

Non-stun Slaughter of Animals

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4.30pm

[Jamie Stone](#)

[\(Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross\) \(LD\)](#)

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I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700557 relating to the non-stun slaughter of animals.

As Chair of the Petitions Committee, I always find it encouraging to witness public participation in politics, and this is a good example. It is evident that this petition, which has attracted more than 100,000 signatures, has engaged a very large number of people from all across the country. For that reason, I must very sincerely thank its creator, Mr Martin Osborne, who is in the Public Gallery today with a group of his friends and other supporters.

Mr Osborne created this e-petition because he believes that in a modern society more consideration needs to be given to animal welfare and how livestock is treated and culled. He and his fellow signatories believe that non-stun slaughter is barbaric and should be banned, as some EU nations have done. I had the happy privilege of speaking to him last week, and he made one thing very clear to me: he is an animal lover, and he believes that he lives in a country that shares his desire to reduce suffering at the time of slaughter in so far as it is possible to do so. Put simply, I would suggest that his motivation comes from a place of care.

But what Mr Osborne did not do is create this petition with the desire for it to be co-opted as a mechanism for prejudice and discrimination against religious communities in this country that prepare their food differently from him. I trust Members will bear that in mind while debating the topic. I also had the pleasure of meeting representatives of the Halal Monitoring Committee and Shechita UK, both of which expressed respectful interest in the debate. Again, I trust that everyone speaking today will return that respect.

I turn to the topic at hand. The current rules on slaughter in England are set by the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015, under which all animals must be stunned, rendering them insensible to pain before they are slaughtered. However, as we know, an exemption to those rules allows slaughter without pre-stunning for religious communities.

In recent years, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has expressed concern about the large increase in the number of animals that have been slaughtered without pre-stunning. In 2024, 30.1 million animals were killed in that way—a significant increase from the 25.4 million

in 2022. Of those 30.1 million animals slaughtered without stunning, 27 million were for halal and 3 million were for kosher.

Evidence presented by the RSPCA makes the case for removing the religious exemption on the basis that animals that are not stunned prior to being slaughter suffer

“very significant pain and distress in the period before insensibility supervenes”.

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That is because the neck, cut, sends a stream of sensory information to the brain in the conscious animal, causing intense temporary pain and distress. Only after prolonged blood loss does the animal become unconscious and thus insensitive to the incision. That process can take up to 20 seconds in sheep, 2 minutes in cattle and 2.5 minutes in poultry. As a result, those concerned about animal welfare are calling on the Government to end slaughter without pre-stunning and to ensure that any free trade agreement that the UK signs with other countries excludes the export of non-stunned meat.

If slaughter without pre-stunning is to remain, the RSPCA requests that

“provisions are used in cases where the religious exemption applies only”,

and that we amend the current rules

“to make sure it better protects animal welfare”.

[Rachel Gilmour](#)

[\(Tiverton and Minehead\) \(LD\)](#)

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I am very glad that my hon. Friend has mentioned the issues surrounding this practice so sensitively. I want to begin by saying that my comments are based on animal welfare issues, as reflected by my constituents. Does he agree that this practice is not only outdated but barbaric, and that it inflicts needless suffering on animals? It also does the consumer absolutely no favours, given that heightened distress and panic in the animal at the time of slaughter leads to meat of inferior quality.

[Jamie Stone](#)

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My hon. Friend makes her point with some passion; I will touch on that point in a second.

Such provisions include post-cut stunning for ruminants, minimum-stun parameters for poultry and mandatory slaughter labelling. Conversely, it is crucial that we properly and thoughtfully consider the other side of the debate: namely, the religious communities that require this method of slaughter for halal and kosher practices. Proponents of those practices argue that banning non-stun slaughter would violate their freedoms. The teachings of the Jewish and Muslim religions state that an animal must be fully alive before it is slaughtered. Accordingly, the stunning of an animal before slaughter may be interpreted as not being compliant with such religious teachings.

However, in many religions—including my own, Christianity—there are variations in the interpretation of religious laws. Leaders of more liberal branches may be more open to interpreting religious law in the light of modern customs and welfare standards. However, it has to be said that more orthodox factions may still consider changes to traditional methods as a serious offence.

[David Pinto-Duschinsky](#)
[\(Hendon\) \(Lab\)](#)
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I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the way he is setting out his case, given the sensitivity of this issue. Would he accept—I cannot, unfortunately, speak for the halal rules, but I can speak for the kashrut ones—that there is no school of kosher slaughtering that permits stunning?

[Jamie Stone](#)
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I am prepared to be informed on that point. In my discussions with both the Jewish and Muslim communities, I actually learned a very great deal myself. I found particularly fascinating the fact that the method used is scripture-based, and I think that is important to remember.

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After all that has been said so far, if we thought that the slaughtering of animals according to religious practice went unregulated in this country, we would be very wrong, because there are certain requirements. First, the killing must take place in a slaughterhouse—an abattoir, if people want to call it that—approved by the Food Standards Agency. Secondly, it must be done by someone who has a certificate of competence, known as the COC. Thirdly, and importantly, the slaughter must be done in a way that follows Jewish or Islamic religious practice when intended for consumption by Jewish or Muslim people. Now, this is the gory bit: the animal's throat must be cut by a rapid, uninterrupted movement, with both carotid arteries and jugular veins severed by a knife of sufficient size and sharpness. There is to be no sawing. These measures are required to minimise animal suffering. I am sorry if that is shocking, but I think we need to be quite clear about the practice as it is.

These existing regulations prompt deliberations on both sides of the argument. In the case of animal-welfare advocates, one could suggest that our current laws are already examples of the way religious practices have adapted in accordance with modern ethical standards, and that it is therefore entirely just for these practices to further adhere to society's standards as those continue to strengthen. Conversely, to be balanced about this, proponents of traditional religious practice could argue that the current regulations typify compromises that have already been made between religion and law in a society like ours, which—I think this is crucial to the way we go about doing things in this country—actively supports and protects religious freedom or belief. That is a crucial factor.

As an aside, it is important to note that the petition follows the European Court of Human Rights ruling that a ban on the ritual slaughter of animals without prior stunning does not violate the European convention on human rights. This is because the Court accepts that

“the protection of animal welfare can be linked to...‘public morality’, which constitutes a legitimate aim”

for which the state might justifiably restrict freedom of religion. In this case, the Court accepted that it was consistent with these standards to legislate that animals should be stunned before being ritually slaughtered. As I am sure many of us know, several European countries have already introduced a ban, including Denmark, Slovenia, Sweden, Finland and Norway. However, other fellow neighbours, including France and Germany, still allow for non-stun slaughter on religious grounds.

All of this is to say that this debate requires nuance—careful nuance—and sensibility to all the views in the room, regardless of the beliefs that one holds.

[Andrew Rosindell](#)

[\(Romford\) \(Con\)](#)

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I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he is saying, given the sensitivities around this subject. Hon. Members will understand that fundamentally this country is of Christian heritage. Most of my constituents do not like the idea that an animal should be slaughtered in this way. Does he agree that some things should be done fairly quickly, even if there is not a complete ban straightaway? For instance, the introduction of a mandatory multi-labelling system that included the method of slaughter would allow the public to make better-informed decisions about the

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food they consume and give them freedom of choice. Surely people who do not want to eat meat that has been slaughtered in that way should have the choice. At the moment, there is no choice. Fundamentally, the British people want to be able to decide whether to consume meat from an animal that has been slaughtered in that way.

[Jamie Stone](#)

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From my discussions with the Islamic and Jewish communities, I think that the concept of labelling—if I interpret what the hon. Gentleman said correctly—could be quite acceptable to them, if that would give people choice.

I come from the highlands of Scotland, where, to be honest, the 1715 and 1745 rebellions were based on the religious division between Catholics and Protestants, and where there have been huge arguments even within the Church of Scotland in relation to the Free Church. I am therefore very clear that tolerance among religions is crucial to a civilised society.

