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Westminster Hall

Monday 23 February 2015

[Mr James Gray *in the Chair*]

Backbench business

Animal Welfare (Non-stun Slaughter)

4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the e-petition relating to ending non-stun slaughter to promote animal welfare.

It is a huge pleasure to serve under your distinguished chairmanship, Mr Gray, and a huge honour to start the debate, which was triggered not by any Member of the House but by the great British public; 115,000 people have signed an e-petition, which reads:

“We call for an end to slaughter without pre-stunning for all animals. EU and UK law requires all animals to be pre-stunned before slaughter to render them insensible to pain until death supervenes. But non-stun slaughter is permitted for certain communities.

We support BVA, RSPCA, HSA, FAWC and FVE who conclude that scientific evidence shows that non-stun slaughter allows animals to perceive pain and compromises welfare.

We must differentiate between religious and non-stun slaughter. Our concern does not relate to religious belief but to the animal welfare compromise of non-stun slaughter.

We note—

over 80% of UK Halal slaughter is pre-stunned—

hindquarters of animals killed by (non-stun) Shechita can enter the market unlabelled.

While non-stun slaughter is permitted we call for clearer slaughter-method labelling and post-cut stunning to improve welfare.

Non-stun slaughter affects millions of animals. We support a good life and a humane death for all animals.”

Under rules recently introduced in the House, the signing of an e-petition by more than 100,000 people facilitates a debate in Westminster Hall. That is a good system, because it means Parliament debates issues that are of concern to everyone. Whatever our views, I hope we all agree on the need for such debates; and where else should the issues be debated, if not here? I hope that today’s debate

will generate more light than heat. The issue is a contentious one for many Members and many of our constituents, but it generates much interest. I contend that an overwhelming number of people want non-stun slaughter in this country to be ended.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I will be blunt. If my throat were going to be cut, I would prefer to be stunned. I have seen what happens to pigs when their throats are cut, and it made my heart bleed—if that is not a pun. It is disgraceful that animals in this country are not pre-stunned before slaughter.

Mr Hollobone: I am sure that my hon. Friend speaks for the vast majority of his constituents. Indeed, a recent YouGov poll, commissioned by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, shows that, as my

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hon. Friend has demonstrated, people have strong feelings on the issue. Seventy-seven per cent. of the people surveyed agreed that the practice of non-stun slaughter should be banned, with no exceptions. However, perhaps we can all agree that the debate is not as simple as we might imagine. The same poll also highlighted that there is a great deal of confusion about non-stun slaughter. Half of British people—51% of the people polled—believe that all halal meat is from animals that are not pre-stunned. In fact 80% of halal meat is from animals stunned before slaughter.

Phillip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on his speech. Would it be helpful if people had a better idea of what they were buying, and could make an informed choice about whether they wanted to buy halal or kosher meat? He mentioned that there is a dispensation for religious belief, but the Halal Food Authority estimates that halal meat makes up about 25% of the meat market. It has been estimated that 70% of kosher meat is not consumed by the Jewish community. Many people buy that meat without knowing it, and surely we should have proper labelling laws, to enable people to make an informed choice. Then those who want to buy it can do so with confidence, and those who do not can avoid it.

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point and reflects one of the main concerns in the e-petition. I will be happy to discuss this further with my hon. Friend.

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that we should provide as much information as possible, but realistically there comes a point where not everything can be put on a label.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as well as strengthening the law, in consultation with the religious communities involved, we could also try to improve standards in all slaughterhouses, by for example supporting the campaign for mandatory CCTV? Even things that are technically legal often involve high levels of animal cruelty.

Mr Hollobone: Yes; one of the advantages of speaking first in a debate such as this is the many helpful interventions from informed Members that flag up items coming later in the speech. The hon. Lady has mentioned one of those. I support mandatory CCTV in all slaughterhouses. There have been some disgraceful episodes, which we have all seen, of animals being slaughtered incorrectly, in huge distress and much pain. No one, whatever side of the debate they are on, would support that. Having CCTV in slaughterhouses would seem to be a helpful weapon against such abuse.

Sir James Paice (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I wanted to pick up on my hon. Friend's suggestion of a four-bar label. After he listed stunned and non-stunned, which I would support, he listed halal and kosher. I draw his attention to the distinct difference between those two. All kosher meat has to be killed by the shechita method, which is non-stunned, but not all halal meat is non-stunned. As he said, for 80% of halal meat the animal is electrically stunned first and then done in the normal way. Therefore, if he were to put halal on a label, he would be inviting people to discriminate on religious grounds as opposed to the welfare grounds of stunned or non-stunned. I want to make him and colleagues aware that we must be careful. We are talking about welfare, which has nothing to do with religion as he said in his opening comments.

Mr Hollobone: My right hon. Friend knows far more about this subject than I do, not least because he was a distinguished Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. He makes a good point, but perhaps I did not explain myself as well as I might have done, which is a common failing of mine.

Personally, I have no problem with labelling food in a religious way. If my constituents went to the supermarket and saw packets of meat on the shelves marked with four boxes—stunned, non-stunned, halal and kosher—some meat might have ticks in the stunned and halal boxes, which is fine, and other products might have ticks in the halal and non-stunned boxes, which is also fine. It is helpful to give consumers that level of information and I do not see what the problem is with labelling food halal and kosher. After all, a Muslim constituent who wants to eat halal meat will be looking for that halal label. A Jewish constituent who wants to eat kosher food sees the shechita label—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Hollobone: I will be happy to give way to all hon. Members, but I want to finish this point. If someone of Jewish faith wants to buy shechita products and products

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are labelled as such, that is helpful information. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said, more meat is being slaughtered by non-stun methods in this country than is required by the Muslim and Jewish communities, and that is of great concern to those members of our society who are neither Muslim nor Jewish. There are three experienced and distinguished Members whom I will happily give way to, the first being the hon. Member for Mansfield (Sir Alan Meale).

Sir Alan Meale (Mansfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his very good approach to this issue. To reiterate, the point he has been trying to make is that this debate is not about religions, but about the non-stunning of animals for slaughter. As he pointed out, one of the reasons

why we need labelling is to show the scale of this in Britain today—at least 4 million to 5 million beasts. That is before we get to the question of poultry: 900 million such birds are slaughtered in the UK every year, 90 million without any stunning whatsoever. This is a big issue, but it is not about differences with religions or anything else; it is about stunning and non-stunning.

Mr Hollobone: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. The wording of the e-petition refers to stunning versus non-stunning, but we cannot have a complete debate about this subject unless we tackle the religious dimension because that is the elephant in the room. I have been led down that path in the first few minutes of the debate because that is the understandable concern of Muslim and Jewish communities. He is correct that the wording of the e-petition and the purpose of the debate is about stunned versus non-stunned, but we soon come on to other issues.

Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Muslim constituents in Wycombe will want to buy halal meat and they should be able to do that. One of my Muslim constituents wants to buy halal meat because of not only the religious justification, but welfare. For him, halal slaughter is a method with a higher standard of welfare than other methods that were common, such as strangulation. Could an element of the debate be that animal welfare standards have advanced with technology, and that in many cases we can find common ground for animals to be both stunned and halal slaughtered?

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend has demonstrated once again how he frequently speaks up in a most thoughtful way in this House on behalf of his constituents. His constituent and many others elsewhere who are Muslim might well take that view of halal slaughter, but he will be aware that that is not the majority opinion. Eight out of 10 people want to see an end to non-stunned slaughter and I suggest that the Muslim and Jewish communities have a lot of persuading to do if they want their point of view to win the day.

Mr Dave Watts (St Helens North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that nothing can justify cruelty to animals, and that that has little to do with religion and more to do with cultural history? That practice would have been introduced when stunning was not available, so is it time for everyone to move on and accept that we should not be unnecessarily cruel to animals in the food chain?

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Mr Hollobone: That is the view of the British Veterinary Association, the RSPCA and the other distinguished animal welfare groups who come at that from the latest advances in animal welfare. The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point, but that will be contended by the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is being very generous. Does he agree that this is not just about animal welfare? Of course, that is incredibly important, but many people of different religious views, such as Sikhs and Christians, object to the blessing given to halal meat. That is one reason why they believe it should be labelled. I am delighted that there seems to be growing support for labelling, because that was not evident when I twice tried to introduce legislation to make it compulsory.

Mr Hollobone: I was pleased to support my hon. Friend's ten-minute rule Bill, because I am a strong supporter of more transparent labelling for meat products. The wording of the e-petition does not go into the religious rights said over slaughtered meat, but he makes an extremely good point.

We have already discussed that there is no nice way for any animal to die. It is important, however, to get in context the volumes of halal and shechita meat compared with everything else. One estimate is that 114 million animals are killed annually in the UK using the halal method, 80% of which will have been stunned first, and only 2 million animals are killed under the Jewish shechita method. An RSPCA poll showed that only two fifths of people surveyed knew that the exemption in the law applied to the shechita method of slaughter. Therefore, while there has been much comment ahead of the debate from the Jewish community, the number of animals slaughtered according to

shechita requirements is small.

To put that into context, while there is no nice way for an animal to die, sadly there are many instances in which animals are mis-stunned and mis-slaughtered. In my research for the debate, I was horrified to realise that, each year, potentially hundreds of thousands of animals are not stunned properly before slaughter, yet data on the extent of the problem are practically non-existent.

When the Minister addresses the Chamber, I hope he will stress his commitment to get the Food Standards Agency to raise its game to ensure not only that all slaughterhouses are properly monitored, but that the number of mis-stuns is properly recorded. In some years, critical instances of mis-stunning have been in single figures when we all know that the scale of the problem is potentially hundreds of thousands. Of course, the number of animals mis-stunned could well be greater than the number of animals slaughtered by the shechita method appropriate for the Jewish community.

The strong view of the BVA, the RSPCA and the other organisations behind the e-petition is that there is clear scientific evidence that slaughter without pre-stunning causes pain and distress. Behavioural and brain scanning research reveals that animals experience pain when their neck is cut and they inhale their own blood, which causes pain and distress—that was very much the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). Slaughter without pre-stunning causes a delay to loss of consciousness. It can take up to two minutes for cattle to lose consciousness, up to 20 seconds

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for sheep, up to two and a half minutes or more for poultry, and sometimes 15 minutes or more for fish. Pre-stunning delivers an instant loss of consciousness when it is done correctly.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that a great deal more research has been done on this matter recently, and that our knowledge of the effects on animals has increased? We understand better nowadays their level of suffering than we ever have previously.

Mr Hollobone: That is an extremely good point, and the House will want to ensure that our domestic legislation follows the evidence. If the quality of the evidence is improved by scientific advance, that should surely be reflected in the laws that we pass.

As has been said, EU and UK law requires all farm animals to be stunned before slaughter, but there is an exemption for religious slaughter. That comes back to the point mentioned by the hon.

