

Wednesday 8 March 2023

British Veterinary Association Annual London Dinner 2023

President Malcolm Morley speech

As delivered

My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to wish you all a very warm welcome to the British Veterinary Association's annual London Dinner. Thank you for joining us.

First, I'd like to start by saying welcome and thank you to Lord Benyon, Minister for Biosecurity, Marine and Rural Affairs, for joining us as guest speaker this evening. Lord Benyon plays a key role in many of the issues facing our profession. We are extremely grateful to have him with us tonight and we look forward to hearing from him shortly.

However, I recognise that Lord Benyon and I are all that stands between you and your dinner, so I will keep to the point.

As many of you will know, the veterinary profession has been under significant pressure with workforce shortages in all sectors. Hot on the heels of the pandemic, we have faced a well-recognised triple-whammy of more pets, fewer vets and increased workload, followed by a cost-of-living crisis. I am proud of the way we have risen to these challenges.

Nine days ago, the Windsor Framework clarified important veterinary issues in Northern Ireland. The measures in the framework support the veterinary profession to undertake our work and are welcomed by BVA. Nevertheless, a permanent solution for vet medicine is still needed.

I could talk at length about the work that BVA is doing in so many areas, but this evening I would like to cover three key points: the very pressing need for reform of the Veterinary Surgeon's Act; the key role of vets in protecting not only animal health, but also human health and the environment; but first I want to talk about the Kept Animals Bill.

In my role as BVA President, the importance our profession places on championing animal welfare is clear and the Kept Animals Bill will address a wide range of important welfare concerns.

Throughout the UK, we've seen a significant rise in the number of ear-cropped dogs - a brutal mutilation that is being fuelled by fashion, social media and celebrity

culture. This is a shameful and illegal practice that is enabled by legal loopholes. The Kept Animals Bill is a ready-made package of measures that will close those loopholes and tackle this issue.

Import of dogs also poses a public health risk. *Brucella canis* is a serious disease, not seen in the UK until recently, and case numbers are rising rapidly. The UK has now seen transmission to humans, causing lifelong illness, showing that this is a real threat to both the public and veterinary teams. Measures within the bill to prohibit the import of puppies and pregnant bitches would contribute to reducing that risk, particularly alongside much-needed pre-import testing for *Brucella canis*. Now is the time to shut the door on this disease and the Kept Animals Bill will contribute to that.

This Bill also addresses crucial issues like livestock worrying, zoo standards, and licensing for privately kept primates. The potential impact of this Bill on animal welfare is significant and it is important that the package does not get broken down.

Its power and strength, in terms of improving the health and welfare of millions of animals, comes from its breadth and depth, which will be lost if the Bill does not continue in its current format. It is estimated that just five hours of Common's time is needed to complete the report stage. About the time I will be on the train tomorrow to Harrogate. Failing to progress this Bill would be a wasted opportunity to tackle measures which our profession and the public care about most deeply.

There is a deepening sense of frustration among vets that this manifesto commitment is floundering.

Next I will cover veterinary legislation.

Every day, it becomes clearer to me just how inadequate the 1966 Veterinary Surgeon's Act is, for the modern veterinary team. Vets and vet nurses do not work in isolation. We are closely supported by other allied professionals — from hoof trimmers to equine dental technicians. The current act does not recognise the importance of these roles and the need to maintain standards. My presidential theme, 'Investing in People' is not just about investing in vets, but the wider team we lead.

There is also a particularly pressing need to protect the title of Veterinary Nurse. Currently any of you in this room could describe yourselves as a Veterinary Nurse, which is an extraordinary and misleading situation given the expertise and training of registered veterinary nurses, and we should all support efforts to secure protection of the title.

As far as vets are concerned our disciplinary system, outlined within the 1966 act, is backward looking and punitive rather than focusing on forward-looking fitness to

practise. In fact, it may also surprise many of you, and certainly most animal owners that veterinary businesses themselves are largely unregulated. As we embrace new ways of working, such as telemedicine and changing business models, it becomes increasingly clear that some of the regulation must lie within veterinary businesses, rather than individual vets.

And all of this is ultimately about animals and the trust that is given to us by their owners.

I want to be very clear that the current Veterinary Surgeon's Act is not even fit for purpose.

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons have led on this issue and together we are clear about the need for reform of the 1966 Act. We appreciate that replacing it is unlikely to happen in this Parliament, however there are serious implications if this legislation is not reformed, for our professions and the animals we care for. I urge all political parties to include this in their manifestos for the next General Election.

Throughout this speech I have touched on the hard work of veterinary teams and their value to wider society, much of this is embodied in the term One Health. This internationally recognised term describes the significant intersection between animal health, human health and the environment in which we all live.

Nowhere has the contribution of vets been demonstrated more visibly than in our ongoing fight against Avian Influenza, which has put huge strain on the work of government vets and the private vets who support them. Avian Influenza has had huge impacts on animal welfare, the productivity and sustainability of the poultry industry, but is also a potential, serious, concern for human health.

The Covid-19 pandemic had its origins in zoonotic disease, along with many of the other recent or ongoing threats such as HIV, Ebola, Monkey Pox, SARS and of course influenza. Vigilance is key, and animal health is the front line of preventing future pandemics.

In June last year, we all held our breath as concerns were raised about a possible Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in the Brecklands of Norfolk. Thankfully it was not Foot and Mouth, but I can tell you with certainty that the UK would have been under-resourced to handle such an incident alongside Avian Influenza, and the same would apply to other diseases such as African Swine Fever.

The last time this country saw Foot and Mouth, it is estimated to have cost the combined public and private sectors £8.5 billion.

Money invested in animal health and national biosecurity goes so much further by also protecting human health, the environment and the sustainability and productivity of our food sector. Investment in the people and infrastructure of public sector veterinary services is vital for the UK.

During the evening we would also like to hear your thoughts on how we can best support you and collaborate to bring about change in these important areas:

The Kept Animals Bill will tackle some of our most pressing animal welfare concerns. We urge you to do everything you can to bring it back in its current form.

Reform of the Veterinary Surgeon's Act is essential for the future of our profession and veterinary teams. It will also improve animal welfare. We ask you to add this to your election manifestos.

Furthermore, I urge you to embed the concept of One Health into policy development. Investing in government veterinary services is a key pillar of that, and essential for the productivity, resilience and sustainability of the UK.

Thank you