practices in those countries that do not observe the same high standards of animal welfare that we have in the United Kingdom. We shall continue to raise animal welfare standards wherever possible.

Let me be clear that the Government believe that the import and export of and trade in domestic cat and dog fur is abhorrent, and we are exploring whether proportionate and enforceable steps can be taken to discourage such trade, both to and from this country and domestically.

If we are to consider a ban on imports we must satisfy ourselves as to the extent of any imports that are taking place, so our starting point must be the import trade statistics. As I explained to the House last November, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Harry Cohen), our trade statistics do not separately identify cat and dog fur. Any imports of such fur would be classified under the catch-all heading of "other fur"—that is, furs that are not separately classified elsewhere. More recent figures for 2001 suggest a slight upwards trend towards cheaper fur imports. However, that may be as much to do with fashion trends as with anything else. Certainly, at this stage there is not enough evidence to identify the animal composition of such imports.

Over coming months we will examine the trade statistics in more detail to try to determine how much, if any, domestic cat and dog fur is being imported into and exported from the UK. For the classification reasons that I mentioned, that will necessarily take some time as we will need to ascertain the facts behind the trade statistics.

An additional related problem is that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Customs and Excise officers to identify by sight at the point of entry any imports of cat and dog fur separately from other unidentified fur, especially if it is mixed with fur from other animals. As my hon. Friend pointed out, furs can be bleached or dyed to disguise their origins and to simulate more expensive furs. Ultimately, forensic examination of all consignments containing fur would be required to identify any cat and dog fur that may be included in them. That would be disproportionate, given that we are not aware of the scale of any problem, and would be ultra vires where the importation is not illegal per se.

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In addition to a closer study of the trade figures, we will pursue other sources of information and consult more widely among interested parties. We have already spoken to the British Fur Trade Association and to several non-governmental organisations. The BFTA told the Government that none of its members deals in domestic cat or dog fur.

The second problem of identification is that no fur is required to be labelled as cat or dog fur in this country. The only fur for which there is such a legal requirement in the UK is sealskin. Some fur is labelled simply as fur or exotic fur. It is not illegal to do that.

Hon. Members will note that the UK import statistics that I gave to my hon. Friend identify made-up garments containing fur separately from sealskins and those of sheep or lambskin or other such garments containing fur. It is illegal to misrepresent fur as coming from rabbit or wolf, for example, when it is not from those animals. Should that happen, legislation already exists to prevent consumers from being misled. Under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968, it is a criminal offence to apply false or misleading statements to goods by any means.

The United States ban on the import, production and use of cat and dog fur was referred to in the early-day motion. It is clear to the United States authorities that large quantities of cat and dog fur were being imported and mislabelled, which was misleading consumers. We understand that the United States Government took into account a video by the Humane Society of the United States when considering whether to ban the trade in domestic cat and dog fur. The video was made two years ago and focused on trade in the United States. In November 2000, the United States passed legislation banning the import, export, marketing, sale, and use of domestic dog and cat fur. The ban cites mislabelling of imports from China, which could mislead consumers, as the primary reason, and a further justification was that trade in cat and dog fur products is aesthetically abhorrent to United States citizens. That is the first time that aesthetics have been introduced in aid of an import ban.

The Act in the United States takes a blanket approach, requiring any product that contains even the smallest amount of fur to be DNA checked. That is an expensive exercise that requires enforcement personnel to be trained and equipped with state of the art technology, and the accreditation of special laboratories.

**Dr. Palmer** : Does my hon. Friend agree that British consumers probably feel similarly to American consumers, regardless of the quantities involved? The permission to import cat and dog fur is in itself abhorrent. Would he agree that the fur trade is damaged by the suspicion that legitimate furs are being sold that might yet be cat or dog fur?

**Nigel Griffiths** : Everyone knows that the practice is abhorrent. What we are getting to the heart of is the principled reason underlying the United States' ban, which concerned a volume of imports designed to mislead consumers and reflected a terrible scale of animal cruelty in countries from which the animals originated. That contrasts with the difficulty that we

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have had in securing evidence of such practices in the United Kingdom. There is no evidence of anything on the scale of what has been experienced in the United States. Nevertheless, I have undertaken to pursue such evidence and collect it where possible. I realise that my hon. Friend has

heightened awareness of the practice, and for that we are grateful. However, I am concerned—I know that he will share my concern—that legislation applicable to the United States could be difficult to transfer here, for a number of reasons

The situation in the United Kingdom is different. First, in the United States there was, as I have said, clear evidence of an import trade in this type of fur. So far, we have found no similar evidence in imports into the UK. Second, the aim of the United States measure was primarily to control the mislabelling problem. That raises the question whether, if applied to the UK, it would constitute a proportionate response in relation to the amount of trade involved and the availability of other remedies. In the UK we normally consider the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 as sufficient. Clearly the United States has no comparable legislation.