Member for Mansfield: although the e-petition mentions stun versus non-stun, one soon gets on to the religious dimension. The EU law on slaughter is contained in European Council regulation 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing. The regulation came into force in January 2013 and allows member states to apply a derogation to permit slaughter without stunning for religious and traditional purposes. That can be decided at member state level.

Interestingly, practice differs across the European Union. Slaughter without prior stunning has been banned in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark. In Austria, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia, stunning is required immediately after the incision if the animal has not been stunned before. In Germany, abattoirs have to prove the religious needs, and the number of animals to be slaughtered to satisfy the needs of the religious community concerned, before they are granted a licence. In Australia, stunning at slaughter is required, but there is an option for a state or meat inspection authority to provide an exemption and approve an abattoir for ritual slaughter without prior stunning for the domestic market, but even in those cases, post-cut stunning is a requirement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley mentioned the large number of animals that are slaughtered in this country without having been stunned first, and how that exceeds the requirements of the Muslim and Jewish communities. The Food Standards Agency carried out a survey of slaughterhouses in September 2013, and the results published last month indicated that in 2013, 31

million poultry animals, 2.5 million sheep and goats, and 44,000 cattle were not stunned. The number of slaughtered chickens, sheep, goats and cattle is more than is required for the Muslim and Jewish communities to consume.

The British Veterinary Association does not agree with me. It does not support calls to label meat as halal or kosher compulsorily because, in its view, that would not help consumers. As we have mentioned, 80% of halal slaughter is pre-stunned and the hindquarters of animals killed by the non-stun shechita method are not regarded as kosher and are therefore unlabelled.

In a November 2014 debate in this Chamber that I had the privilege to chair, the Minister said that “from the EU perspective, ‘stunned’ has a clear legal definition in the legislation, and it is simply that an animal is rendered insensible to pain almost immediately.”

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He also said that it was

“a clear definition and the scientific evidence does not support the argument that a cut without prior stunning achieves that.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2014; Vol. 587, c. 169WH.]

I understand that that goes directly against the shechita understanding, in that a cut to the throat stuns, kills and exsanguinates all in one go, so there is clearly a different view, and that circle needs to be squared. The shechita authorities in this country need to make a more powerful case to Her Majesty’s Government if they want their view to prevail.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Unlike most colleagues, my constituents are more likely to be beef producers than halal or shechita consumers. I am concerned that, although everybody should be able to eat beef whatever their religious backgrounds, more work could be done on the amount of blood left in carcasses that have been stunned or not stunned, and we do not have sufficient evidence to allow the Jewish community to convince themselves that stunning would be helpful. Without that, we are not really allowing them to take the right steps.

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. As he represents a farming constituency, he will appreciate perhaps more than many Members that farmers take a very close interest in where their livestock ends up. They take the view that if they bend over backwards to ensure that their reared animals have a good quality of life, and that they are looked after to the very high standards that we enforce in this country, their lives should not be ended inappropriately with inappropriate slaughter. He will know that farmers are very concerned that their livestock ends up being slaughtered in an appropriate way.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My hon. Friend referred originally to the question of pain and suffering for the animal. Is he aware of any laboratory experiments or any scientific evidence whatever that point to the fact that shechita is cruel and unacceptable? The shechita community clearly believe that it is the most humane method of slaughtering animals, and of course, if the animal is damaged in any way, shape or form, it would not be kosher meat.

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I have a great deal of respect for the shechita position. The *shochetim* who slaughter under the shechita provisions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green has described, might be miscategorised as mad axemen running around with knives slaughtering animals by cutting their throats. They are not like that. They have to go through a very intensive training programme that lasts at least three years. They have to be calm, and the animal has to be calm when the slaughter is about to take place. A surgically sharp knife is used, and I have to say that a strong case can be made that an animal meeting its death in that calm environment with a trained professional may meet a better end—“happy” is the wrong word—than an animal that is pushed through mass production abattoirs, where animals are bumping into each other, mis-stunning takes place and there is a lot of distress and noise because of the need for mass-produced meat in this country.

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The shechita community can make a good case, but I contend that they are not making it strongly enough, and that there is work for them to do to convince the Government of the merits of their case. They are also going against an overwhelming tide of opinion in this country which is against the non-stun slaughter of meat. I respect the Jewish point of view—please do not get me wrong on that—but they need to make their case rather better.

There was an interesting letter in last week's *Jewish Chronicle*, of which I happen to be a weekly reader, from, presumably, a Jewish correspondent from Lancaster, who said:

“The rabbinical interpretation has been made that the blood should be removed by drainage through a severed artery. And that is carried out by cutting the throat. However, I cannot see why having the animal anaesthetised, before its throat is cut, in any way detracts from the original biblical injunction not to consume animal blood.

Perhaps a rabbi can explain where I am wrong.

Is there really any religious reason that shechita might not include stunning of the cattle before their throats are cut?”

I suggest that elements of the Jewish community do not quite understand where Shechita UK and other organisations are coming from.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I place on the record my complete support for what my hon. Friend is attempting to do. Perhaps he could, though, use this debate to draw a distinction between the expressions “cruelty” and “suffering”. The former is often assigned to human behaviour and the latter is a more measurable impact on the animals themselves. The House does not have a particularly good record of separating the two.

Mr Hollobone: That is right, but to the great British public, the two are closely aligned. A lot of people would take the view that non-stun slaughter is a cruel way for animals to die. That would be the language of British public opinion. About 80% of people want an end to non-stun slaughter, but I take my hon. Friend's point.

I have spoken for too long and I know that many other hon. Members will make better contributions than I have, but I want to ask the Minister five questions. Do the Government agree that all animals should be stunned before slaughter for animal welfare reasons? Why are they allowing non-stunned meat to go outside the communities for which it was intended, contrary to EU and UK legislation? Will they support the introduction of compulsory labelling of meat, fish and products from non-stun slaughter as “non-stun”? Will they look at introducing mandatory post-cut stunning, as has been done in some countries, including Finland, Austria, Estonia, Slovakia and Australia? Finally, will they consider the German approach of abattoirs having to prove the religious needs, and to define the number of animals to be slaughtered to satisfy the needs of the religious community concerned, before being granted a licence?

It has been a huge privilege to introduce this debate. There will be many contributions that are more intelligent, thoughtful and informed than mine, and I look forward to doing my best to sum those up at the end of the three hours.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

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Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Order. A glance around the Chamber will demonstrate that quite a large number of hon. Members want to take part in the debate. I do not intend to impose a time limit, which to me would sacrifice quality in favour of clock-watching. None the less, colleagues might wish to be considerate towards one another by keeping their remarks reasonably crisp.

5.2 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and to speak after the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), who opened the debate very well. I note that the last time I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on this matter, he was in the Chair. It has been good to hear his views this afternoon.

I welcome this debate. It is important that we debate this very emotive issue in an atmosphere of calm in which, hopefully, reason can dominate, rather than the hysteria that we sometimes see in the national media. Certainly there was much more hysteria the last time this issue was debated in Westminster Hall, and religious minority communities in this country—the Muslim and Jewish communities—rightly felt picked on and unfairly scrutinised. It was as if people were saying that their way of life was significantly more cruel, and that they were more reckless as to the level of cruelty than any other communities, which is a deeply unfair mischaracterisation of the seriousness with which practising religious minority communities in this country take their religious obligations.

It is clear from some interventions that significant points of disagreement will remain at the end of the debate, but it is important that we continue to examine these issues in an atmosphere that, as the hon. Member for Kettering said, generates light rather than heat. As I have noted before, I am a practising Muslim, so the debate matters to me on a personal level, but I also represent many thousands of practising Muslims and Jews, and both communities have written to ask me to place on the record in this debate their views and feelings.

It is interesting to note that the first national legislative requirement in England and Wales for stunning before slaughter was in the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, which, even then, retained an exception from stunning for religious slaughter by Jews and Muslims. That strikes me as a very British approach to an issue that is clearly of long-standing interest to both the public and legislators in this place. The Government have made it clear—this is my understanding; I hope that the Minister will confirm it this afternoon—that they do not intend to move away from having an exception in the law for religious, non-stun slaughter. I welcome that commitment on behalf of my constituents, for whom this is an incredibly important issue.

As we have heard in the debate, the key point of disagreement is of course about welfare. I have to say to hon. Members who tried to make a distinction between a debate that is focused on religion and one that is focused on welfare that it is actually very difficult to make that distinction. For those of us who are members of a religious minority in this country and who practise our faith, it is very difficult to hear people say, “Actually, we are talking about only one thing here, not something else. You shouldn’t really feel so strongly about it.” That

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is simply not possible to do. All these issues are tied in intimately with one another and should therefore be considered in that context.

There will be differing views, and different pieces of science that we can quote at one another in support of our respective positions on whether non-stun slaughter is or can be described as humane, but one point that is often not made in these debates is that for religious minority communities, the non-stun slaughter of animals must be done in a way that ensures that the animal does not suffer. The whole reason for having those rules and laws in the first place was precisely to prevent the suffering of animals. It is testimony to the importance of the ancient texts that laid down those laws that there was such concern for animal rights at that point. That motivation and desire to ensure that an animal does not suffer needless pain is important for everyone to remember when we debate these matters.

I also make the point that for religious people, who are looking for religious slaughter of animals before they consume meat, that act itself is an act of faith, because religious people, who care about these issues, do not take the killing of animals lightly. The hon. Member for Kettering made the

point that there is no good way to kill an animal—I made that exact point in the last debate—but for religious communities, the right to take the life of an animal is an expression of faith. It is a God-given right that can be exercised only in very specific and prescribed circumstances. For people who take their religious obligations seriously and who practise their religious obligations, these are matters of great concern. These things are not done in a way that is negligent or reckless as to what act is being committed.

Practising Muslims and Jews know, when they are consuming meat, that as a matter of religious law, they are allowed that meat only in certain circumstances. They recognise that the animal had a life and then died. They care about that fact before they consume that meat. It is important to recognise that, because often the debate happens in a way that implies that we simply do not care about the welfare of animals—we just want it our way and no other way—without recognising the reasons behind how those ways came about.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Before the hon. Lady concludes her remarks, will she deal with the point about labelling? Surely there can be no objection to supporting more comprehensive labelling of halal meat.

Shabana Mahmood: I am grateful for that intervention. The next part of my remarks is about precisely that: labelling. However, before I leave the issue of welfare, I want to say—this point was made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas)—that enforcement of the current rules on welfare is just as important, when we discuss these issues, as whether religious slaughter is humane or can be done in other ways, because any abuse of the current rules does not exactly inspire confidence that any additional rules that we may bring in will be followed.

The point about mis-stunning is really important. For religious communities, the risk that an animal has been mis-stunned would negate the claim that it had been slaughtered in accordance with religious rites. Even those who accept that stunning might be possible under a different reading of religious law would not tolerate mis-stunning, which is cruel and barbaric.