I have probably said enough. I can see many hon. Members who, I am sure, will make the most interesting contributions, and I look forward to the Minister's. However, I want to end where I began, by thanking Mr Martin Osborne for the sincere way in which he put forward the petition. I also thank those I have spoken with, who have had the patience to explain the halal and the Jewish kosher points of view. I am grateful to have learned a lot over the past few days.

Several hon. Members rose—

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[Peter Dowd](#)

[\(in the Chair\)](#)

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Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. I call Yasmin Qureshi.

4.42pm

[Yasmin Qureshi](#)

[\(Bolton South and Walkden\) \(Lab\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I rise to oppose the petition and the divided narratives that surround it. Let us be clear: non-stun religious slaughter accounts for just 2.9% of all animals killed in the United Kingdom, and 88% of halal meat is already pre-stunned. The remainder is slaughtered in accordance with strict religious guidelines by trained professionals in a regulated setting, with respect for the animal, yet that small percentage is repeatedly singled out in public debate. We have heard religious slaughter described as “barbaric”. MPs such as myself have received emails referring to “Muslim meat” and “dirty men with beards”. That is not the language of animal welfare; it is prejudice—plain and simple.

Although the petition talks about “non-stun slaughter” in general, public focus has almost entirely been on halal. Kosher slaughter uses the same method, but is rarely mentioned. That reveals what many of us have known for some time: this debate is less about animals and more about Muslims.

[Sarah Owen](#)

[\(Luton North\) \(Lab\)](#)

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I draw the House’s attention to the fact that eating meat does mean that an animal has to be killed—that is the gross reality of what we do and what we are talking about. Unfortunately, as has already been mentioned, the context has been taken

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out of this debate. The Food Standards Agency states that 98% of cattle are stunned before slaughter and just 2% are not. Many constituents in Luton North have contacted me to say that any ban will contravene religious freedoms for both Muslim and Jewish communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that both groups care deeply about animal welfare, but are now concerned about their right to eat meat prepared in accordance with their religious beliefs?

[Yasmin Qureshi](#)

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I totally agree, and I will come to those points a little later in my speech.

As I said, for many people the debate has been revealed to be less about animals and more about Muslims. If it is truly about animal welfare, will we be talking about the 44,000-plus welfare breaches occurring in the stun industry; the millions of animals affected by failed stunning, painful procedures and transport death; or the use of CO₂ gassing in 88% of pig slaughter, which is known to cause severe distress and pain? Instead, attention is focused on a religious practice followed by a minority, which has been protected by our laws for many decades. The right to practise one’s faith should not be up for debate, and it should not be undermined by misinformation driven by culture wars.

The practice seems to be: pick a minority practice, label it backward or dangerous, and claim the moral high ground under the banner of animal welfare. But this is not about welfare; it is about control, scapegoating and singling out faith communities for scrutiny that others are not subjected to. Let us be clear: although the petition refers to non-stun slaughter, the debate outside this room has focused almost entirely on halal meat. That is what is dominating the headlines. Again, as I said, kosher slaughter is done in a similar way, so it is great that at least one community is not being picked on over this issue.

What all of this highlights is a double standard. As I mentioned, the real welfare crisis is the over 44,000 animal welfare breaches that happen in a single year; the failed stunning, which affects up to 31% of poultry and leaves animals conscious; the CO₂ gassing of pigs, which causes panic and breathlessness, and is still used on 88% of pigs; the transport deaths, which see over 118,000 chickens die before even reaching the slaughterhouse; and castration, another painful practice, which causes prolonged suffering.

Do hon. Members think that the electric bolts sent into an animal's head—which quite often fail—are somehow painless? They cause immense suffering, yet nobody talks about them. Why do we not talk about them? Because it is easier to attack visible religious practice.

[Afzal Khan](#)

[\(Manchester Rusholme\) \(Lab\)](#)

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Even the British Veterinary Association has suggested a permit system for non-stun allowances—for halal and kosher demands—not a blanket ban. Does my hon. Friend recognise that debates such as this can feed division rather than unity? With religious hate crimes against British Muslims rising by 13% last year alone, and many feeling increasingly marginalised by political discourse, does she agree that we should confront the underlying racism and Islamophobia that too often drives these debates?

[Yasmin Qureshi](#)

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I agree with my hon. Friend and thank him for making that observation.

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Jewish and Islamic traditions around slaughter are grounded in clear rules designed to minimise suffering. These are not casual practices. The animal must be healthy. It must not witness another animal being slaughtered; the slaughter must be done individually, with animals away from one another. The process must be swift and carried out by someone who is trained and accountable. It is not a mechanical process; it is solemn and Islamic. As I am sure those who can talk more about kosher practice would agree, this is about recognising that we are taking the life of a living being, so it must be done with respect. In fact, in Islamic slaughter—I think it is the same in the shechita method—the animal is held, or embraced, so that any stress is reduced.

In Islam, all animals must, in effect, be vegetarian. Basically, Muslims eat only lambs, cows, sheep and chicken, because they are considered to be grass-eating vegetarian animals that do not eat other animals. So this is about eating healthy meat, but it is also about protecting animals. The way they are slaughtered is important, and it is wrong to say that it is somehow barbaric. However, as I said, when I have looked at social media, GB News and newspapers, the whole debate has been, “Oh, barbaric! Let's get rid of halal meat, halal meat, halal meat.” That is almost the mantra that everybody has. Yet, 88% of halal meat is pre-stunned.

I am grateful the Government have taken a sensible approach to this issue. I believe that halal meat and kosher meat should be available in this country, and I am very happy for it to be labelled; it is very important that there should be clear labelling—I do not think anybody has any problem with that—so that people know what they are getting.

Although this has not been mentioned, scientific studies have shown that the Jewish and the Islamic method of slaughter is actually less painful to the animal because it involves a minimum amount of time, whereas gassing animals or putting a bullet through their heads—a lot of times, that actually fails, so it has to be done twice over—is much more painful.

4.51pm

[Iqbal Mohamed](#)

[\(Dewsbury and Batley\) \(Ind\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd.

I am also an animal lover, and it is really important to put that on the record. I think everybody in this room would be happy to be described as an animal lover. However, we are omnivores, and some of us eat meat. As a Muslim, I will only eat meat that has undergone slaughter using the traditional Islamic halal method.

The rhetoric around non-stunned slaughter, and the way this debate is being framed in Parliament today, are deeply concerning not just to me, but to other Members, to organisations and to many of my constituents. I care about animal welfare, which is the supposed topic of the debate, but I am equally disturbed by the undertone—a title dressed as a welfare concern, but sounding like a dog whistle for xenophobia, targeting religious practices, particularly those of Jewish and Muslim communities.

The methods of slaughter we are discussing are long-standing practices already regulated by clear legislation. Previous Governments have ensured that safeguards are in place to protect animal welfare during religious slaughter. So why are we having this conversation again, if not to stigmatise kosher and halal traditions?

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The claim in the petition that non-stun slaughter does not reflect our culture or modern values is not just inaccurate; it is worryingly exclusionary and divisive. It shows a lack of understanding of why these practices exist and how they are monitored.

Let us make this conversation what it should be: about learning and inclusion. As the hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) said, many people may not realise that both halal and kosher slaughter practices are centred around minimising suffering. They require the animal to be alive and healthy at the time of slaughter. Animals must not be shown the implement with which they will be slaughtered. They should not be in the presence of other animals that are being slaughtered. If that is not humane, I do not know what is.

A sharp knife is used to make a swift incision, cutting key arteries and the windpipe, but not the spinal cord, causing rapid unconsciousness and minimal pain. Evidence shows that when done properly—the key word here is “properly”; I am a proponent of halal and kosher slaughter done in the proper way—kosher and halal methods can be as humane as stun slaughter, if not more so. In fact, if we flip the narrative, mistakes in stunning can cause suffering and expose animals to bad welfare in pre-slaughter handling, or cause pain and fear.

