



Dempsey at large

UK and Ireland – different planets

We might as well be on two different planets when we look at the differing approaches to animal welfare. Last week, the Minister for Agriculture held a full-day conference on the subject in Dublin Castle.

I had expected there to be 30 or 40 people in a side room – instead, there were 300 in the main conference hall.

The discussion and contributions were, for such a potentially emotive subject, surprisingly constructive and restrained.

While there was the occasional emotional outburst, for example, about live shipping, there was a lot of plain common sense.


The event was, I suspect, sparked by the stories that got a lot of prominence on the abandonment of horses after the boom years that ended so abruptly in 2009.

Some of these incidents were horrific and the Department, under the new Animal Welfare Act, has sensibly consolidated and added to its powers to seize animals being subjected to cruelty and unnecessary suffering.

The Act would seem to give the full protection of the court system to those charged with an offence. While the inflicting of cruelty and unnecessary suffering on an animal is deeply repugnant to practically all people, there is still

a recognition that animals for farming are produced in an intensely commercial and competitive world.

Broadly, it's probably true that animals do not perform to their potential if they are uncomfortable or in pain, but one of the more interesting brief discussions showed

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the differences in approach to the slaughter of beef animals by the Halal method.

The CEO of ABP, Paul Finnerty, acknowledged that the practice left him uneasy but the practice has caused such a furore to British supermarkets, it would probably be commercially impossible for him to take any other view.

Minister Coveney, on the other hand, identified the issue as one of religious practice and he was not going down the road of telling members of another religion what they could or could not do and that broadly was the

end of the Halal discussion.

The overwhelming commercial point to emerge was that commercial customers of Irish meat are acutely conscious of the importance of getting the animal welfare aspect of their procurement policy right.

Reputations can be shredded in a few hours by the widespread use of social media.

So even if individual participants in the sector have different viewpoints on various practices, we cannot, as a major exporter, step out of line and Bord Bia are right to have animal welfare as an integral part of their Quality Assurance Scheme.

However, the audience was not entirely composed of narrowly focussed activists.

I was intrigued to meet some Cork members of the terrier association.

This countrywide association will voluntarily undertake vermin control measures on farms overrun with problems such as rabbit, mink etc.

Ultimately, nature is a balance. With foxes gone in some areas, natural predators may not exist and an imbalance inevitably occurs. Because so many have some farming roots, Irish people are probably better at recognising the necessary balances that have to be struck compared to many of our more urbanised neighbours.