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Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Many of the points that my hon. Friend is making will be welcomed by the large number of my constituents who have contacted me about the matter. In the discussions that she has had, have any concerns been expressed about the pretty horrific things that appear to be going on under the label of mis-stunning? In theory, that is supposed to protect animal welfare, but the reality seems to be very different.

Shabana Mahmood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why it is so important that we reach the position of being able to guarantee that the current basic standards are fully realised in slaughterhouses. We all need to understand better what goes on in slaughterhouses and how different types of animals are slaughtered in the current process. It is important to shed more light on what goes on in slaughterhouses before moving the debate to other practices and complicating things further. That may or may not be a road that we want to go down, but it does not inspire confidence about enforcement if we cannot do things correctly now.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): We are talking about the clash of two principles, one being animal welfare and the other being people's right to practise their religion. If it were proved that there were serious issues of animal welfare, which of those two principles does the hon. Lady believe would trump the other?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman and I are entering the debate from different starting points. I do not accept that non-stun slaughter is cruel or inhumane, if it is done properly in accordance with Jewish or Islamic religious texts. We must not forget that those texts lay down clear and detailed rules about, for example, how one animal must not witness what happens to another animal. That would never apply in any of the slaughterhouses where the mechanised slaughter of large volumes of animals takes place. I simply reject the basis of the hon. Gentleman's

question.

I turn to the question of labelling, which we have debated before. I agree with the labelling of our meat, and I believe that all consumers in this country should have a much better idea of where our meat comes from. My perspective on the debate is shaped by being a practising Muslim. I have spent my whole life looking at labels and trying to work out whether something contains, for example, derivatives of alcohol or derivatives of pig meat. For me, labels that provide a lot of detail and information are a great thing, because they enable me to exercise choice. At the moment, when I am in doubt about something, I simply put it back, but I may be missing out on something that I could legitimately have consumed. Often, I rely on the good old V symbol on food, which shows that it is suitable for vegans and vegetarians, because I think that it must be okay for me as long as it is not a meat product. That does not help me out when it comes to meat, however.

I reject what the hon. Member for Kettering said about the danger of too much information. I simply do not buy that argument. If we say that people should be able to make a choice, we should ensure that their choice is fully informed. If we want to shed light, we should not say that that light can extend no further than

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an arbitrary threshold. That seems very unfair to me. The hon. Gentleman suggested that the line should be drawn at labelling meat halal or kosher, and stun or non-stun, but to do so would support a debate that is about heat rather than light. Such a debate stigmatises certain communities and implies that their way of doing things is really bad, so there must be a special label to allow people to opt out of it. To say that is to forget that there is no good, clean way of killing an animal; it ends up dead one way or the other.

We ought to know more about how animals are stunned. As a result, many people may well make the choice that they do not want to consume meat full stop, and they have the right to do so. That is not a choice that I would make, because I am quite well informed about these things. I make my choice knowing exactly what happens when stunning does or does not take place, and what happens during different types of slaughter. However, I believe that the majority of people in our country do not have that knowledge. If we are to be champions of animal rights and animal welfare, not only in our country but across the world, we should be better informed as a nation. Detailed labelling would go a long way to supporting that.

The point has been made that 80% of the halal meat produced within the Muslim community is stunned. It is certainly true to say that large numbers of Muslims have accepted the stunning of animals before slaughter, and it should be open to them to make that choice. Clearly, there is a demand for such meat, because it is being produced and consumed. For those of us who wish to make a different choice, however, it is just as important to know that our halal meat is non-stunned and to be able to rely on the label to give us true and accurate information. I am all for labelling, but it should be thorough. It should not be introduced because we want to muddy the waters in the debate. I believe that some on the other side of the argument believe that we are trying to do that when we say that a label should detail whether the stunning has been done by bolt, or whatever. We support that precisely because we live in the information age, and people want to know what has happened to an animal. We should not draw an arbitrary line that puts some communities under greater scrutiny and makes people feel threatened. We should make all the information available for all to see. In an age of social media, it is very easy to put lots of information into the public domain so that the public who care about the matter will learn about it, understand it and then apply the rules to their daily life.

I accept that as technology develops, we should continue to re-examine the issues that we are discussing. Speaking from a Muslim perspective, it is imperative that as society and science evolve, we continue to examine our jurisprudence and our approach to it. However, I see nothing at the moment that would support a derogation from the exception for non-stun slaughter. We should ask

much deeper questions about the mechanisation of our slaughter processes and the volume of meat that we produce, and whether they make it difficult to maintain any kind of standards. When so much meat has to be produced in such a short time, it is hard to keep track of different rules and regulations. I believe that that is where science, as it develops, should focus. I see no reason for us to move away from the very British way in which we have approached the matter. We have maintained

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the exception in law for many decades, and I hope that the Government will confirm that that exception will remain for the foreseeable future.

5.17 pm

Sir James Paice (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I suspect that if we asked hon. Members of this House, I would not be seen as someone who was particularly squeamish or had too much of a conscience, given my agricultural credentials, which have already been referred to. I have to say, however, that the killing of an animal without stunning is, in my view, repugnant. It should be stopped, in an ideal world, but I accept that there are constraints on taking that final step. I say that not because I have read about the process or been pressurised by various people, but because I took the trouble when I was a Minister to go and watch it happening. It was clear to me that what was often referred to as religious slaughter—unstunned slaughter—was a political issue of some importance, so my private office organised my visit to a halal slaughterhouse to witness it happening. I stress that I have not been to a shechita abattoir.

I went to the halal abattoir, and I watched a number of sheep and cattle being slaughtered. The owner of the abattoir, himself a Muslim, made it absolutely clear to me that he did not like unstunned killing, but that when it comes to the obligation that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) touched on a moment ago, the decision as to whether something is halal is taken by the imam who is present at the time. A prayer has to be said during the slaughter of all halal meat, but the decision on whether an animal is stunned or unstunned is taken by the imam. A number of Muslim organisations take it upon themselves to decide what is and what is not halal. When I was a Minister, I organised meetings with representatives of many Muslim organisations and groups, and I am afraid that there was absolutely no meeting of minds—I do not mean with me, but between the organisations across the table. I sat back and listened to some very strong language between Muslim abattoir operators who always pre-stun everything and whose imams are happy to say the prayer when an animal has its throat cut after being electrically stunned.

Going back to my own experience, I have watched a number of sheep having their throat cut without pre-stunning. As anyone who has visited an abattoir will know, the sheep were held in a conventional rising V-belt. They are hugged by the V-belt, which is made up of two belts, and when they reach the top it is their turn to be killed. Normally the animals are stunned before their throat is cut, but what I saw was without the stunning. Incidentally, that is how the abattoirs address the issue that one animal should not see another animal being slaughtered, because, in a V-belt, the next animal in line is behind the one being slaughtered. I saw a number of sheep being slaughtered, and the average time before those animals appeared to become senseless—in other words, before their head dropped, which most people assume is the point at which an animal collapses—was between 15 and 18 seconds.

I have also watched cattle being slaughtered, and I am afraid that my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) underestimates the length of time before cattle become senseless. He referred to two minutes, but when I was a Minister I was told that it often takes a lot

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longer. In the slaughters I witnessed it was nearly always much longer than two minutes. I watched animals going into the slaughter box, where their head was lifted by a form of restraint to expose

the neck, which was then cut. Their heart, of course, was still going. Blood gushed out—there is no alternative word, and I am not overemphasising this—and stretched several feet in front of the animal. The gushing went on for minute after minute. Animals are not held up in such restraints, so they remain standing on their legs. If we take the point that an animal becomes senseless when it collapses, or that it collapses at the point when it becomes senseless, we are talking about four to six minutes. I saw animals stand for six minutes before they collapsed. That is my experience.

The owner of the abattoir I visited was trying to be helpful. He clearly understood the reason for my presence and would have preferred not to have to slaughter unstunned animals, so he also did what has been referred to as a post-cut stun, in which a bolt is fired into the animal's head at the moment its throat is cut. Of course, the animal collapsed immediately. Any animal in the conventional slaughter process collapses senseless at the moment the bolt is fired. Such post-cut stunning strikes me as a significant alternative option. I am concerned about the disagreement within the Muslim religion about what constitutes halal, but I believe that we should be able to find a way forward.

My hon. Friend did not refer to New Zealand, but I have also witnessed the halal slaughter of both sheep and cattle in New Zealand slaughterhouses. The animals were all electrically stunned, rather than stunned with a retained bolt, before their throat was cut. In all the cases I witnessed, the animals appeared to be completely senseless from the electrical shock when their throat was cut. I therefore conclude that the animals were not suffering, but my experience in this country is different.

As an aside, we have heard from a number of quarters about mis-stunning. I was going to say that mis-stunning is regrettable, but that is not strong enough. Mis-stunning is not good enough, but it is a distraction from the issue. Mis-stunning should be dealt with. Even if every animal is stunned, mis-stunning should be addressed through better training and the proper prosecution of abattoirs in which it takes place.

I do not want to venture too far into the religious arguments—I strongly feel that non-stun slaughter is an animal welfare issue—but the other issue is what constitutes what is legitimate under sharia law and Muslim beliefs. The argument put to me by those who support non-stun slaughter is that the animal must be able to recover if its throat is not cut. An animal clearly cannot recover from a bolt fired from a bolt gun, and therefore it is not permissible. The debate is much more balanced on electrical pre-cut stunning. The problem—I am sure this has already been put to my hon. Friend—is that members of the Muslim community who would be prepared to entertain electrical stunning as acceptable, other than those who already do, want evidence that animals are able to recover. In other words, if an animal's throat is not cut after it has been electrocuted, they want evidence that, moments later, it will recover and be perfectly all right and undamaged. The problem—this is bureaucracy gone mad—is that supporters cannot provide that evidence because it then becomes animal experimentation, which requires a Home Office licence.

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The Home Office will not grant such a licence, so supporters cannot provide the evidence that might convince people of the argument.

Earlier, somebody said that pigs do not count because they are not eaten by either Muslims or Jews, and I also want to address the issue of training.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am genuinely interested in the right hon. Gentleman's speech, and I bow to his far superior knowledge of the subject. May I ask him about the head-only electrical stun? I have been told by animal welfare groups that, under UK law, sheep only have to have one artery, rather than both arteries, cut, which often means that, because the electrical stun only lasts between 20 and 40 seconds, there is a good chance that a sheep will recover consciousness before it bleeds to death. Will he enlighten me as to whether that is the case? I have been told that, even though they have been stunned, some 4 million sheep a year recover consciousness before their throats are cut.

Sir James Paice: I genuinely do not know. I cannot vouch for the accuracy of that statistic. All I would say is that I have watched quite a number of sheep having their throat cut after electrical stunning not just in the UK but in New Zealand, and they usually become insensible—in other words, their head collapses—in about 15 seconds. I have never witnessed an animal come round at a point at which it might suffer. I cannot answer the hon. Lady's question.