We have heard how halal and kosher slaughter are performed. In the UK, the main methods used to stun an animal before slaughter include penetrating captive bolts, which are used on cattle, sheep

and some pigs. A gun fires a metal bolt through the skull into the brain, causing unconsciousness after excruciating pain. In electrical stunning, which is used on sheep, calves and pigs, an electric current is passed through the brain, temporarily rendering the animal unconscious, but not always. Chickens are often stunned before slaughter using an electrical water bath, which involves shackling the birds upside down and passing them through a bath of electrified water. Does that sound humane to anyone in this room? It does not sound humane to me. We have already heard about gas stunning and killing, which is primarily used for pigs and some poultry. Animals are exposed to mixtures of gases, such as carbon dioxide, that cause unconsciousness and eventually death. Each of those stunning methods can lead to the death of the animal, and the eating of a dead animal by Jewish and Muslim believers is not permissible.

This is not a simple “stun good, not-stun bad” issue. It is far more complex and should be centred around good and well-monitored practice. Assuming that there is only one ethical way to slaughter an animal is not science; it is imposition, and it does not reflect the values of a pluralistic society. To claim that halal and kosher practices are outside of “our” culture is a dangerous path—one that risks vilifying communities under the guise of animal welfare.

If we are talking about welfare, let us talk about factory farming. Are the same concerns being raised about that industry, which still allows animals to live in cages, to be mass culled and to suffer through profit-driven systems from birth to death? Despite the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and subsequent legislation, certain intensive farming practices are still legal and widely used. One is enriched cages for hens. Although barren battery cages

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were banned in 2012, around 28% of the UK’s laying hens are still kept in enriched cages, which severely restrict natural behaviours. Another is farrowing crates for sows, which prevent mother pigs from turning around or interacting properly with their piglets.

[Mr Adnan Hussain](#)

[\(Blackburn\) \(Ind\)](#)

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The hon. Member is putting forward his case passionately. Does he agree that this debate is not about animal welfare? We once saw Nazi Germany put into law policies similar to those we are discussing. The justification then, too, was animal welfare, but in context it was a thin pretext for antisemitism. That ban was part of a broader programme to marginalise and dehumanise Jewish people by stripping away their rights and religious freedoms. Does the hon. Member agree that such a ban threatens to have a similar effect on Britain’s Muslim and Jewish communities?

[Iqbal Mohamed](#)

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We in this place must drive our society to move away from divisive rhetoric, hurtful behaviours, racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia. Any attempts to bring them to the fore should be challenged, and communities should be protected.

Another practice that is allowed is the use of individual calf pens. Young calves can be kept in isolation for weeks, which can cause stress and developmental issues. All the practices I have mentioned are legal under current UK law, but are increasingly seen as inhumane by animal welfare advocates. Many of my constituents in Dewsbury and Batley have written to me in support of the

RSPCA's campaign to end cages that restrict an animal's movement for life. Why are we not debating that?

These are not questions of belief; these are clear, systemic welfare violations, undisputed and urgent. Yet, here we are instead scrutinising faith-based practices rooted in ethics and compassion. This debate must not become a platform to demonise or criminalise. If we truly care about welfare, we must look at the bigger picture: intensive farming, mass culling, corporate cruelty, the prevalence of illegal fox hunting, and the importing and selling of fur products, which is still permitted. That is where the real, meaningful change lies.

5.00pm

[David Taylor](#)

[\(Hemel Hempstead\) \(Lab\)](#)

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I start by acknowledging that this is an extremely sensitive debate. We have heard some really thoughtful contributions, for which I am grateful to Members, and I really hope that the debate continues in that tone.

Constituents on all sides of this debate have emailed me; I have heard from the local mosque, but also from a number of people who are concerned primarily by animal welfare. I am grateful that the tone of those emails has been appropriate, and not of the sort that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) rightly mentioned. I want in particular to acknowledge the point that she made that the vast majority of meat in this country is non-halal and non-kosher and that, too often, the welfare standards of that meat are poor.

As a lifelong RSPCA supporter, I am strongly of the opinion that our Government should take further measures—I believe that they are—to ensure that the majority of meat consumed in this country is produced to the highest possible standards of animal welfare. One issue that has not been raised is the increasing number

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of people getting meat from out of home—from a takeaway, rather than a supermarket. Outside of the debate on halal and kosher meat, I know that the Government are looking at that issue. We often do not know the welfare standards of the meat that we buy from a takeaway, which is a problem when more and more of us—I include myself in that—are eating takeaway food. When we buy from a supermarket, we can look for the Red Tractor or free range mark. I think that is an area that needs to be looked at. I also recognise what others have said about how, unfortunately, a lot of people who raise this issue do so not because of animal welfare concerns, but from a place of Islamophobia or antisemitism. That is completely unacceptable.

As a supporter of the RSCPA who has donated to it and volunteered with it all my life, I want to highlight one of its recommendations to Members. It suggests the adoption of a permit system for non-stunned meat, to allow the tracking of the number of animals slaughtered without prior stunning. I want the Government to consider whether that might be of merit, just to ensure that the volume and proportion of such meat is appropriate. That is the only contribution that I wish to make to the debate, and I hope that the Minister will consider it.

5.03pm

[Rupert Lowe](#)

[\(Great Yarmouth\) \(Ind\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I accept that this is a very sensitive debate. We all get along fine in Parliament, so I hope that Members will accept what I say as my genuine view.

One of the greatest joys of being a farmer is raising livestock. We see them born, we feed them, we watch them grow and we care for them. When their time comes, we want the end to be swift, calm, dignified and painless. Right now, today, in abattoirs across the country, we are allowing vile practices that would turn the stomach of any decent person, all in the name of religious exemption. There is no bolt to the brain, no stunning, no anaesthetic, but a blade—a deep, crushing cut across the throat. The animal does not die instantly; it thrashes, gasps and panics—it feels everything. It experiences a minute of pure agony while the blood pours from its body. There is no sedation or stunning, just raw terror and suffocation. As a farmer, I would rightly be prosecuted for treating our animals like that, but in the abattoir, it is legal under religious exemption. It is two-tier slaughter.

Instead of an instant, painless death, these poor beings are put through the most unimaginable pain, all in the name of religion. This is not farming; it is torture. The British people have no idea that this is happening, because supermarkets do not label it, restaurants do not mention it and schools do not highlight it, and politicians in these buildings are too terrified to mention it, out of fear of upsetting the religious minorities. I am afraid I do not care—it is about animal welfare.

Millions of Brits are eating halal meat against their will and without their knowledge due to our deceitful labelling system. The two-tier regulatory arbitrage between our abattoirs and halal slaughterhouses means that economic factors foster a more widespread adoption of the cheaper option, which means that halal meat is seeping into the food chain and the consumer is unwittingly eating it.

Column 262WH is located here

[Ayoub Khan](#)

[\(Birmingham Perry Barr\) \(Ind\)](#)

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The hon. Member mentions halal meat. Does he adopt the same position for kosher meat?

[Rupert Lowe](#)

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I do, and I will cover that at the end of my speech.

We are all eating halal meat without knowing it. I find that morally repugnant. We should ban non-stun slaughter, we should ban halal slaughter and we should ban kosher slaughter.

[Naz Shah](#)

[\(Bradford West\) \(Lab\)](#)

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Will the hon. Member clarify what he proposes? Eighty-eight per cent. of halal meat is pre-stunned. Is he just after pre-stunned meat? Is that the crux of his argument?

[Rupert Lowe](#)

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The issue of stunning is complex, as the hon. Member probably knows. The halal stun is a lower voltage than the non-halal stun. As the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) rightly said, chickens are put into an electric bath before they are killed. It is the level of the stun that counts.