Third, as I am sure we are all aware, the United Kingdom cannot, unlike the United States, act unilaterally in regard to imports and exports with third countries, as this is a matter of exclusive community competence. Any measures that we may consider would therefore have to be discussed first with our European partners, and, for that discussion to be credible, we would first need clear evidence of a problem in this country, which we do not have at present. I know from bilateral meetings with colleagues in Europe and Ministers in each of the European countries that, in advancing any change or improvement in legislation, they look for the evidence. That is why we have undertaken to evaluate any evidence that emerges. Without such evidence, we are not likely to have fruitful dialogue with our colleagues in the European member states.

**Dr. Palmer :** Can my hon. Friend the Minister clarify the application of subsidiarity? I understand that Pascal Lamy has said that the EU would not wish to deal with the matter at a European level but that it was a matter for individual countries. Is that not my hon. Friend's understanding?

**Nigel Griffiths :** My hon. Friend will find that Pascal Lamy did not address imports and exports but internal production and marketing.

As I have said, we need to investigate further the present situation in the United Kingdom when we consider whether to introduce a similar import ban. Furthermore, any regime introduced in this country as a result of our current investigations must have a strong possibility of working in practice and must be proportionate: we must ensure that the resources that we commit to tackling it are in proportion to evidence of abuse. As I said, the United States has clearer evidence than has been supplied to us of widespread abuse and the perpetration of consumer fraud. Thirdly, any regime must be enforceable, an issue that I shall touch on in a minute. Those are reasonable parameters—I see my

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hon. Friend nodding assent—which my noble Friend has outlined, and we shall consider the issue on that basis.

We have noted a newspaper article published just before Christmas stating that the Government will ban the trade in cat and dog fur in the coming months. The House will realise from my comments that we are not yet at a stage when we can make that decision. Our investigations continue, and we must consider action that is enforceable and proportionate. We shall report further in due course.

The newspaper article stated that a fur collar obtained from a large London store was found to contain DNA traces of Canidae. However, that is not conclusive proof that domestic dog fur is being imported into the UK, because Canidae is the Latin term for the canine family, which covers no fewer than 14 genera and 34 species. About half those species are on the lists of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild fauna and flora and therefore need CITES documentation to enter the country. The domestic dog, otherwise known as *canis lupus familiaris*, is only one of those 34 species. Others are the coyote, the dingo, the jackal, the wolf, the fox and the dhole. Some of those species are even culled as pests in other parts of the world.

Having begun our investigations into the trade in domestic cat and dog fur in the UK, we must proceed with the further work being urged on us by my hon. Friend. The Government view it as an emotive matter. I hope that what I have said will reassure him that we take the issue seriously through our investigations. We have looked in some detail at the position in the United States, so we do not lag behind it in the ability to carry out any necessary detection. However, the scale of the problem in the United States appeared, from my hon. Friend's and other comments, to be so horrendous that action was needed, and not just to protect consumers, although I understand that that was the primary reason for introducing the ban in the United States.

I hope that I have also demonstrated that we are aware of the issues surrounding Pascal Lamy's powers and desires and are more than willing, if pan-European action is needed on the basis of evidence that we do not yet have, to enter into a dialogue with the Commission and other countries. Before we consider introducing legislation, it is essential that we have the evidence that does not at present exist. If we or the groups with whom my hon. Friend is in touch can do anything to help to collect that evidence, that would be especially welcome.

I understand that our officials have viewed the video from the United States, which, as I said earlier, applies only to that country, and are in dialogue with colleagues there about the issue. However, as the problem is

not as large in the UK or the European Union, that sort of evidence will be necessary to change minds. Without it, we shall not succeed. I realise that, for consumers, this is an ethical and not an economic issue and that in other cases, such as cosmetics, the Government have left the moral decision to consumers but have ensured that they are fully informed.

The Government hope to make suggestions towards the end of this year on advancing the issue. I assure my hon. Friend that they will write to all hon. Members on the outcome of the investigations.

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My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to all Members of Parliament about early-day motion 11 setting out succinctly some issues on which I have touched in this Adjournment debate. I hope that hon. Members found that information useful, and that what I have said today has reassured them that we take the issue seriously.

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