Understandably, there has been a lot of debate about labelling, not least because a lot of shechita meat is not acceptable for Jews to eat and therefore goes into the mainstream, as does a lot of halal, whether or not it has been pre-cut stunned. Nobody can argue against informing consumers, of course, and I would never dream of doing so. I have advocated all sorts of labelling, and I would support it in this instance, except that I question whether it would work. It is not that I think that consumers would not respond to it; however, it is wide open to abuse. It would be extremely difficult to enforce and monitor, and to trace pieces of meat as they moved through the supply chain to determine whether the labelling on whether the animal was stunned before slaughter was correct.

I am afraid that I do not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering about putting religious connotations into labelling, because I wholly object to anybody discriminating on those grounds. People have written to me saying, "I object to buying meat that has had some Muslim say a prayer over it." I reject that attitude totally; in my view, it is racist, and I will have nothing to do with it. I am concerned purely with welfare.

I want to mention the distinction that was made concerning the Jewish process, which renders an animal effectively dead the moment its throat is cut. As I said, I have never actually witnessed that process, so I cannot speak from experience, but if that is the case, I cannot see how that community can argue against a post-cut stun. If their view is that the animal is dead the moment its throat is cut, what is wrong with a bolt or electrical shock seconds afterwards? According to that argument, it is effectively being applied to a dead animal.

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The conclusion that I came to when I was the Minister responsible—frankly, I wish that I had had time to pursue the issue as I wanted to—was that the way forward to reduce suffering while recognising the need for proper respect for religious rites was to introduce compulsory post-cut stunning. That would have been far more effective at reducing suffering, as I witnessed. I also thought that the arguments used by those who opposed a pre-cut stun would fall aside, if their view is that the animal is dead immediately after stunning.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his well-informed and impressive speech. Does he see no role for additional labelling?

Sir James Paice: I am certainly not against labelling. As I said a few minutes ago, I have recommended and indeed driven forward initiatives to provide consumers with more information, and I am not averse to the idea of doing so in this context. I have grave doubts about how effective it would be, simply because I fear that it would be difficult to enforce.

My final comment relates to training. I discussed the issue of mis-stunning, and I am sure that all of us have often heard different groups say that Jewish slaughtermen are far more effectively trained than Muslim slaughtermen. I have heard all sorts of accusations about some halal slaughtermen using blunt knives to saw away at necks and so on. All that I can say—maybe this is obvious—is that the examples that I witnessed in both this country and New Zealand do not sustain that argument. As far as I could tell—I am not a complete layman; I have been to many abattoirs in my lifetime—the animals were cut as quickly as possible with very sharp weapons, and the training was perfect. Whatever system of slaughter is used—pre-cut stun, post-cut stun or anything else—we cannot accept anything less than highly skilled operators. I certainly believe that that is a matter for enforcement, whatever else might be decided.

I do not know whether I shall speak again in this place during the next five weeks, but if this is my

last speech, I hope that it is recognised as a seriously intentioned argument for moving forward in the interests of animal welfare and nothing else. I strongly urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider the post-cut stun—it is a compromise—as a way of effectively reducing unwanted and unnecessary suffering.

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): The right hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying that if that was his last speech—we all hope that it was not—it was an extremely fine contribution at the end of a long and distinguished career.

5.35 pm

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice) on his speech, which was moving and hugely well informed. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on his part in this debate.

I am afraid that I do not have such experience or erudition to add to the debate, but I will make one or two points. I am Jewish. I was not brought up to eat kosher meat, and I am not agricultural. I have visited

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slaughterhouses on two occasions, which I will mention in a minute. I make these comments entirely because of what I have learned from speaking to my constituents—both those who are religious and those who simply follow the traditions—after debates on the subject in this House.

Perhaps I should mention that I have received a petition from nearly 2,000 members of the Muslim community in Watford, suitably supported by members of the Jewish community, who were rather fewer in number because there are rather fewer Jewish people in Watford than Muslims. It came about as a result of comments by the new president of the British Veterinary Association that appeared in *The Times*.

I took the petition to the Prime Minister, who seemed clear on the Government's view, although of course the Minister will say what he has to say. The Prime Minister said that he was “delighted to support” my campaign in Watford, and that he was

“very happy to confirm that while I am Prime Minister of this country”,

both halal and kosher killing are

“safe in Britain”.

That is a clear view from the Government. If I may speak for the Opposition—I have never had the arrogance to do so before, but I think that I am right in saying this—I imagine their official view to be much the same.

I have visited two abattoirs in my life, one using conventional slaughter and the other religious slaughter. I did not visit them as a Member of Parliament, and again, I cannot compare my visits and level of observation to those of my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire. I must say that I did not see a material difference between the death of the animal in the conventional abattoir, which was stunned, and the religious slaughter, which was done without stunning. I can say without discrimination that I was absolutely put off eating meat for some time by both of them—I am not a vegetarian, but I could see an argument for it—but I cannot and would not say that I noticed any material difference in the suffering of the animals in either case.

Given that it is one of our great beliefs in this country that people's religious traditions and views should be upheld, and that the issue is important to religious Muslims and religious Jewish people, I believe that it is the Government's job to stipulate standards of cleanliness and to deal with other

more modern issues. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) mentioned, religious texts can be interpreted in a modern way, which I am sure must include modern versions of safety and cleanliness, but I cannot accept that in today's society, religious traditions held with such belief by people in this country could be declared illegal by the Government. I will do everything in my power, modest though that power may be, to reject anything of the sort.

Mr Lee Scott (Ilford North) (Con): I totally agree with my hon. Friend that people's freedom to practise religion, and to eat meat produced as they feel it should be produced, is vital. Does he agree that this is really a matter of protecting animals? A bad abattoir is a bad abattoir, whatever process it might carry out. That is what we should stamp out: bad abattoirs, not the method by which the animals are slaughtered.

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Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend, as ever, makes an extremely good point that reiterates what I was saying about modern standards of cleanliness and methods.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering pointed out in his brilliant opening remarks that this debate came about because of an e-petition; I think that he said about 110,000 or 115,000 people had signed it. I know that this debate is not simply a "mine's bigger than yours" or "my brother is bigger than yours" kind of argument. However, the chairman of the Conservative Muslim Forum, Mohammed Amin, had a counter-petition called "Protect religious slaughter in the UK and EU", which has received 125,000 signatures. It is not just a question of the number of signatures, but we can gauge from the number of signatures to both these petitions that strong views are held, quite legitimately and properly, by people on both sides of the argument.

I congratulate my hon. Friend for the way that he tried to address all the arguments. MPs have a reputation for talking about things they do not know much about, and it is true that most of us from urban backgrounds do not know very much about this issue. However, based first on the interests of my constituents and the sincerity with which they hold their views; secondly, on my limited experience of observing two types of slaughterhouse, and I do not recommend either of them, but I saw no material difference in the suffering of the animals; and thirdly, on this country's belief in tolerance and religious freedom, including protecting people's religious beliefs, it seems to me that the status quo should be upheld, possibly with some amendments relating to modern slaughterhouse conditions.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I—a Jew and a Muslim—travelled to some of the most deprived communities in the world together when we were on the International Development Committee, and we have had many discussions similar to this one. Is it right to say that this cannot be viewed as a debate between those in favour of animal welfare and people of faith? I am sure that there are people who have an overlap—who are really keen followers of faith and who also passionately believe in animal welfare. If it is right, confusing the two is very dangerous indeed, particularly as both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are on the rise in the UK.

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman is correct. Of course, certain things come out of ignorance, and ignorance breeds the sort of anti-Semitism and Islamophobic comments that are made; the actual method of slaughter becomes almost irrelevant.

Mr Gray, you have been very patient as regards the time that you have given me. I will say finally that most things in religion came about for a reason, including hygiene, decency at the time and the reduction of animal suffering, and I do not really see that very much has changed.

5.42 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Gray, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on presenting this e-petition

and speaking to it with his usual charm, eloquence and thoughtfulness.

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This is not an issue that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has considered, so I make my remarks today in a personal capacity. Also, I come from the constituency of Thirsk and Malton, which contains Filey. It is not only probably the most northerly but also one of the most rural constituencies in England. It has two livestock marts and a number of abattoirs.

At the outset, we must recognise that farmers put the welfare of the animals they produce right at the heart of all their activities, and their passion. I recognise that the ritual slaughter of animals for religious purposes is of historical interest, not only in this country but across many other EU countries, and that traditionally it has been a very limited practice. As my hon. Friend pointed out, some 80% of halal meat is already non-stunned, which puts this debate in context.

I must refer to the highly regrettable incident at Bowood Lamb abattoir in Carlton Miniott, near Thirsk, in my constituency, which displayed the most gross and unacceptable animal cruelty; it was caught on camera. There is absolutely no place for cruelty at any stage of production, or indeed in the final stage of slaughter, and this incident has sent shockwaves through the rural constituency—through Thirsk, Malton and Filey—and not least through farmers, who feel very beleaguered at present, even though they are of course in no way implicated in the incident.

Farmers display the highest level of care and welfare, and leave their animals at the place of slaughter in the most stress-free state. They are concerned about that not only because they invest a lot of time, energy and, as I say, passion in the production of animals, but for a very good economic reason: a stressed animal damages the quality of the meat, making it, in many instances, either inedible or valued at a price lower than the market would otherwise dictate. It is an affront to farmers and others if their animals are treated in such a way.

The debate today, and indeed that incident, prompts a number of questions that go beyond the actual incident, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice), a former Minister, mentioned. I went to see a halal slaughterhouse, where chickens were being slaughtered. I saw the chickens before they went through the slaughterhouse and after they came out, but I could not bring myself to see the moment of truth. Today's debate raises a number of questions about who inspects such premises and how frequently.

When the Minister responding to this debate replies, I would be grateful if he could say what the role of the Food Standards Agency should be in all this. In particular, when was the Bowood Lamb abattoir last inspected, and how frequently would it have been inspected? Obviously, in that particular case, the camera revealed inhumane and deeply cruel practice, which one hopes was a one-off incident and not something that had happened previously. The footage went to the heart of how workers at abattoirs are trained. It is some time since that abattoir changed hands, but we must ask how abattoir workers are trained, because what is important for halal and kosher is not only the moment of truth—the point of slaughter—but whether the workers at that abattoir were working directly under the supervision of the owners and managers. Had the workers been properly trained in handling livestock?

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Having seen animals, not so much at abattoirs but at a regular auction mart, I can accept that livestock coming at someone in numbers and at some speed can be scary, and I think that goes to the heart of the matter. The way forward is to regulate, inspect and have much closer supervision of slaughterhouses, including this particular slaughterhouse, to ensure that the standards within are the highest possible.