Freedom of belief does not mean freedom to cause cruel and brutal pain. When I care for animals, I have the most stringent set of rules to abide by. I am regulated on how I house them, feed them and transport them. There are inspections, paperwork and codes of practice, all to make sure they are treated with dignity.

[Iqbal Mohamed](#)

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Will the hon. Member give way?

[Rupert Lowe](#)

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I am going to finish.

A halal abattoir can brutally butcher an animal alive, and all is fine. Where is the fairness in that? Where is the humanity in that?

This is not a fringe issue. In 2024, an estimated 214.6 million animals were slaughtered for halal meat: 27 million entirely non-stunned and the remainder with some form of weak and ineffectual attempt to ease the animal's pain, often just causing an epileptic fit. It is state-endorsed butchery. We talk so much in this place about being a nation of animal lovers. It is time to prove it. Let us ban non-stun slaughter, along with any fig leaf of reduced-stun slaughter, which simply accentuates the suffering.

5.08pm

[David Pinto-Duschinsky](#)

[\(Hendon\) \(Lab\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank hon. Members for engaging in the debate and I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on the way he has led it. I also thank Mr Osborne for instigating the petition. The debate allows us to directly address some of the myths that pervade the conversation and speak honestly about the implications that it has for our Jewish and Muslim communities.

Let us start with the myths. Everyone here today believes in improving animal welfare. We have heard that time and again. I want to acknowledge the really strong and right feelings of all those who signed the petition. We are right to be proud of our reputation as a nation of animal lovers. Proponents of moves to ban what they call non-stun slaughter argue that stunning is more humane. Their advocacy conjures up pictures of animals gently and humanely put to sleep, shielded from suffering. I am afraid to say that reality does not always conform to that comforting image. As we have heard, modern industrial

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methods of stunning often involve significant distress and suffering. Animals are suffocated and slowly asphyxiated by carbon dioxide gas, electrocuted by having metal tongs placed around their heads, or maybe even placed upside down and dipped in baths of electrified water. As we have heard, captive bolts are also used.

These processes are used not to minimise pain, but to maximise economic efficiency. They still entail significant suffering, and it is not clear at all that they involve less suffering than traditional forms of ritual slaughter used in the Muslim and Jewish communities. For instance, evidence suggests that animals undergoing kosher or halal slaughter often rapidly lose consciousness. A recent peer-reviewed report in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* suggests that, in the case of kosher slaughter, consciousness is lost within 10 seconds.

Both Jewish and Muslim traditions emphasise the compassionate and humane treatment of animals. A focus on using factory methods of meat production will not reduce the suffering of individual animals, and it will not reduce the suffering of the animals we consume overall. Kosher slaughter accounts for 0.5%—just one in 200—of all animals slaughtered in the UK, and so-called non-stun halal slaughter accounts for merely 2.6%, so 97% of animals are unaffected. If we are serious about improving animal welfare, we should focus on how the 97% are treated throughout their lives, and not how the 3% meet their end. Banning or severely curtailing traditional slaughter will not help animal welfare, but it will hugely impact Jewish and Muslim communities.

That brings us to the implications for those communities, and here I need to declare an interest of sorts. Just as colleagues have declared that they keep halal, I should say that I am Jewish and I only eat kosher meat. I am proud to represent large Jewish and Muslim populations in my Hendon community. I say to the proponents of a ban that keeping the rules of kashrut or halal is not some minor technical issue for observant Jews and Muslims; it is at the core of their—our—religious practice.

To be an observant Jew is to keep kosher and to be an observant Muslim is to honour halal and avoid that which is haram. Banning or restricting halal or kosher meat would strike at the core of religious freedom for Jews and Muslims. It is an affront to the principles of religious liberty upon which this country is so proudly built. It would essentially deny Jews and Muslims the right to practise their religion in our country in the way that they see fit.

I say respectfully that, as we have heard today, proponents of a ban have no answer to that argument. They cannot tell us what they expect Jews and Muslims who wish to be observant to do. They need to be honest about what a ban really means for their Jewish and Muslim friends, colleagues and neighbours.

Some proponents have suggested not banning kosher and halal slaughter, but labelling all kosher and halal meat as non-stun. I say to them that, at a time when antisemitism has reached record levels and Islamophobia has risen dramatically, labelling meat prepared for the Jewish and Muslim communities as inherently cruel not only is inaccurate, but will feed the fires of prejudice.

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Of course, for some people in today's debate, that is unfortunately the whole point, and this is where we need to come to some honesty. The vast majority of people engaged in the debate do so in good faith, but a very small number are not interested in animal rights, compassion in farming or food standards; they are interested only in division. In France and other countries, the far right has used

this issue to stir up hatred against minorities. We must not allow it to be used as a weapon to sow the seeds of division between our communities here. We must not allow those who seek to undermine the quintessentially British value of tolerance to do so. The British answer is to maximise animal rights while protecting religious freedom. Banning this form of slaughter is fundamentally un-British.

Animal welfare is critical—I endorse all moves to enhance it—but so is religious freedom. Banning kosher and halal slaughter will not improve welfare. There are other measures that will achieve that far more effectively, and they should be taken. However, imposing a ban would curtail the fundamental religious freedoms of my Jewish and Muslim constituents in Hendon, and I fear that it may feed a rising tide of prejudice. I urge everyone who cares for our communities, and for animal rights, to join me in rejecting the calls for this divisive ban.

5.15pm

[Shockat Adam](#)

[\(Leicester South\) \(Ind\)](#)

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It is a real honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. Let me take this opportunity to thank Mr Osborne for bringing this petition to the House, allowing us to debate it in the respectful manner that it has been. I also thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for the compassionate manner in which he set out the petition. I hope to follow suit.

As has been articulated, we are a nation of animal lovers. In the words of Immanuel Kant:

“We can judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals.”

But to truly protect animals, we must look at their entire lives, not just their final moments. Many animals endure terrible suffering in the food system from the farm to the fork: chickens in battery cages, pigs exposed to CO₂ and cattle transported for hours in cramped conditions. Yet debates such as this often focus narrowly on the method of death, and occasionally even more narrowly on religious slaughter.

Let us look at the facts. Scientific studies, including those from the European Food Safety Authority and Massey University in New Zealand, suggest that methods such as kosher and non-stun halal slaughter may cause more pain than pre-stunning. But even scientists concede that pain can only be inferred, not definitively measured, through behaviour and EEG data. Meanwhile, pre-stunning methods are far from perfect—everyone would agree with that. As has been mentioned, in the commonly used penetrative captive bolt method, a 7 cm to 11 cm bolt is fired into the animal’s brain. Yet the EFSA found that 4% of cattle are not rendered unconscious after the first attempt of that bolt of electricity. The non-penetrative method, where the bolt strikes but does not penetrate the skull, has a failure rate of up to 30% of animals, causing skull fractures and distress. Electrical stunning, often used in poultry, involves passing a high voltage current through the brain, but if done incorrectly, the animal remains fully conscious.

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Let us be honest: no method is entirely pain-free. The idea that one is humane and the other is completely barbaric does not hold up to scrutiny. While we are on the subject of fairness, we must talk about human rights, as has been mentioned by hon. Members. Article 9 of the Human Rights Act 1998 protects freedom of thought, freedom of belief and freedom of religion, including the right

to eat in accordance with those beliefs. UK laws reflect that. Religious slaughter is legal as long as it is regulated by licensed slaughterhouses and under the oversight of the Food Standards Agency.

Furthermore, as has been mentioned, 88% of halal meat in the UK is already pre-stunned. In fact, just 2.5% of the 1 billion animals that are slaughtered annually are processed using non-stun halal methods. I may not be able to speak about the Jewish communities, but I am of the firm conviction that many Muslim communities support clear, accurate labelling. Those who do not wish to eat religiously slaughtered meat have the freedom to choose. This is not about hiding anything but about respect and choice for all.

