The future is vegan – but only if we change the law

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Ten years ago, my then 14-year-old daughter said she was going vegan. And she showed the whole family a film about farming practices involving the maltreatment of animals. We all agreed that this was not acceptable and very quickly became vegan. Our diet had not been very meat-heavy, so it seemed like a relatively straightforward decision. Before I became vegan, I had not thought much about these issues. My diet involved some fish and meat as well as milk, cheese and eggs, and I bought products such as leather shoes. That was the way I had been brought up. It was just a case of following a 'normal' lifestyle without thinking too much about it.

For many people, the situation will be similar. They consume animal products because they are used to it. The fate of the animals is far removed from most people's minds. But the death toll is staggering. More than a trillion land animals and fish are killed for food every year the world over. In the UK, more than a billion land animals are slaughtered every year, and around two billion fish are killed by UK fleets. The conditions in which many of these animals live and die are mind-numbing. All this is happening although we do not need to exploit animals for food or any other purpose. It is completely superfluous. We can have a healthy diet, and meet all our other needs, without setting out to ill-treat or kill anybody.

The environment is an important factor, too. About 14 to 18 per cent of the emissions that drive climate change can be attributed to animal agriculture. What does that mean for the contribution to climate change of vegans vs meat-eaters? A study published by *Nature Food* in 2023 concluded that the negative dietary impacts of vegans on greenhouse gas emissions are about a quarter of those of high meat-eaters. Levels of about a quarter to half of those of high meat-eaters were found for the negative impact on land use, water use, nutrients in water bodies, and biodiversity. A vegan diet is also good for your purse. According to a study published by *The Lancet Planetary Health* in 2021, in high-income countries sustainable vegan diets reduce food costs by up to one third.

All these facts point to one conclusion: the killing of animals for food, and perhaps their exploitation in general, should be outlawed. If you think that is too radical, and that the decision on veganism should be left to individuals, consider some other cases. Slavery was not abolished because some people stopped buying the cotton produced by slave labour. It was abolished because there was a campaign to change the law. Smoking in pubs did not stop in Britain because some people refrained from it for the benefit of others. It only stopped when it was made illegal. Likewise, exploitation of and cruelty to animals will not stop because some people turn vegan. Stopping it requires a change in the law.

This change in the law could be gradual, and it does not have to be absolute. It is sometimes suggested that, even if we do not intentionally kill any animals, we could still eat meat. This

could be procured from, for example, roadkill or cultured meat processes. I would not want to eat such meat. But perhaps some other people would. The precise scope and timing of changes in legislation would have to be the subject of a debate. At the moment, there is no such debate. Getting it going will be a long process. Adjusting the law to prevent the killing of animals for food, and perhaps their exploitation in general, is currently not on the agenda of any of the major political parties in the UK. Let us make sure that changes.