Kerry McCarthy: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady that better inspection and enforcement of standards is the way forward. However, I understand that many slaughterhouses pay their staff according to the number of animals killed. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural

Affairs and the Meat Hygiene Service have said that it is not their business how slaughterhouses choose to pay their workers. Surely, however, if workers are being paid according to how many hundreds of animals they kill each day, they are less likely to pay attention to proper standards and doing things properly.

Miss McIntosh: The Minister will have heard what the hon. Lady said, and I think that her questions back up my argument.

The issue of how many animals are being slaughtered, particularly for halal meat, was first raised with me at a meeting attended by the then chairman of Natural England at a regular farmers' event I hold in my constituency at the new auction mart premises at Thirsk Rural Business Centre. At that meeting, it was put to me by someone who farms and who is also a former newsreader—so they obviously make a good case—that many animals are being slaughtered for halal meat, but actually there is no intention that the meat produced will be used in the specific religious halal trade; instead, it enters into the general market. I take the point made by the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire, about its being difficult to label, but people are getting quite upset.

There is a market out there for halal meat, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) for making the case for it. I support the case for all forms of religious slaughter—I have done as a Member of the European Parliament, and I continue to do so in this place—but I ask the Minister to look closely into practices arising where halal slaughter might be respected but the ultimate destination of meat so slaughtered is not halal.

There is clearly a higher proportion of such meat—my understanding is that it is more halal than shechita meat—being produced now than there was, say, five, 10 or 15 years ago. I understand that this has to be provided to hospitals, schools, airlines and many other public places and restaurants, but this matter goes to the heart of the issue addressed in the petition regarding animal welfare, as my hon. Friends the Members for Watford (Richard Harrington) and for Kettering said, and it raises questions about where this meat ends up. That is a separate source of concern.

You would think, Mr Gray, that we had learned the lessons of adulterating the food chain through the horsemeat scandal, but today's debate shows—I back up what the Minister has said previously—that any form of labelling has to be done at EU level. I hope that the Minister is able to report to us and say precisely where we are in that process, because if the wish of the

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House, along with that of the 115,000 petitioners, is to have better labelling—or, indeed, any form of labelling—stating that an animal has been slaughtered according to religious conditions, meat should be clearly marked accordingly. We should also aim to have shorter food supply chains, greater transparency and openness in the food chain and better labelling, either for religious or animal welfare purposes, which is what the red tractor label covers.

How can we seek to raise standards at slaughterhouses? There was a recent debate, which I was not able to attend, on the use of closed circuit television in slaughterhouses. I hope that the Minister will forgive my asking a question that may have been asked during that debate. We have regular debates about the cost of food and the cost of food production. If CCTV cameras are to be installed and regularly monitored in slaughterhouses and abattoirs, who will be responsible for monitoring them and for the cost of fitting them? Obviously, if the farmer has to pay, that is taking away from their profit. Many sectors—dairy is the worst—feel beleaguered, given the difference between the farm-gate price and what we pay in the supermarket.

This is a timely debate, given the questions raised in the petition and those asked by hon. Members this afternoon. We have to establish how labelling would work, whether the amount of meat produced for religious purposes is larger than required, whether it is entering into the regular food chain, and how it could be labelled as such. I invite the Minister to report back on negotiations for

better labelling at EU level.

I should be delighted if the Minister also reassured the public that there are regular inspections at abattoirs and slaughterhouses, and that standards are being upheld. I understand that criminal prosecutions may follow from the recent cruelty at Bowood Lamb abattoir, and I hope that that sends a message to other abattoirs throughout the country.

[Mr Dai Havard *in the Chair*]

5.54 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for my late arrival, Mr Havard—I was chairing the Select Committee on Transport—and I thank you for calling me to speak. I congratulate the hon. Members who secured the debate and the 115,000 people who signed the e-petition, which has brought this debate to the fore.

There are differences of view on this topic, but I believe that everybody speaks about it with sincerity, and that concerns about animal welfare are at the forefront. I ask that the concerns of the Jewish community be considered when looking at this whole issue, and that some thought be given to shechita, the Jewish method of slaughter, in relation to the genuine and legitimate concerns raised by petitioners, which have led to today's debate. First, I hope that we can all reject the term "ritual slaughter", which is often used in relation to both Jewish and Muslim methods of slaughter. That is an unpleasant, pejorative term with very unpleasant connotations. It is not helpful for such a term to be used.

I stress that Judaism's key concern is with the animal's welfare, in life as well as in death. Shechita, the Jewish method of slaughter, is extremely complex. It has rules

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governing which animals people are permitted to eat, what condition they must be in before that is allowed, and how they are killed and subsequently dealt with, and it is performed by a trained person whose licence is annually renewed. The incision is made by a regularly inspected sharp instrument at the structure at the back of the neck, and at that point, blood supply and the ability to feel pain cease, consciousness is immediately lost, and rapid death follows. In effect, cutting and stunning happen almost simultaneously. It is important to spell those things out, because it is vital that when slaughter of a permitted animals occurs it is done in the kindest, most pain-free way possible.

What is not permitted under Jewish laws is mechanical stunning. We are not just talking about stunning; we are talking about mechanical stunning. Many people believe that mechanical stunning is essentially superior to any other kind of stunning as regards the alleviation of pain, but there is no scientific unanimity on that point. In a recent contribution in the other place, the noble Lord Winston went into some detail on those points, and I do not intend to repeat that here.

It is important to look at what happens in practice. Mis-stunning takes place on a significant scale. The Food Standards Authority has admitted that its numbers do not constitute a full record, and that it is likely that a greatly reduced number of animals have been recorded as having been subjected to mis-stunning. The 2004 report from the European Food Safety Authority on the welfare aspects of animal stunning and killing methods shows that failure rates for mechanical stunning in cattle may be more than 6.6% and could rise to 31% for non-penetrative bolt stunning and electric stunning. There is a significant level of mis-stunning. Anecdotal reports from DEFRA show a similar picture.

It is also important to remember the video produced by Animal Aid after secret filming in three slaughterhouses in 2009, which showed pigs, sheep and calves inadequately stunned by electrocution, and horrific scenes in those slaughterhouses of animals trying to flee and ewes watching their young being killed.

In debating this issue, it is important that we look at not only the theory but the facts. It is also important that there is proper monitoring of what takes place in all slaughterhouses, whatever the methods of slaughter, and that CCTV is used where it can be effective in showing what is actually happening.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I have a large number of constituents who are concerned about animal welfare. I also have a large number of constituents who are concerned that this debate and this petition highlight animal welfare issues for the Muslim and Jewish communities that are not being highlighted more widely. My hon. Friend referred to the Animal Aid videos and filming, but some of the terrible practices they show were in places that have nothing to do with shechita or halal. They were producing meat in the normal, run-of-the-mill way that we do in this country. Is there therefore not a danger that we are focusing the debate on the wrong issue? We should be concerned about all animals and their welfare. If people do not like animals being hurt in any way, presumably they will become vegans. I am afraid that I am not prepared to do that, but—

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Mr Dai Havard (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions are meant to be short, concise and cogent.

Mrs Ellman: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) for his intervention. He makes an extremely important point. Animal welfare is important and counts in how animals live, as well as in how they die. It is not solely about methods of slaughter, but about what is happening in individual slaughterhouses daily. His point shows the wider context in which this issue should be discussed.

The kashrut enables observant Jewish people to eat meat and poultry. Although not all members of the Jewish community observe the rules of kashrut, most do. Enabling kashrut to take place in this country is a recognition of an important part of the Jewish way of life. If such a practice were banned, that would be seen as an infringement of the civil rights of many members of the Jewish community. It would be a sad day for the diverse communities in our society, which are important, and our recognition of their individual contributions.

I end by reiterating the statement I began with: this issue is about animal welfare and being humane. Judaism and kashrut are about humanity and reducing pain. Those Jewish people who observe kashrut do so because they believe it to be the most humane and kindest way to deal with animals.

6.2 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I welcome you to the Chair, Mr Havard. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important debate. As we have heard, it has attracted a great amount of attention. The e-petition on which the debate is based has attracted, according to my iPhone, more than 116,000 signatories. On the other hand, the other petition, which is aimed at protecting religious slaughter, has attracted more than 124,000 signatories. This issue clearly attracts a great deal of interest and arouses a great deal of passion, and it is a credit to Members of this House that the debate is being conducted in such a calm and rational manner.

We must not be under any illusions. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice) pointed out, any form of animal slaughter is a distressing business and all rational people, whatever their beliefs, would wish to do all they can to minimise, if not obviate altogether, any suffering caused to another sentient creature. In that regard, the scientific evidence is clear: stunning minimises the distress caused to the animal before and at the time of slaughter. The Dialrel report of 2010, for example, stated:

“It can be stated with high probability that animals feel pain during and after the throat cut without prior stunning.”

It also found that in the case of stunned slaughter, the hazards of restraint stress and injury were

low, as were pain and suffering during the cut and immediately afterwards, while in the case of slaughter without stunning, those hazards were considered to be high. On purely scientific grounds, therefore, it seems clear that the case for stunned slaughter is strong.

It is with good reason, therefore, that European law and United Kingdom law require that animals should be stunned before slaughter, but as we have heard, the relevant EU directive permits member states to apply a

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derogation to permit non-stunned slaughter for religious purposes. Out of understandable consideration for religious beliefs, the UK and certain other member states have decided to apply the derogation, but it is clear, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) pointed out in his excellent opening remarks, that there is no uniformity in how that derogation has been applied. In some countries, such as Denmark and Sweden, non-stunned slaughter is not permitted. In others, such as Austria, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia, post-incision stunning is required if the animal has not been previously stunned. That is the halfway house my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire mentioned.

Interestingly and importantly—this was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering—in Germany, where the derogation has been applied, abattoirs have to prove the religious needs of the community concerned before a licence is granted. There may well be different approaches to the interpretation of the derogation by individual states, but all the member states I have mentioned have a great deal more clarity on how the derogation has been applied than the United Kingdom. Indeed, I specifically ask the Minister to address the lack of clarity in the application of the UK derogation.

The fact is that in the UK in 2013, some 15% of sheep and goats were not stunned before slaughter. That is some 2.4 million animals. Given that the Muslim and Jewish communities together comprise only 4% to 5% of the British population, and given that most halal meat—we have heard that the figure is 80%—is from stunned animals, it follows that a significant proportion of sheep and goat meat from non-stunned slaughter is being supplied otherwise than to the market for which it was intended. In other words, I would go so far as to say—this was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh)—that there seems to be a gross over-provision of non-stun slaughterhouses in this country, and I would be interested to hear what the Government intend to do about it. The extent of non-stunned slaughter in this country tends to go against the UK and EU legislation.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Surely the point that the right hon. Gentleman raises is about labelling, rather than the nature of the stunning.

