

Opinion: The Animal Sentience Bill and Animal Nationalism in Post-Brexit Britain

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In this opinion piece, Dr Corey Wrenn addresses new legislation in post-Brexit Britain on non-human animal welfare.

There were many uncertainties with Britain's planned exit from the European Union. Seasonal labour, refugee asylum, immigration, Ireland's border and many other human rights issues busied political pundits and activists. The quiet erosion of animal rights, however, had garnered much less attention in mainstream media channels. The primary rationale behind Brexit was the nationalistic campaign to control Britain's economic relations, and, as non-human animals are legally considered property and speciesism remains a key economic system in both Britain and Europe, the welfare of other-than-humans remained unclear. As such, the new Animal Sentience Bill will be key to the official recognition that non-human animals are more than commodities.

The notion that, in 2021, a bill would be required to acknowledge the basic scientific reality that millions of species other than humans are sentient may seem incredible, but historically the economic commodification of non-humans has rendered them non-persons. To recognise their sentience would be to fundamentally challenge entrenched European economies that rely on the gross (but highly profitable) use and exploitation of vulnerable non-humans.

Britain, newly liberated, is now using its independence as a means to establish itself as a socially and economically advanced nation. In such situations, animals are frequently objectified as symbols of this global superiority. Any resulting welfare legislation is likely to support the myth of 'Great' Britain, but highly unlikely to fundamentally challenge the state's entitlement to non-human bodies, labour or lives. This symbolic exploitation is a phenomenon animal scholars refer to as 'animal nationalism.' Britain can hail itself as especially 'advanced' or 'civilised' with reference to its more 'humane' treatment of the animals it kills by the billion each year.

Welfare laws are essentially a measure to manage public relations and streamline speciesist industries (healthier animals make for a more marketable product). If Britain wishes to become a true global leader in animal welfare, it would do well to cease its economic and political support for speciesism. (Prime Minister) Johnson's 10-step plan for a 'sustainable' future, for instance, makes no mention of animal agriculture (and the European Union continues to deeply subsidise these industries). This is a bizarre oversight given the immense violence exerted on domesticated and free-living animal populations as well as the heavy toll that meat, dairy and egg production enacts on the environment.

Ultimately, nationalistic politics are likely to work against animal liberation given their inherent divisiveness. Perhaps the first step to achieving a species-inclusive society is to challenge the very premise of borders, be they between the nations or between the species, and to celebrate the diversity of life on earth with inclusion and mutual respect.

The original article can be found on Dr Wrenn's [blog](#). This article was featured by the [University of Kent's News Centre](#).