Why does this issue keep returning to the political spotlight? Frankly, we must ask if it is being used as a dog whistle—I exclude the people who may have brought this petition today—by stirring suspicion and division under the guise of concerns for animals. When MPs table 12 questions about halal, only one about kosher and absolutely none about CO₂ gassing of pigs or factory farming, that does send a message—either consciously or not—that this may be about faith, not welfare.

If we are genuinely committed to animal welfare, let us raise standards across the board for how animals are raised, transported and treated, and not just how they die. Let us tackle intensive factory farming and support improved enforcement, CCTV in slaughterhouses and transparency in all meat production, including for the food we import such as foie gras, which is the diseased liver of force-fed ducks and geese—how inhumane is that? Let us build a system rooted in science, compassion and dignity for all animals and for the people of this country.

5.20pm

[Josh Newbury](#)

[\(Cannock Chase\) \(Lab\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I welcome the opportunity to debate this subject, so I, too, thank the petition author, Mr Osborne, and the signatories for enabling us to do that.

I declare that I am personally against non-stun slaughter. I am not religious, and I would never knowingly buy products from animals that had not been stunned before slaughter. Some 301 of my constituents signed this petition to ban the non-stun slaughter of animals. That is the second highest number of signatories from any constituency across the UK, so it is clear that people in Cannock Chase feel very strongly about this topic. I appreciate that many of my constituents will have signed the petition to voice their concerns about animal welfare—a topic that I am always keen to discuss. I hope that across the House, we can balance that valid question with respect for those for whom non-stun slaughter is part of religious observance.

I affirm that animal welfare is, and must remain, a core concern in the UK. We are rightly proud of our high standards, and it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that our animals are treated with dignity and

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suffer as little as possible in life and death. Just last week, I was in this room for a debate on animal welfare in farming, discussing low-welfare farming practices, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), who is no longer in his place. I am glad to be in another debate with the Minister so soon.

Although the religious aspect of slaughter methods might make headlines, I have brought my passion for animal welfare to this House long before today, and I will continue to do so long after this debate is over. As representatives of the British people, parliamentarians must recognise that both the Jewish and Muslim faiths have deeply rooted religious practices around slaughter—kosher and halal—which are grounded in principles of respect, discipline and faithfulness to scripture.

In preparation for the debate, I spoke at length with a friend of mine who is a practising Muslim. He told me that in the Koran, cruelty towards animals is considered to be a sin. There are also several rules around Islamic slaughter, as other hon. Members have said. Animals must be well treated before being killed and they must not see other animals being killed. The knife must not be sharpened in the animal's presence, and the blade must be free of blemishes so that it will not tear the wound.

The demonstration of life protocol is an industry-led initiative that provides assurance to Muslim communities that stunning is compatible with halal slaughter requirements while protecting the welfare of the animals involved. Because of that, already a significant proportion of halal meat comes from animals that were stunned before slaughter, as has been said. Last year, that was 88% of halal meat. There is widespread agreement in the Muslim community in Britain that stunning is compatible with halal slaughter principles as set out in the Koran. As has been pointed out, stunning is deemed incompatible with Jewish requirements, so exemptions for non-stun slaughter are particularly used for the production of kosher meat.

This debate is an opportunity for us to reflect on whether, as raised by the Chair of the Petitions Committee, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), the law should evolve once again. The British Veterinary Association shared a briefing note with Members about changing labelling requirements so that meat from animals that have not been stunned prior to death is clearly labelled, so that consumers can make informed choices. As the Minister knows, I am keenly interested in improving labelling for consumers, particularly welfare labelling, which would give a far broader perspective on welfare than simply “stun” or “non-stun”. I appreciate that we could end up crowding food packets with way too much information, but as part of the Department's ongoing review of food labelling, I ask the Minister to consider the BVA's proposals; perhaps he could comment on that.

The BVA also shared ideas on introducing a non-stun permit system to ensure that the number of animals slaughtered without prior stunning does not exceed demand. I imagine that others across the House will focus on those suggestions, so in the interests of timekeeping I will not dive any further into them, but I want to place them on the record as I feel that they are important for us to consider.

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Through the National Farmers Union food and farming fellowship scheme, I recently had the opportunity to visit a beef farm owned by ABP Food Group in my home county of Staffordshire. We met abattoir managers who talked to us about how the industry is continuing to innovate and push for higher welfare standards during slaughter. For example, they are introducing new forms of lighting, which mimic the way that light falls in barns, to ensure that animals are as relaxed as possible. Although there are lingering examples of outdated and bad practices, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) rightly highlighted, I hope that innovations in modern abattoirs will ensure that they are consigned to history.

We also discussed non-stun slaughter at Bromstead farm. Contrary to what people might think, there are ways to minimise the suffering of animals being slaughtered without prior stunning. Many of the stunning methods that have been described in this debate are instantaneous, so I do not believe that it is correct to say that they always cause excruciating pain to animals.

Scientific evidence continues to develop, and discussions in faith communities about how animal welfare can be improved are growing. Examples of improvements include shortening transport times or increasing transparency in abattoirs. That brings me to the importance of the role of small and local abattoirs. They must be part of this conversation. Small abattoirs offer something that larger industrial systems often cannot: shorter journey times for animals, more human handling and the possibility for community oversight.

The long-term plight of abattoirs is not spoken about in this House frequently. In the 1970s, around 2,500 abattoirs were operating in the UK, but today that number has fallen to just 200. That collapse in capacity has left many farmers with no choice but to send their animals long distances for slaughter, which increases the animals' stress and undermines efforts to maintain short, local supply chains from farm to fork. I know that is a concern for some religious communities.

The Food Standards Agency has been consulting on increasing fees and removing a discount scheme on the inspections. Concern has grown in the industry about the future of the current discount, which represents up to 90% of charges for some abattoirs, according to the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers, which states that 45% of small and medium-sized abattoirs could close without this discount. Our commitment to farming and our record £5 billion investment into the agricultural sector needs to support small local abattoirs. They are essential not just for animal welfare but for rural economies, food security and diversity in our food system.

If we are serious about welfare and about balancing our values and standards with religious traditions, we should support a system that allows more ethical, more local and more transparent slaughter. That includes investing in small abattoirs, supporting training for specialist staff, and encouraging respectful dialogue between religious and non-religious groups, vets, farmers and regulators. Our task is to hold all those principles together with seriousness and sensitivity.

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5.27pm

[Ayoub Khan](#)

[\(Birmingham Perry Barr\) \(Ind\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for presenting this topic for debate following the online petition. I extend my gratitude to all Members, who have made efforts to treat this issue with the sensitivity that it demands.

However, unfortunately, while there are people looking to promote animal welfare issues, such as Mr Osborne, who I am confident is sincere in his efforts, there are also those looking to make use of this debate to stoke hatred along cultural divides. Although the petition makes no reference to halal or kosher slaughter, it has been welcomed in right-wing echo chambers as an opportunity to marginalise and discriminate against the Muslim and Jewish communities. This selective false outrage is not about ethics; it is a concerted effort to provoke and to marginalise, and to turn the

wider population against religious communities by painting their practices as cruel, foreign and incompatible with modern life.

Given there are well-meaning concerns at hand, let us move beyond motive and look at practicalities. We must tread carefully when it comes to imposing a blanket ban on non-stunned meat, as we are looking at a sector that brings £2 billion of trade to the UK economy every year. The demand for non-stunned halal and kosher meat will not cease, because it is a matter of profound, unwavering religious conviction for many. Eliminating the practice outright would not just infringe religious freedom, but British farmers—the very people many of the campaigners claim to support—whose enterprises supply the demand for non-stun slaughter would be the first to suffer. In the blink of an eye, they would lose vital domestic and export markets to overseas competitors as Muslims and Jews are forced to turn to imports. It may be that the price of meat would fall for consumers because the costs of raw energy are so high in this country.