Mr Jones: Not entirely. If more non-stunned slaughter is being carried out in this country than is required for religious purposes, there is an over-provision of non-stunned slaughter. The point that the hon. Lady makes on labelling is absolutely right, however. It is unacceptable that meat from non-stunned animals should be sold in this country without that being drawn to the attention of potential consumers. While we have heard suggestions today that the precise methods of non-stunned or stunned slaughter should be drawn to consumers' attention, my view is that "stunned" or "non-stunned" is at least a clear and understandable starting point for labelling, and I believe it would be widely welcomed. We have already heard that simply to label meat as "halal" or "kosher" would be insufficient, for all the reasons that have already been advanced.

It emerged last year that the restaurant chain PizzaExpress had been serving halal-only chicken for some considerable time without drawing that to the attention of consumers. Labelling goes beyond what is

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displayed in the butcher's shop or on the supermarket shelves. People in restaurants must have a

clear choice as to what they are being offered, so labelling should extend to menus in restaurants.

We must ensure that only the appropriate level of non-stunned meat is allowed to be sold in this country. Similarly, it is essential that consumers know precisely what is being offered for sale before they buy it and put it on their families' plates.

6.10 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Havard, and to follow the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), who succinctly set out the positions of the Jewish and Muslim faiths on the stunning and non-stunning of meat. It is always useful to debate a range of subjects, but this debate seems to involve a sense of déjà vu. We discussed the issue on 4 November, and I see present Members who contributed to that debate, along with others. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) chaired that debate. I am surprised that the issue has come around for discussion again so quickly. If former and current Ministers did not already know the range of views on this matter, we have made them very clear over the years.

I want to say a few words about why I certainly do not support the e-petition. I have several thousand Muslim and Jewish constituents, and I am representing their point of view. I am also against stunning because of my own view about animal welfare. I have been a vegetarian for the past 32 years. I can assure Members that I am not squeamish about killing animals: on occasion, animal welfare necessitates the death of animals. I have, in the recent past, put animals—particularly rabbits—out of their misery when I felt that their poor quality of life required action, so I feel that I speak on animal welfare with some authority. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) suggested in an intervention that perhaps more people should go vegan or vegetarian. Sometimes, when the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) suggests that we should have a day in Parliament each year when people do not eat meat, she is ridiculed. That is wrong.

In preparing for this speech, I looked at the amount of meat that is consumed in this country. We have already heard about the glut of meat in the market. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has consulted on the consumption habits of the British public for the past 20 years. In the last year for which the figures are known, people consumed around 190 grams of chicken each week. If we multiply that figure by 52, we get around 9.8 kg—almost 10 kg of chicken every year. If broilers are slaughtered at eight weeks and the average carcass weight is around 1.8 kg, that means that some people, at least, are eating at least six chickens a year. If we extrapolate those figures, we come to the view that every year in the UK approximately 2.6 million cattle, 10 million pigs, 14.5 million sheep and lambs, 80 million fish and 950 million birds are slaughtered for human consumption. I have to ask: why are we consuming so much meat?

I will contradict some of my colleagues in saying that shechita accounts for only 1% of the totals that I just read out, and it is incorrect to say that it enters the food

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chain: it does not. There are approximately 300,000 Jewish people in this country, and the meat produced for them goes to the community itself. The Beth Din already label kosher meat.

Sir James Paice: If all shechita slaughtered meat is eaten by Jews, is my hon. Friend saying that they are eating the hind quarters? That is forbidden. What happens to the hind quarters?

Dr Offord: I take my right hon. Friend's point about all parts of the animal—I do not know whether they are discarded, or whether my right hon. Friend knows the answer to that.

Sir James Paice: They are sold into the rest of the supply.

Dr Offord: My right hon. Friend may say that, but he has not come forward with any evidence to convince me. Some people may argue that slaughter is humane if it is—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Offord: Well, I must give way to the Minister.

George Eustice: I have discussed this issue with Shechita UK, and everyone acknowledges that the hind quarters are normally sold on the open market. It would be conceded that most of it goes to Smithfield, possibly to be sold to caterers, but Shechita UK will also maintain that some of it goes to halal markets.

Dr Offord: I apologise to the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice), because I have been corrected. I can only say that some of it may indeed go into the food chain, but not in the way that was anticipated—that is, the whole carcass of an animal. I think we are dancing on the head of a pin if we are saying that only some might go into the food chain.

What is humane slaughter? Some people say that slaughter is humane if an animal is protected from unavoidable excitement, pain or suffering, and that that requires the animal to be restrained and stunned, rendering it insensitive to pain before it is allowed to bleed to death. I do not accept that. I too have been to an abattoir, and I have also been around cattle when they have been killed in other places. When cattle enter any kind of contraption, including the back of a lorry, their stress levels increase.

In preparation for this debate, I read Jon Henley's January 2009 article in *The Guardian* about the European pig industry. Some animals experience a lifetime of distress and suffering. The article documented pigs being kept on slatted concrete floors; pregnant sows being kept in cages so small that they could not move; piglets being castrated without pain relief; and tails routinely being docked to prevent animals from attacking each other. The food that enters the UK food chain from the EU is never discussed, which is peculiar. Muslim and Jewish people do not eat pork, but no one ever discusses such issues—we seem to be focusing on

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the same issues time and again. We should certainly spend time on other issues, such as the trimming of hens' beaks; the mechanical mis-stunning of animals; the fly-grazing of horses; puppy farming; the culling of chicks on the basis of sex; and the cultivation of endangered turtle meat in places such as the Cayman Islands. None of that is ever covered.

It is worth highlighting that the petition has come about with great haste, in contrast with the British Veterinary Association petition, which has taken almost a year to come to fruition. I would like the new BVA chairman to stop fanning the hysteria around this issue and look at what veterinarians are doing to ensure animal welfare in slaughter houses.

I will not talk about shechita in particular, because it has already been covered, but I want to make a point about why some of the methods we have discussed have come about. The whole motivation in the large-scale factory abattoirs is to speed up the process and prevent the animal from thrashing around at the point of slaughter. That is why stunning occurs. Animal welfare organisations claim to have adopted the idea of stunning in an effort to raise levels of animal welfare, but the evidence in support of the animal welfare benefits is inconclusive. Mechanical methods frequently go wrong, leaving the animal in great, prolonged distress.

The last time we debated this issue, I mentioned the Food Standards Agency statistics on mis-stuns, which showed—and the Minister agreed—that an unrealistically low number of mis-stuns had been reported in the UK. In 2011, only six cattle were officially reported as having been mis-stunned. Following my questions, the Minister conceded that the statistics are not complete and may represent only a fraction of the actual number, and that the FSA will have to endeavour to improve its reporting methods.

I oppose stunning on the basis that mis-stuns cause animals more pain and distress and that it does

not improve animal welfare. I am uneasy about the idea of ending non-stun slaughter coming forward so soon after the previous debate. I defend people's right to eat meat and I defend my right not to eat meat; I also defend my constituents' right to eat meat slaughtered in the way that they want it to be. Some people have said that these methods of slaughter are alien practices that are not part of British culture and not something we do in Britain. That starts to produce a divide between some groups and the so-called British public, and I am greatly concerned about that.

On the back of the Copenhagen and Paris attacks, many of my Jewish constituents worry that they are not wanted in this country. They, however, are more British than some of the people who have signed the e-petition; they, at the end of their synagogue services, always play "God Save the Queen" and sing along. We do not see that in other parts of society, more's the pity. Similarly, when I visit my Muslim constituents at the mosque, they do not talk about the issues that some of the far right claim that they do; they are more concerned about parking outside the mosque on a Friday, so that they can get not only to the mosque but back to work afterwards.

Ms Abbott: My local Muslim community is concerned about this debate. Many do not feel that it is really about animal welfare; they worry that it is some sort of

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covert attack on them and their way of life. I am glad that so many of the speeches today have confirmed the importance—for some of us, at least—of not only animal welfare, obviously, but the right of communities to slaughter meat in the way they wish to under the law.

Dr Offord: The hon. Lady's intervention illustrates that some of the concerns of people in different communities are not as portrayed by far-right organisations, but are very much about more normal things, including not only how they feed their children, but how they look after their children and live their daily lives.

In preparing my speech, I wondered which of the British values we are talking about are those to which slaughter practices are alien. I looked at the Department for Education's advice on promoting fundamental British values in UK schools, which is clear:

"Schools should promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs".

Surely the e-petition goes against that. Moreover, schools should

"further tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions by enabling students to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures...encourage respect for other people...and...an understanding that the freedom to choose and hold other faiths and beliefs is protected in law".

The e-petition and today's motion go against that. We are going down the route of asking people to choose the food that they eat on the basis of religion. Labelling already exists to indicate whether food is kosher, and the Muslim community may introduce similar arrangements as well. I feel aggrieved on behalf of my constituents that we are returning to the same issue. Many of them feel under attack as a result.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Dai Havard (in the Chair): Four Members wish to speak and I want to start the Front-Bench wind-ups by 6.55, leaving them a goodly time to reply. Will Members restrain themselves to about seven minutes each, so that they may all get in?

6.22 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Havard, and it is a great pleasure to take part in the debate, which I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for

securing.

I do not rise to talk about anything that is anti the Jewish or Muslim communities. The debate is very much about animal welfare. My right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice) made the point very well: in the end, according to scientific and veterinary experience and the New Zealand research into slaughter methods, an animal that is stunned before slaughter without doubt feels less pain than one that is not stunned. That is the issue.

We should be able to work with religious communities to find compromises to ensure that animals are stunned at slaughter. For example, my right hon. Friend made the point that there is very much a case for post-stunning, especially of large animals. Clearly, a cow or beef animal can take up to four or five minutes to die, so post-stunning is relevant.

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In addition, the halal system is about ensuring that an animal may recover from being stunned—that is what makes the difference. If electric shock is used, the animal should be rendered senseless so that the cut may be made and the animal bled without it feeling any pain, but it should be able to recover from the shock. That is why the stunning system is acceptable—we should not forget that 80% or 90% of halal meat is from stunned animals—and it is what we want to happen. I want to see more and more animals stunned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made many points, one of which was that all the meat slaughtered under the shechita system was consumed by the Jewish community. That is far from the point and is not what happens. All the hindquarters go into general meat consumption, so labelling of such products is essential.

Furthermore, I think I am right to say that in Israel, because fewer cattle are slaughtered, much more of the animal is eaten by the Jewish community than in this country. I have done a lot of work on this through various Committees and, no matter how much meat is needed for the Jewish community, they will accept no stunning whatever. They are absolutely convinced that the way in which the knife is wielded does the stunning. I do not believe that to be the case, but that is the argument that is made. If so, clearly the amount of meat needed for the Jewish community should be the amount slaughtered under the shechita system. I therefore press the Minister on the situation in Germany where, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering pointed out, the Jewish community has to be clear about the amount of meat they need, so that that is the amount of meat slaughtered.

