

Party raises the bar for animal rights

IF you took the florid news accounts of its launch at face value then the political aims of animal rights party Animals Count will be achieved in a blast of hoummos and vegan morality. Jasmijn de Boo, party leader, is a slightly more sobering prospect: neatly dressed and calmly spoken.

Rallying the faithful at the party's December launch, against the backdrop of colourful support that the animal rights movement attracts, is a far cry from the quiet and sober surrounds of our small interview room on the 12th floor of an Albert Embankment tower block. Far below, a London rush hour whispers its protest.

"Right now, we're building for the future," says Jasmijn. "I do this in my free time in the evenings and weekends. We're getting excellent support from people who have experience with the issues, but it takes time. I'd like to have more active regional representation, because there is a large supporter base here in the UK."

The UK party has been buoyed by the success of its Dutch counterpart – the Party for Animals – which won two seats in its national parliament and had a respectable showing in the European elections.

"We've received so many supportive emails and letters since the British party's inception," she continues. "Of course you always get one or two negative emails from the hunting lobby or people who say 'humans are more important than animals'. That's logical in my opinion, but overall it's been extremely positive."

After working closely to initiate the Animals Count UK working group in the south of England, Jasmijn applied to be a listed European candidate with the Party for Animals to get campaign experience. "I did some campaigning for the European elections and it was a great success – we just missed out on a seat with 153,000 votes. We needed more than 170,000 for a seat, but it was really encouraging."

Right now the UK party has 70 members and is using its local outreach projects and lectures to recruit or raise awareness of the party and its aims. Hopefully, says Jasmijn, it will find more donors willing to stump up funds to improve its standing.

"We have basic ideas of how we want to raise the issues of animal welfare and rights to a higher political, moral and legislative level," she says. "We would like to start through recognition in national and European legislation, and it is already some way there because animals are recognised as sentient beings in the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. But

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discusses aims, aspirations, emulating Dutch successes and engaging with veterinarians with the leader of the Animals Count political party

we need to make that stronger and more practical."

She adds: "We need to develop policies for different sectors, such as farm animals, companion animals, laboratory animals, wildlife and animals used in entertainment, fashion and art. We also want a serious independent scientific review into animal experimentation and its scientific validity. That was promised by Labour in 1997 and it's a promise that has been broken."

"It's one of the reasons that people are interested in our party, because they are disappointed in political parties that pay lip service to animal welfare, but do nothing."

Broad appeal

Jasmijn insists that Animals Count's appeal is wide and she is keen to forge links with farmers and veterinary surgeons to develop better practice. However, some of the party's policies will prove too close to the fringe to attract conservative voters; policies like the establishment of a government-funded national healthcare system for animals.

"We think that a lot of animals are not receiving adequate veterinary care, sometimes due to lack of funding by the owners," Jasmijn says. "Animals should get equal treatment when they're sick and we need to establish a basic healthcare system comparable to the NHS. Although owners can get treatment from PDSA or RSPCA clinics, it's still not the same as people who have enough money to provide privately-funded care for their animals."

"There should be a government project, funded through tax revenue, to provide veterinary care firstly in companion animals, but as an extension to farm animals as well."

An unpopular animal tax will not find much favour with the public, even less if revenue is diverted away from arts, sports and youth initiatives, or inefficient farming subsidies, as Jasmijn suggests.

"Despite all the EU funding for dairy farms, demand is falling each year by several per cent, while in other areas, such as soy products or organic fruit and vegetables, demand is increasing. There needs to be a shift in subsidy to create investment in those areas. Some of the money that is saved by people eating healthier diets and using less NHS

resources could then be used for animal health provision."

Whether the political will exists for this sort of radical solution to veterinary provision is extremely doubtful, but Jasmijn insists that the public's affinity with animals is strong enough to carry opinion forward.

"Charities alone will never achieve true animal protection," she points out. "You need political support and government policies on important issues like this. It won't happen overnight, but we have to start somewhere."

Jasmijn's career to date reflects her progressive manifesto. The 31-year-old was born in Amsterdam and brought up in Muiderberg, 20km east of the capital, which is now a small media enclave known for its abundance of television celebrities. She studied animal management in production animals in Groningen and spent 10 months in Thailand studying gibbon behaviour before taking her masters degree in animal behaviour at the University of Edinburgh.

She devised and taught a vocational course in animal care in Holland and became actively involved in promoting alternatives to harmful animal use in higher education for four years, which included a research project on animal reduction strategies. In 2003, she volunteered with the Party for Animals before coming to the UK in October 2004.

It seemed like a natural progression to try to establish a political base for animal rights in Britain.

By her own admission, Jasmijn's first efforts in January 2006 weren't well received, but when she met vice chairman Sean Rutherford, she found an ally with public backing for their ideas. Six weeks later, the party was launched in Wales and on December 3, they launched the party in England.

The differences between the animal rights movements in the Netherlands and the UK are marked, mainly by cultural differences, she says. Hunting is still a contentious issue in Holland – only the aristocracy engage in it seriously – but the hunting tradition isn't as entrenched as it is in the UK. Mink farming is also still allowed in the Netherlands.

The main difference between the two countries, though, is the connotation implied by the term "animal rights".

"It doesn't have such negative implications in Holland,"

she says. "When you say animal rights, people here immediately think of extreme or illegal acts. In Holland, there is a very small group that is involved in that as well, but debate is based more on the rights of animals and a cruelty-free life. There's not so much polarisation of 'for' and 'against'."