What is more, many of the abattoirs that would ship such products to Britain's shores do not observe animal welfare regulations as stringently as we do in the United Kingdom. Although some may think they are standing up for transparency or animal welfare, they are really outsourcing the practice abroad, where British regulation and welfare standards no longer apply, all the while harming local farmers and losing millions of pounds in tax revenue. It is not just short-sighted but self-defeating, and it harms entire religious communities.

Let me be absolutely clear. If we want a serious and respectful conversation about animal welfare, let us have one. If we want to debate how best to balance religious freedom and national values, let us do that too. But those discussions must be fair, rooted in evidence and, above all, consistent.

[Naz Shah](#)

[Share this specific contribution](#)

Following on from my intervention on the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), I have looked at the issue of stunning. I have heard from a slaughterhouse that, particularly for lambs—chickens are slightly different—the same method is used, with the same level of electricity, for stunned meat and halal. Even with chickens, the difference is actually very slight. The same legislative practice applies to the majority of chickens that are stunned. Does the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) share my concern

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that we are focusing on a minute number here? Ultimately, it is very disheartening that people say they are absolutely mortified to see people are eating halal meat; they would be even more mortified if they knew the real issues.

[Ayoub Khan](#)

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I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Scientifically, one of the biggest challenges in modern times is to determine the level of pain. That will always be an enormous challenge; it just cannot be done. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that one method may be slightly less painful than the other, but it will never be factual. When we debate the different methods, we need real understanding, not dog whistles. Hon. Members have talked about the very small percentage of non-stunned meat, but we should be focusing on the wider cruelty, which simply goes unheard.

Britain has a long and storied history of tolerance for religious slaughter practices. Successive Governments have upheld that principle, and I encourage Members to honour it. Every individual has an inalienable right to freely practise their religion without fear of persecution or discrimination, or of the state setting conditions for them. Our society is made richer, more vibrant and more humane when we treat each other with dignity—even when we disagree. That dignity begins when we recognise when an argument is not about what it pretends to be about.

Let me be clear: abuse of the rules that perpetrates cruelty and excessive pain is reprehensible, and abattoirs that do not comply with welfare requirements should be disciplined, but the obligation to reduce animal suffering has its limits. Let us protect our faith communities, stand against veiled bigotry, and stand unapologetically with all affected communities.

[Dr Caroline Johnson](#)
[\(Sleaford and North Hykeham\) \(Con\)](#)
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The hon. Gentleman says that this is a long-standing practice for faith communities in the UK. I looked back, and there is UK legislation on this issue from the 1920s and 1930s that supports what he said. It looks like this Government have no intention of changing that. However, I have many constituents who would prefer not to eat animals that have not been stunned, because they are concerned about the pain that those animals may suffer. Would the hon. Gentleman support changes to legislation so that labels are placed on the food so that people know whether an animal has been stunned before slaughter and can make their own choices?

[Ayoub Khan](#)
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I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I was about to conclude my speech, but I wholeheartedly agree. I believe that labelling is paramount, and that people should have the choice to decide what meat to consume based on the methods used in the animal's final moments.

5.35pm

[Gurinder Singh Josan](#)
[\(Smethwick\) \(Lab\)](#)
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It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I want to speak about some of the aspects already referred to, but I just wanted to say that I am slightly conflicted on this, as I speak as a vegetarian. I am a vegetarian because of my religious beliefs: as a practising, Amritdhari, initiated Sikh, I do not eat any meat, egg, fish or any product that derives from them. It is a bit conflicting, as the prevention of cruelty to any being is a key belief that I hold. My own personal belief is that God is

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omnipresent and within every being, and, therefore, to hurt any being is to hurt God, and that simply will not do. The other conflict that I have in my mind is that I struggle with the concept of the compassion involved in breeding and rearing animals, but for the sole purpose of killing and eating them. Nevertheless, the vast majority of my constituents do eat meat, and I fully support their right to do so. We also have a thriving agricultural farming industry in this country. We export meat

to other countries and we have had trade deals recently that will further improve those opportunities, and others have set out why they are so important.

Essentially, where I think the issue sits concerns our great British values. British people have strong beliefs about the humane treatment of animals. We see that in our postbags and when we go around our constituencies; we see it all the time. British people also have strong beliefs about freedom of choice and respect for other religions. We are an incredibly diverse country and although we have our challenges, I, as a practising Sikh, strongly believe we have probably the best model of integration in the world, and that that is something we should be proud of.

I just wanted to touch on the Sikh aspect of this, partly because some of my constituents have asked me to raise it. I have said where I sit on this, but the Sikhs have the Sikh Rehat Maryada, the code of conduct put together by the central Sikh authorities based at the Golden Temple. That states that eating ritually slaughtered meat is not allowed—that is something that we believe—and that meat, when it is eaten, should be from an animal slaughtered by a single strike that instantly beheads the animal. That is thought to be quick, humane, and the most compassionate way. That process is called jhatka, and I recently met representatives of the Jhatka Council, who would like to explore with the Government how that method of slaughter, perhaps using guillotines, could be accommodated in abattoirs in the UK. If people were struggling with the concept of religions getting involved in meat, there is another thing to struggle with.

Laws are seldom perfect and without fault. Clearly, this area is one where our thinking, science and understanding has evolved over time, and will continue to do so. We may get better at identifying pain thresholds and the methods to use for stunning, but I suspect that we will never know for sure exactly where they sit.

At our very best, we are a country that not only tolerates but respects differences, including religious differences. Statistics show that well over 80% of the meat that is butchered in the UK is stunned prior to slaughter, so we are talking about a minority of the animals slaughtered. It seems to me wholly un-British, and entirely out of keeping with our role in this place, to be talking about things that would adversely affect the religious practices of any of our citizens, particularly when the supposed problem is relatively small. Although it is important to debate such issues, the current situation, in which the vast majority of animals are pre-stunned and we can accommodate the religious requirements of fellow citizens, is an excellent, British solution.

5.40pm

[Dr Danny Chambers](#)

[\(Winchester\) \(LD\)](#)

[Share this specific contribution](#)

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the petitioners on bringing this important subject to Parliament.

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I start by making something absolutely clear: the Liberal Democrats, and I personally, fully respect the right to freedom of religious belief and expression, and this debate must not be used as a smokescreen for antisemitism or Islamophobia. Too often, discussions about religious slaughter are hijacked by those with an agenda that has nothing to do with animal welfare. That is unacceptable. This debate must be grounded in science, evidence and animal welfare, not in prejudice, and our

focus should be on improving welfare standards through respectful dialogue and evidence-based policy, not fuelling division or targeting communities.

To declare my very obvious conflict of interest, I am a veterinary surgeon. As a veterinary student, I had to spend a lot of time in abattoirs learning about the process and about public health. As a vet, I have had to issue emergency slaughter certificates for farms. I was on the policy committee of the British Veterinary Association, and we looked at farm assured schemes and welfare standards at different stages of animals' lives on farms. As a veterinary profession, we have always been clear in talking purely about stunned and not stunned, and not bringing in kosher, halal or other types of religious slaughter, because doing so would muddy the waters and play into the hands of people who are trying to hijack the animal welfare agenda with antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The science is clear: the evidence shows that stunning animals before slaughter is the most humane method available. Stunning renders animals unconscious and insensible to pain prior to slaughter, and slaughter without stunning causes avoidable pain and distress. That is why, from a veterinary and animal welfare perspective, we want to see a reduction in the amount of non-stunned slaughter and a great uptake of stunning techniques that are compatible with religious practices. It is encouraging that almost 90% of halal meat in the UK is already pre-stunned. That is a clear example that animal welfare and religious observance can go hand in hand.

[Dr Caroline Johnson](#)

[Share this specific contribution](#)

When doing research for this debate, I found that the RSPCA states that 65% of all halal meat is pre-stunned; the rest of it, presumably, is not. Can the hon. Gentleman explain the difference, and why some meat would be classified as halal when it has been stunned and some would not?