In this country, not all shechita systems use slow methods of slaughter. In some slaughterhouses, even shechita is a relatively fast system. When two or three animals are slaughtered without stunning, only one might land up as in the shechita system, because the other two have passed through before the Jewish inspectors have time to ensure that the animals are fit. Shechita is not only about the method of slaughter, but about testing the lungs and other parts of the animal to ensure that it is healthy enough to be accepted. There is a lot of practice out there that we can tighten up on.

There should also be CCTV cameras in all slaughterhouses, whether they are using shechita or halal systems, or the general system of slaughter with stunning. Also, mis-stunning should be put right. I wish to refute entirely an argument that has been made several times, which is that because there are some mis-stuns when we stun animals, we should not stun them at all and do everything under a shechita system. We should ensure that there is absolutely no mis-stunning in this country. That is where I nail my colours to the mast, because we have to stamp out any mis-stunning. Furthermore, where possible animals should be stunned.

We also need to look at having a workable labelling system, which we do not have at the moment. If we talk about a shechita or halal system, we immediately make the issue a religious one. We do not want to make it a religious issue, nor should it be one. My right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire said that any system would not be easy to police, but if

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we are to go down the labelling route, we must ensure that the labels say “Stunned” or “Non-stunned”. That should clearly be the issue. We need to get that right.

In this country and throughout Europe and the world, if religious communities believe that there can be no stunning of animals, we should ensure that as few animals as possible are slaughtered under such a system and that that meat should go to the community concerned. I am not against people having their religious rights, but it is wrong that more animals than necessary are being slaughtered without stunning. We need to sort that out.

I repeat that we have to have cameras in slaughterhouses to ensure that the systems are carried out properly. We can then work with religious communities to try to minimise the amount of animals not stunned at slaughter and the amount of meat that goes into the normal meat trade and not into the kosher or halal trade. That way we will be able to get to a position where most animals in this country are stunned before slaughter and fewer and fewer are not. That is where we need to get to. That is not an easy matter, but it is something that I am sure the Minister will reply to. At the end of the day, this is not a party political issue but an issue of what is right for animal welfare.

6.31 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I have listened with great interest to the contributions to the debate, in particular the contribution from the right hon. Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice). I am here to speak not to the technicalities or detail of the issue, but about how it is seen by communities.

I represent Hackney, a traditional centre of the Jewish community, with the oldest synagogue in the country in Brenthouse road. We also have, from a little more recently, a large Muslim community. Both those communities are quite anxious about this debate. Both are very civic minded. On Cazenove road in Stoke Newington we have a mosque, the Simon Marks school, which is a maintained Jewish school, and other Jewish schools. Whenever there have been pressures and tensions, my Jewish community and my Muslim community have come together—they are an example of how that can happen.

Both communities are concerned about the debate. They are concerned that it has come forward so quickly after we debated the issue in November. They are also concerned about what the debate really means. They are worried that the issue is not really one of animal welfare. People of all faiths and none are concerned about animal welfare. There is an issue about whether slaughterhouses are well run, and there is agreement that we must get them run properly, through using CCTV and stamping out abuses where they occur. Everyone is concerned about animal welfare, but my communities are concerned that, although we hear little about other forms of animal use and abuse that could be dubbed cruel, some people keep wanting to go back to the issue of halal meat.

I was asked to speak in the debate to make it clear to people that communities want to work within the law and to have the highest standards of animal welfare, but that they worry that some people—not all, because I imagine most people who signed the petition did so in good faith—who are pursuing the issue of halal meat are

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in some sense antagonistic to some of our communities of faith. When we are debating this issue, I urge hon. Members to avoid a narrative that makes it sound as if one is trying to say that communities of faith are backward or mediaeval, or unnecessarily cruel to animals. Let us try to restrict the debate to practical measures to achieve the safest and most humane methods of animal slaughter.

There is real concern in communities. They will not read the details of some of the speeches made today, but they hear people going back once more to the issue of halal meat and wonder what it is a

vehicle for. I do not believe that there is necessarily a contradiction between religious observance and treating animals in a humane way, and would not want anyone to feel that their methods of religious observance are under threat. I was glad to hear from the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) that the Prime Minister himself has given an undertaking that halal slaughter and shechita slaughter are safe in principle. That will be reassuring to the people I represent and to Jewish and Muslim faith communities up and down the country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Dai Havard (in the Chair): Order. To give hon. Members a little advice before we continue, when we vote it will be on a motion to say that we have considered the petition, not that we necessarily agree or disagree with it. Mr Freer is itching to go in trap one.

6.35 pm

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): The debate has quite rightly focused on animal welfare. I have to say that those who believe in methods associated with religious slaughter are equally concerned with animal welfare. I am not Jewish, but, representing Finchley and Golders Green, I have taken a great deal of time to understand the religious traditions behind religious slaughter. Any rabbi or imam will say that the welfare of the animal is paramount. If the animal is stressed or in any way hurt or damaged, it cannot be slaughtered. It is also important to remember the long and proud tradition we have of protecting religious freedoms. I do not believe that the two are incompatible.

We are here once more, having debated the same issues in November. I apologise, but I want to repeat some points that I have made previously. I recognise that the debate has been prompted by 116,000 people signing a petition calling for non-stun slaughter to be banned, which I believe was started last April. However, 10 days ago, a counter-petition was started, which now has 124,000 signatures. My point is that the public are completely divided. There is not a common view.

Before we go on to the key animal welfare issues, I will touch on something that is a bit like the elephant in the room. A number of Members have alluded to the fact that our religious communities, whether the Muslim community or the Haredi community in Hackney, the Jewish community that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) and I share in London, or the largest Jewish population in the UK, represented by a colleague from slightly further away, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and our constituents, are concerned about the motives behind some of the debate—not all of it, but some of it.

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I believe that the vast majority of people raising this issue are concerned with animal welfare, but that for some it is a flag of convenience. For instance, when Animal Aid aired the video on 3 February of the appalling behaviour of slaughtermen in a halal abattoir, there was quite rightly an outcry, but a week later, when a video was aired showing the same behaviour in a mainstream abattoir, there was not a peep. It is an interesting juxtaposition of people's responses: for halal, there is outcry, but for non-halal, silence.

I have also had e-mails in the past saying:

“I don't want my meat touched by a dirty man in a beard”

or

“I don't want Muslim meat”—

whatever Muslim meat is. I have bought meat in halal shops, in kosher shops and in Sainsbury's, and frankly I cannot tell the difference, so I am still trying to get my head around how Muslim meat or kosher meat is meant to be so different that people do not want it because it is blessed or is in some way religious meat. Sadly, it shows that perhaps ignorance, racism, Islamophobia and anti-

Semitism lurk behind some of the respectable arguments.

Mike Gapes: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. I will add my voice to his. Constituents in Ilford have written to me in exactly those terms this week, saying that there is a rising Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. I have had almost identical words from Jewish constituents and from Muslim constituents. It is not just in his part of London but in east London, which has large Jewish and Muslim communities that go back many decades—indeed, the Jewish community goes back centuries.

Mike Freer: The hon. Gentleman is right. Religious communities feel that they are under threat and that they are being made to feel unwelcome. However, I should put the issue in context: some, but not all, and certainly not the majority, are using animal welfare as a flag of convenience. That is why we must ensure that we anchor our arguments in animal welfare.

In that respect, my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice)—I took members of Shechita UK to see him when he was a Minister—has given this issue a huge amount of thought, not only because of his farming background, but because of his former ministerial position. I do not always share his views, but they come from a very valid point of view, and I will seek advice on the point he raised about the post-stunning cut, because it is a fair one and it needs to be explored—I am not a Talmudic scholar, although I sometimes feel I am rapidly becoming one. I am sure someone will have an answer.

Before I looked at this issue, I thought I would go to see these things for myself, and I am surprised to find that a number of colleagues have also been to an abattoir. I went to see what goes on, and I have to say it is not a pleasant experience. Anyone who goes to an abattoir either comes back firmly a vegan or simply has to deal with the fact that there is no such thing as a good death for a cow. I certainly do not have the experience of my right hon. Friend or the experts. I saw these things from a layman's point of view, like my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington).

I have seen the shochetim operate, and I have seen the bolt through the head, and, to put it bluntly, there is no such thing as a warm, cuddly abattoir. The cow or the

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lamb is being slaughtered: they either get a quick slice across the neck or they get a bolt fired at pressure through their skull—there is no nice way of dressing it up. However, from what I witnessed, I simply could not see the difference between the two methods. If colleagues get the opportunity to see animals being slaughtered, they should do so—it is gruesome, but they will be better informed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire said the training of non-religious slaughtermen is rigorous, but it is not as rigorous as that for the shochetim. The shochetim go through examinations, and they have at least three years' training before they can use the surgical blade. Furthermore—this sounds slightly frivolous—if the shochetim is involved in a row while driving to the abattoir, they are not allowed to practise. Not only must the animal be calm, centred and unharmed, but the shochetim must be peaceful and calm as well. A great deal of time and effort are put into ensuring that the process is as humane as possible.

The point about labelling is a fair one, but labelling meat as stunned or non-stunned is simplistic. If we are going to talk about animal welfare, we have to say, “This was stunned”, “This was gassed”, “This was electrified” and “This was a bolt through the head. Oh, by the way, we had to use three bolts before we got it right.” If people want to inform the public about animal welfare, they can do so. If we label meat only kosher or halal, stunned or non-stunned, the danger is that the issue becomes religion, not animal welfare.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who is not in his place, said the scientific evidence showed that non-stunned animals suffered more pain, but that contradicts last November's report from his all-party parliamentary group for beef and lamb, which said the

evidence regarding the pain felt following a bolt through the head or following religious slaughter was inconclusive.

I have two final comments. First, 1% of animals in the food chain are non-stunned, but we seem to obsess about that 1%, rather than about the poor practices that have been illustrated in the slaughter of the other 99% of animals. Secondly, the all-party group report said:

“it is to the benefit and pride of the United Kingdom that religious freedoms allow communities to eat meat prepared in accordance with their religious rites.”

That has been the consistent view of this House, and I say once again that we should leave it alone.

Mr Dai Havard (in the Chair): I now intend to let Mr Blackman speak. We will then have the two Front-Bench spokesmen. I will give Mr Hollobone some time at the end to wind up.

6.45 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Havard. The debate has demonstrated the power of e-petitions to generate calm, sensible and rational debates on issues petitioners wish to raise with us.

I start from the principle that we should look at the definition of stunning, because it has not been referred to during the debate. The EU definition is that stunning is

“any intentionally induced process which causes loss of consciousness and sensibility without pain, including any process resulting in instantaneous death”

by causing immediate cerebral perfusion. That is my starting point.