In 2003, the Speak campaign took its successful crusade against the planned primate laboratory at the University of Cambridge into the full-time political arena to challenge the Government's stance on wide support for animal experiments in medical and other research. It was possibly the first group to offer a concerted political challenge to the Government's thinking.

On its website, which contains links to antivivisection campaigns, it states: "To date, the Government has avoided exposure for its failure to meet its pre-election promises regarding its animal rights agenda. The Government, vivisection industry and media commonly use negatively-emotive language when describing those opposed to the abuse of animals."

"We are often referred to as 'terrorists' because we have been forced to choose unorthodox methods to draw attention to an issue where other means have failed."

Conflicts

Jasmijn says Animals Count respects this position, but when challenged further she says it cannot accept donations from anyone who has been convicted as a result of the bitter escalation of conflicts between protesters and laboratory backers.

"I can understand why people are frustrated with the slow progress of animal rights, but we will only conduct campaigns in accordance with the law," states Jasmijn. "Though we will accept donations from protesters, because protests are a form of free speech."

She stops short of supporting campaigns on behalf of convicted protesters who some in the animal rights community feel have received harsh jail terms as an example to others.

"I think we should make clear that some sentences are disproportionate to the crime," she says. "Rapists can get away with two years in prison, so are we classifying these people in the same way or worse?"

"We would raise the issue that, in these cases, the balance has been lost. Some sentences have been brought in purely as deterrents, without any relation to the severity of the crime, and I believe the Government is only succeeding in making the whole issue even more polarised. It is pushing

people further into a corner rather than opening up debate."

Despite Jasmijn's reservations about UK government policy and the state of animal rights debate, the introduction of the Party for Animals has been a success story in Dutch politics. Two MPs were voted in during the November elections and the impact couldn't be clearer, in Jasmijn's opinion.

"In January, the human health bill was discussed, which accounts for laboratory animal activity," she says. "Three motions were tabled by the Party for Animals and accepted by the government, including greater transparency on animal experimental data and research proposals. There has also been a review of animal protection law – an equivalent to the scientific procedures act. The review was accepted last year, but now parliament wants a serious discussion about it and that's a move in the right direction."

"At the moment it's the same secret system in Holland as we have in the UK, in that only the Dutch home office has access to details of lab experiments. Whatever system is in place, the same transparency is needed to decide if those experiments are useful. Research institutions should have to show that objectives have been achieved in order to secure future funding."

Raising the bar

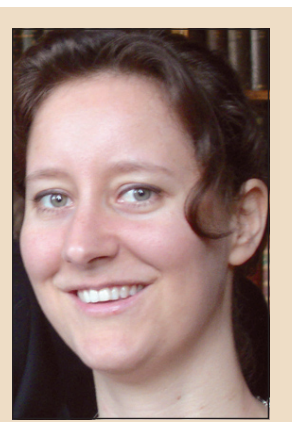
Jasmijn says the Party for Animals has united policy between different parties and raised the bar for animal rights. She's hopeful that something similar can happen in the UK.

The Welsh Assembly elections on May 3 will be the first real test of that belief, though she thinks it will be too soon and has realistically targeted the European Parliament elections in 2009 for a serious challenge.

Meanwhile, the party is busy drafting its 23 manifesto aims into a detailed set of policies. Jasmijn says the party needs to make more contact with the public and talk to the interest groups involved in animal welfare, including detailed discussions with veterinary professionals and farmers.

"I'm sure a lot of veterinarians in the field are not happy having to work under intensive farming conditions," she says. "Farmers in some ways are victims of that sort of system – there's no doubt that they would be happier to work on free-range farms or where the conditions for the animals are much better."

In any case, she states, people on the whole are opposed to the idea of abuse or neglect of animals. As part of that, Animals Count agrees with the introduction of animal licensing



Jasmijn de Boo.

across the agricultural sector – a suggestion tabled by some animal welfare groups.

"An animal licence for livestock keepers is a positive move and courses for basic animal care should be given to anyone who wants to keep animals – whether that's farm or companion animal. I definitely think this is one area where we could learn something from developing countries," Jasmijn says.

"In Kenya they have extension workers who go into local communities to help small-scale livestock keepers to look after their animals by giving advice on health and nutrition. With the growth in smaller herds and hobby farmers across the UK we need that sort of advice to protect animal and human health."

She adds: "On the whole, people should be much more aware of what it takes to keep an animal, and the health implications. People go through years of checking to adopt a child; I'm not saying they're the same, but the principle is the same in that you have to show commitment and respect. I personally don't think the introduction of animal licences is too much to ask, and if there was an annual renewal, it could be combined with a veterinary check-up, so that vaccinations are up-to-date and general health is checked."

She thinks the penalties for people who flout animal welfare laws are paltry and would like to see tougher sentences for animal abusers. She'd also like to see better enforcement of the current anti-hunting legislation and an eventual expansion to ban all hunting.

Whether you agree or not, it's certainly a radical departure from appeasement politics. Only time will tell whether the party can rise above the "single issue" label or the peculiarly British image of the animal rights movement.

"Our policy advisor is a veterinarian and I think it's important to show where we're coming from," Jasmijn concludes. "We know we'll never be a political party that appeals to everyone. There are always people who want you to be more or less radical, but we believe we'll find a lot of common ground."