[Dr Chambers](#)

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If the RSPCA has different figures, I would ask it to explain where its figures come from. Not all non-stunned meat is halal. Some of it is shechita slaughter, and the hind quarters are not considered kosher, so they would go into the normal food chain. That could be why there are some discrepancies, but I am not familiar with how the RSPCA generated its figures, so I would take it up with the RSPCA.

I acknowledge that, as many hon. Members have rightly pointed out, there are failures in stun slaughter as well. That is sometimes due to bad practices and inadequate training in abattoirs, and is one reason why I was pleased to be part of the successful campaign to put CCTV in all abattoirs. We should ensure that legal standards are upheld, that anyone breaking those standards is held to account, and that adequate training is given.

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I share the concerns about slaughter in which pigs are stunned with CO₂. I eat pork, but I am aware that such slaughter is a welfare concern in the veterinary world. We are looking at how we can improve that experience for pigs.

[Iqbal Mohamed](#)

[Share this specific contribution](#)

On CCTV and enforcement of existing humane slaughter processes, does the hon. Member agree that the Government must ensure that there are adequate resources for inspectors' visits and audits of abattoirs so that the right level of treatment of animals is maintained?

[Dr Chambers](#)

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I totally agree. The resourcing of trading standards and the veterinary profession is a hugely important issue. We know that we are short of vets working in public health and farm animal medicine.

As many hon. Members have pointed out, the British Veterinary Association has made several sensible recommendations, including that the UK Government should introduce

“a non-stun permit system to ensure that the number of animals slaughtered without prior stunning does not exceed the relevant demand of the UK’s religious communities”

and that they should

“stop the export of meat from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter.”

The British Veterinary Association and the National Farmers Union also support greater uptake of the demonstration of life protocol for sheep and goats. Although that protocol is not perfect, it can help improve welfare outcomes, even in non-stun contexts. I urge all abattoirs to adopt it.

The Liberal Democrats believe that consumers deserve full transparency. That is why we back clear and honest labelling that includes information on whether the animal was stunned before slaughter, the conditions in which it was reared and the environmental impact of the product. Our goal is simple: to give people the information that they need to make informed choices—not to stigmatise any group, but to raise welfare standards across the board. Religious consumers who wanted halal meat, for example, would be able to see whether it came from stunned or non-stunned animals. That matters deeply to many of the individuals in those communities with whom I have spoken.

There have been many calls for a way to know whether meat is stunned or non-stunned, and for freedom of choice. I point out that British consumers already have the freedom of choice to ensure that they eat only meat that has been stunned. All farm assurance schemes, including Red Tractor, Soil Association, and RSPCA Assured, have minimum welfare standards throughout the animal’s life, and require stunning before slaughter. Someone like me, who wants to ensure that they eat only animals that have been stunned, can do that with current farm assurance label systems.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) made a very important point about the need for more local abattoirs, to reduce transport time and stress, and to ensure that more meat is produced and sold within local communities. I commend him for that point.

Let us move forward with a science-based, respectful approach that works in partnership with, not against, religious communities; that improves welfare without

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fuelling division; and that ensures the UK remains a world leader in compassion and evidence-based policy, while allowing for expression of religious freedom.

5.49pm

[Jerome Mayhew](#)

[\(Broadland and Fakenham\) \(Con\)](#)

[Share this specific contribution](#)

It is good to see you in your place, Mr Dowd, and it is a privilege to speak in this debate on a petition that has attracted over 109,000 signatures from members of the public across the country.

At the start of my comments, let me acknowledge the importance of this issue, which touches on two fundamental principles: commitment to animal welfare on the one hand, and respect for religious freedoms on the other. Those values should not be placed in opposition one to the other, but reconciled through careful evidence-based policy. The petition argues that non-stun slaughter is incompatible with modern animal welfare standards and urges the Government to ban the practice, as has already happened in some other European nations. It is worth remarking that the European Court of Human Rights has already ruled that such a ban does not violate the European convention on human rights. An hon. Member—I cannot remember which one—made reference to article 9 on freedom of religion, and the court has already found that that can be balanced against legitimate animal welfare concerns.

So there are conflicting positions. We have animal welfare, a cause close to the hearts of many Britons and many of our constituents—we can see that by the large number of signatures to this petition; I sometimes think my constituents prefer their animals to their neighbours. Many would prefer all animals to be stunned before slaughter. The RSPCA, the British Veterinary Association and Compassion in World Farming all argue that slaughter without prior stunning causes unnecessary pain and distress. Their research shows—there has been some conflict between the numbers being bandied around, but the general sense of the numbers has been consistent throughout the debate—that consciousness is lost for sheep within five to seven seconds and for adult cattle within 22 to 40 seconds, although some larger numbers were referenced in other people's contributions. During that period we have to accept that animals will endure pain and suffering. For that reason, non-stunned killing has been banned for many years in this country, with the religious practice exception going back at least until 1933.

As the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said in her intervention, we need to recognise that when we eat meat an animal always dies. But I accept the argument from the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), with his expertise as a veterinary surgeon. He said—I have no reason to doubt him—that the science is clear. Contrary to some of the arguments put forward by hon. Members during the course of this debate, welfare is improved by stunning. So where do we go from here?

I very much liked the contribution of the hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky), who, if I wrote this down correctly, said that there is a British answer: to maximise animal rights while defending religious freedoms. Equally venerable has been our determination as a society to defend religious freedoms. It goes back, as I mentioned a moment ago, as far as the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, which contains an exemption for

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stunning for religious slaughter for Jews and Muslims. That has been repeated more recently in the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015. Religious slaughter in the UK is permitted under exemptions laid out in those regulations.

That does not mean that we cannot make significant improvements to the current position. One issue raised was that of oversupply: the killing of more animals without stunning than are required

for religious observance in this country. That might be because they are being exported. That begs the question: why do we need a religious exemption to fund or support an export market rather than religious observance in this country? Another issue could simply be over-production. There is a wild variety of estimates as to how much oversupply there is in this country; the figures that I have seen vary between 32% over-production and 278% over-production. That could mean that as many as 99 million animals are being slaughtered annually without stunning, despite not being required for religious observance—at least, not in the UK.

Such a huge variation suggests that better data, at the very least, is required. What steps is the Minister intending to take to obtain reliable data on the end use of non-stunned meat? The second significant area where improvements can be made is in the area of labelling. Many consumers are unaware of whether the meat they purchase comes from stunned or non-stunned animals, and that is not the same as saying the meat is halal or kosher. We have heard repeatedly that 88% of all halal-killed animals are pre-stunned. Nevertheless, there are currently no legal requirements to label meat by method of slaughter. That creates a genuine lack of consumer choice—especially for those who, for ethical or welfare reasons, prefer to avoid non-stun meat, or conversely, those who wish to consume meat that has been religiously slaughtered.

[Dr Johnson](#)

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The Conservative Government had a consultation on food labelling, which was completed last May. The current Government said they would respond, but they have now had more than a year to do so. Does my hon. Friend agree that they need to get on with it and ensure they respond as quickly as possible?

[Jerome Mayhew](#)

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My hon. Friend has clearly been looking over my shoulder, because I was about to say that the last Government did undertake a consultation; it is very noticeable that there has been no official response from the Government. My next question to the Minister, who I know is keen to provide us with full answers, is this: when will we receive an official response to that previous consultation? What is the current Government's position on method of production labelling?

It must be right that increasing transparency through clearer labelling could empower consumers to make informed choices. Improved engagement with religious certification bodies could help to promote the wider use of pre-stunned methods, particularly for halal meat: some stunning methods—where the animal is capable of revival, for example—have been deemed compatible with religious standards. I hope that this afternoon's debate leads to renewed engagement between the Government, communities, scientists, welfare organisations and religious groups, so that we find an accommodation, rather than a conflict, that both respects faiths and honours our shared responsibility for the welfare of animals.

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5.57pm

[The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs](#)

[\(Daniel Zeichner\)](#)

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It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. Can I join others in thanking both the Petitions Committee and the more than 100,000 people who signed the petition, for giving us the opportunity to discuss this very important subject? I also commend the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for opening the debate on this sensitive topic so very thoughtfully, which is very characteristic of his approach.

It is clear from the petition and from today's discussion that both Parliament and the wider country care dearly for our farm animals and their welfare. I was in this very Chamber at this very Dispatch Box last Tuesday, discussing farm animal welfare standards. I will be returning this time next week to debate another e-petition on cages and crates. I have no doubt that farm animal welfare is an issue the public care deeply about.

I was struck by many of the contributions from hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi), for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) and others, who made a series of wider points about animal welfare. I hope we can continue that discussion as we make progress through this Parliament on improving animal welfare in general.

The topic of non-stun slaughter is clearly important, but, as we have heard from passionate contributions, it is also a sensitive one that understandably evokes deep convictions on both sides of the debate. I was struck by the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Smethwick (Gurinder Singh Josan), which I thought was both thoughtful and well-grounded.

Let me be clear from the outset: it is the Government's preference that all animals should be stunned before slaughter. However, the Government respect the right of Jews and Muslims to eat meat prepared in accordance with their beliefs. We therefore intend to continue to allow the religious slaughter of animals for consumption by Muslims and Jews. We believe that is an important religious freedom, as we have heard; many have spoken passionately about that point.

There is a long history of upholding this freedom, set down in legislation since the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, which contained an exemption from stunning for religious slaughter by Jews and Muslims. Since then, animal welfare legislation concerning all slaughter methods has continued to develop, with new requirements introduced through EU legislation in 2013 that have now been assimilated into UK law. When animals are slaughtered either by the Jewish method or the Muslim method without prior stunning, there are additional animal welfare rules that apply to ensure that animals are spared avoidable pain, suffering or distress during the slaughter process.

One important requirement stemming from European legislation is for all ruminants that are to be slaughtered in accordance with religious rites to be individually and mechanically restrained. This has resulted in improvements to sheep handling, because sheep are no longer lifted on to tables to be slaughtered. New monitoring procedures have also been introduced to check for unconsciousness and death among all species.

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Our slaughter legislation also provides greater protections than those contained in the EU regulation, which sets a baseline for standards in Europe. For instance, we prohibit the inversion of cattle for religious slaughter, which the EU regulation does not prohibit and some EU member states still allow. This ban followed a 1985 report of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, which recommended that cattle inversion should be banned.

Our legislation also specifically requires that any animal slaughtered without prior stunning must not be further processed before a minimum length of time after their cut has passed—90 seconds in the case of meat chickens. This adds an extra safeguard to ensure that animals are not dressed while still conscious.

Cattle present particular animal welfare issues due to the time that it takes for them to become unconscious, so additional national rules also specify that adult cattle have to be restrained in a restraining pen that has been approved by an official veterinarian from the Food Standards Agency. Also, following the neck cut, cattle must not be moved until they are unconscious and at least 30 seconds have elapsed.

The Government pay careful attention to trends in slaughter methods. With the Welsh Government, we jointly commission the FSA to undertake a biennial survey of slaughter methods. This survey is carried out over the course of a week and deliberately avoids any major religious festivals. The most recent iteration was carried out in February 2024 and was published last November. It showed that the majority of animals are stunned before slaughter: 97% of poultry, and 86% of animals that produce red meat. The number of poultry and cattle that are not stunned before slaughter actually decreased between 2011 and 2024.

However, I recognise that the rate of non-stun sheep slaughter has effectively doubled over the same period and is currently at 29% of all sheep killed in England and Wales; to some extent, this answers the questions put by the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew). The data shows that this change is being driven by increases in non-stun halal. However, it is unclear whether those increases are being driven by exports or by the changing requirements of Britain's Muslim communities. The survey also shows that a considerable proportion of halal meat comes from animals that are stunned before slaughter. For example, in 2024 88% of halal meat chickens in England and Wales were stunned prior to slaughter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) made a very thoughtful speech, in which he talked about the demonstration of life protocol. This is an industry-led initiative. It provides assurance for Muslim consumers that stunning sheep and goats is compatible with halal slaughter requirements while protecting the welfare of the animals involved, and it also supports opportunities for trade. The FSA recently removed its associated fees to promote uptake of this protocol, which the Government support.

I turn to labelling, which a number of Members raised. Concern has been voiced about meat from animals slaughtered without stunning being sold to consumers who do not wish their meat to come from animals that are killed in that way. Clearly, such sales are regrettable. Currently, there are no regulations that require the labelling of non-stunned slaughtered meat. Legally, however, where any information of this nature is provided, it must be accurate and must not be misleading to the consumer.

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I think the point was made by a number of Members that it is also worth remembering that the major supermarkets currently have sourcing policies requiring that all their own-brand fresh meat comes from animals that have been stunned before slaughter. Alongside that, they operate limited concessions for halal or kosher food that will clearly be labelled as such. In addition, some farm assurance schemes, such as Red Tractor and RSPCA Assured, also require stunned slaughter, so consumers can look out for such labels. However, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel

Hempstead (David Taylor) made an important point about the out-of-home sector, which is clearly more challenging.

Recently, considerable work has been done to consider the merits of method-of-production labelling. A public consultation on proposals to improve and extend current method-of-production labelling was undertaken last year by the previous Government. The consultation sought views on options for the production standards behind the label, including the period of life that should be covered by the standards. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase also spoke about the BVA proposals, and the potential for a plethora of information on labels.

In the debate on Tuesday last week, the interest in animal welfare labelling was very clear. We recognise that this is an important matter, and are looking closely at all the responses to that consultation before we decide on the next steps, but there will be a response to the consultation shortly. “Shortly” is quite interesting parliamentary language, but Members will not have to wait very long.

The effective monitoring and enforcement of our animal welfare regulations is key to ensuring that our high standards are maintained. Official veterinarians from the Food Standards Agency carry out that important work at approved slaughterhouses, and religious slaughter can take place only in an approved slaughterhouse. Enforcement action is taken when there are any breaches of animal welfare legislation, and that may involve suspension or revocation of a slaughterman’s licence, the imposition of an enforcement notice requiring that the non-compliance be remedied, or a formal investigation with a view to prosecution.

CCTV is an important tool to assist with monitoring and enforcement for all methods of slaughter, including non-stun slaughter. It provides assurance that it is done

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in accordance with the regulations to protect animal welfare. All slaughterhouses in Great Britain are required to have CCTV recording in all areas in which live animals are present, and they must make the recordings available to the official veterinarian.

In conclusion, the debate today has been wide-ranging, underlining the complexities involved. I understand the welfare concerns of animal welfare and veterinary groups, as well as of many Members who have spoken today and urged the Government to reform the rules around non-stun slaughter. I can assure the House that I have listened carefully to all the points made. As hon. Members would expect, I will engage with religious communities and other stakeholders on these issues.

I reiterate that the Government will continue to respect the rights of Jews and Muslims to continue to eat meat prepared in accordance with their beliefs, but I am also proud that we have some of the highest standards of animal welfare in the world. This Government were elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans in a generation to improve animal welfare, and that is exactly what we will do. The Prime Minister announced last week that we will publish an animal welfare strategy later this year, and I look forward to being able to outline more detail in due course.

6.07pm

[Jamie Stone](#)

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I thank everyone who has spoken. People all over Britain who care about animals will be going online and watching this debate. The Muslim and Jewish communities will have been watching—we know that these debates have huge viewing figures. We have conducted this debate in a civilised fashion, and I think that will give people such as the petitioner and others the reassurance that when a petition comes here for debate, it will not just be put in a bag behind the Speaker’s Chair or put on a dusty shelf; it will be properly looked at. I hope I am not over-egging it when I say that that is quite good for British democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 700557 relating to the non-stun slaughter of animals.

6.09pm

Sitting adjourned.

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