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The debate has largely centred on the difference between religious manners of slaughtering cattle, sheep and other animals, and the supposed stunning version. However, it should be clear, as has been alluded to, that the welfare of the animal being slaughtered is paramount in the Jewish religion and the Muslim religion. The animal is being used for food and to sustain human life, so it is paramount in both religions that the slaughter takes place in the most humane way possible.

In an intervention, I made a point about the process that I think is quite important. As my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) said, shechita slaughter requires a fully trained individual to slice through the neck and carotid arteries of the cattle with one stroke—not a series of strokes. There is a particular way of doing this, which is quite clear, and it requires particular skill and ability, as I have personally seen. The stroke renders the animal unconscious, removing its ability to feel pain through the cerebral link—it is an instantaneous means of rendering it unable to suffer pain. However, I would argue that the animal will suffer pain regardless of whether it is stunned with a bolt or electrified. Therefore, the shechita method and the halal method, if used properly, are the humane way to proceed—they are a process of stunning the animal to start with.

There has been no scientific evidence from a laboratory environment to demonstrate whether one method of stunning is more humane than another. However, leading scientists and academics regard shechita and halal slaughter as being at least as humane as, if not preferable to, the forms of stunning used in abattoirs up and down the country. There is a clear issue there. There is an absolute duty to introduce CCTV in every abattoir in the country. We will then be able to see the process, and there will be evidence that the slaughter has taken place in an effective and humane way.

Several hon. Members have mentioned labelling. Simplistically labelling food as stunned or non-stunned is not appropriate. The process that has taken place should be clear. If meat is regarded as kosher or halal, or is produced by any other means, fine; I do not believe that that sort of labelling is a problem. Accepting stunning or non-stunning as the principle would not be appropriate,

particularly given the contention by the shechita and halal communities that their means of stunning are at least as humane as other, conventional methods. Such labelling would clearly be directly discriminatory against both the Jewish and Muslim communities. I do not think that that is acceptable.

Debates such as this one are generally a means of formulating policy, and getting the views of the Government and the Opposition, so I would welcome a clear statement from both of them that there will be no change to the principle of allowing shechita and halal meat to be prepared exactly as it is now, and that slaughter will be allowed to happen exactly as it has for hundreds of years. In the summer, a comprehensive food labelling report will come from the European Commission. The Government of the day will then have to make a decision. I would welcome the Government's and Opposition's view on what they would do about that report if their party were to form the next Government. The process is important.

The regulations that apply to shechita, in particular, are important. The animal's throat must be cut by one rapid, uninterrupted movement of the knife. Both the

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carotid arteries and both jugular veins must be severed, and the knife used to slaughter the animal must be inspected before each animal is slaughtered, to make sure it is of sufficient size and sharpness to slaughter that animal and render it deceased immediately. Since March 1999, under the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) (Amendment) Regulations 1999, such religious slaughter has been able to take place only in a licensed slaughterhouse. The relevant European Council regulation requires stunning before slaughter, but allows member states to exempt religious slaughter. However, they can impose stricter rules if they wish. I invite the Opposition and the Government to state their position on whether they will continue with the derogations. That will give an important signal to the community.

I share the view of many hon. Members who have spoken in the debate that there is a growing feeling of anti-Semitism and of Islamophobia in this country. The public's attitudes have given rise to great concern, particularly among the Jewish community. Those concerns must be treated appropriately. I received many e-mails before the debate from constituents who believe that their way of life is being directly threatened and attacked. We need to send the strong signal that they are British and deserve to be treated appropriately. Their way of life must be respected.

6.53 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) on introducing it, and on his calm and reasoned approach to the subject matter. I also congratulate the other right hon. and hon. Members who have made speeches or interventions, including my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the right hon. Members for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice) and for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), and the hon. Members for Watford (Richard Harrington), for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh), for Hendon (Dr Offord), for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). All brought well informed views to the debate and spoke passionately on behalf of their constituents. There have been urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, religious and non-religious views put forward. The animal welfare considerations have been wide-ranging, and I hope that people who read the report of the debate will, like me—and, I think, other Members—feel better informed because of the debate and this afternoon's parliamentary work.

I forget who made the comment this afternoon that religious communities are deeply concerned with animal welfare. I put that top and foremost in my speech, because it is right. Those who condemn the slaughter practices of religious communities should be aware that those who practice

shechita or halal do it with the best interest of the animal in mind, and attempt to do that to the highest standard.

The Labour party position is that we would prefer it if all animals were stunned before slaughter. That is a long-held policy position shared with Her Majesty's

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Government and is based on well established scientific consensus, which points to evidence that slaughter without pre-stunning causes pain and distress. The EU-funded DIALREL project, a DEFRA and New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry research study, a European Food Safety Authority study, and the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, among others, have come to the same conclusion. Some, in defence of non-stun slaughter for religious reasons, contest the evidence; but the mainstream scientific consensus is well established. There is, however, an exemption within EU and UK law to allow religious slaughter for kosher and halal meat. Labour would prefer that all animals be stunned before slaughter, but we support the exemption, which allows for production and consumption of kosher and halal meat. There is of course a delicate balance to be struck between the pressing need to respect different religious communities and beliefs in the UK, and the equally pressing need for animal welfare and the reduction of suffering and distress in slaughter.

The Labour party also believes strongly that consumer interests are best served through transparency in food production and processing, and that consumers have a right to know where their food comes from, and how it was reared and slaughtered. We believe that that labelling to show different methods of slaughter, or simply stun or non-stun slaughter, has merit, but that it is best debated and agreed at an EU level to ensure a clear and consistent approach across all EU member states. We hope that today the Minister will be able to reveal some progress with the extended European Commission study on labelling, which was originally expected to report in 2014.

The Minister might also want to comment on the practicality of an industry-led UK-only scheme, in response to consumer concerns. The British trade body for the beef and sheep industry, EBLEX, led a consultation in 2013 on such a scheme, and the British Veterinary Association, of which I am an honorary associate member, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Humane Slaughter Association have advocated the adoption of a simple logo to indicate whether the animal was stunned before slaughter. Has the Minister had any discussions with those trade bodies or other organisations on the practicality of implementing a UK-only scheme—perhaps industry-led, and perhaps a voluntary approach? Will the Minister also reveal what discussions, if any, he has had with consumer organisations about the changing levels of concern—or otherwise—of UK consumers, given heightened media coverage of the issue in recent times? What is the current level of consumer demand in the UK for clear labelling on methods of slaughter, or simply on stunned or non-stunned slaughter?

Many organisations have come together to demand a total ban on slaughter without pre-stunning. The Labour party commends their focus on animal welfare, which is something that we have long championed. Only last week, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), launched Labour's wide-ranging animal welfare proposals, which were warmly welcomed.

However, the call for an outright ban on pre-stunned slaughter would have significant consequences. It would end the non-stunned slaughter for kosher and halal meat in the UK, which would of course impact on

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religious communities. It would not, to my understanding, ban the importation of non-stunned meat from other countries, where we have no direct control over methods of slaughter. If done in the UK, at least we can effectively regulate and enforce the highest standards of animal welfare for stunned

and non-stunned slaughter. When standards of slaughter fall short, as they have in recent examples highlighted by Animal Aid and others, action can be and is taken decisively by UK authorities. For animal welfare considerations, therefore, exponents of a ban need to be sure that we would not simply offshore non-stunned slaughter to other countries where we have no such controls.

Let me be absolutely clear: banning the production of non-stunned meat will not lead automatically to the end of the consumption of non-stunned meat. For many Muslims and Jews, there is no alternative to consumption of meat slaughtered in accordance with their religious beliefs, or an interpretation of religious beliefs that stipulates that an animal may not be stunned.

Organisations such as the RSPCA, the BVA, the Humane Slaughter Association and others have come together with reasonable questions for the Minister on measures that fall short of a ban, but could improve animal welfare at slaughter. I ask him for his response to their suggestions, which he will have had time to consider before the debate. First, what consideration have the Government given to the German approach, which places a requirement on abattoirs to demonstrate religious need and demand, and to define precisely the numbers to be slaughtered for the demand of that religious community, as a condition of being granted a licence for non-stunned slaughter? The logic is that that restricts non-stunned slaughter to a minimum, and avoids excessive and unnecessary non-stunned slaughter, in which ultimately surplus meat is diverted away from those communities and into the wider UK and EU supply chain.

What discussions has the Minister had with our Muslim and Jewish community leaders and organisations in the UK on greater use of post-cut stunning to reduce animals' distress and suffering? Does he, as Members have said today, see scope for progress on that? Post-cut stunning would be a significant step forward on animal welfare. While countries such as Finland, Estonia, Austria, Slovakia and Australia have made that mandatory, we want to see our religious communities work with the Government to achieve that without mandation, if possible.

Labour will continue to speak up for animal welfare and consumer rights while respecting religious communities. There is work to be done by Government, but also by and with organisations concerned with animal welfare and those religious communities affected, who are also hugely concerned with animal welfare. We are committed to taking this matter forward when we are in government, working with all concerned to ensure the highest standards of animal welfare at slaughter, and building on our long-standing support for improving welfare standards in production and processing of Great British food and in our fisheries. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

7.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I congratulate all the members of the public who signed the petition and for getting it past the 100,000 threshold to secure

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this debate. Members from all parties have expressed frustration at the fact that we debated this issue as recently as November, but let me be clear: I have always been of the view that debate never does harm to a democracy such as ours. This issue has been debated in Parliament since 1875 and if reports are to be believed that another petition has also exceeded 100,000 signatories, no doubt we will discuss it again, perhaps even before the general election.

The reason for that is the importance of this issue to the public. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) that the new procedure that enables members of the public to force debate on issues that are important to them is a good one. It is healthy for our democracy, so we should embrace and support it. I remember that he chaired the previous debate, which took place here back in November, when I dealt with many of these issues. He may recall that I set out some of the historical context. Given that some hon. Members here were not at that debate, it might be

useful to summarise briefly some of that context again.

European and domestic regulations, which apply to the welfare of all animals slaughtered, require that all animals are stunned before slaughter. However, there is a long-standing derogation to allow slaughter without stunning in accordance with religious rites for the production of halal or kosher meat.

Our current national requirements on religious slaughter have a long history. The Government first set down powers to prevent cruelty in slaughterhouses through the Public Health Act 1875, and byelaws made under that legislation required animals to be “effectually stunned”. In 1904, the Admiralty set up a committee to ascertain the most humane and practical methods of slaughtering animals. Its report recommended, without exception, that all animals should be stunned before slaughter.

Following that report, the Local Government Board issued a circular proposing that the recommendations of the Admiralty’s committee should be implemented, but stunning should not be obligatory where slaughter was carried out by a Jew, licensed by the Chief Rabbi, provided that no unnecessary suffering was inflicted. It is interesting that a similar requirement for shechita slaughter—that it is carried out by a Jewish slaughterman, licensed by the Rabbinical Commission—still exists in our national legislation.

The first national legislative requirement for stunning was brought in under the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, as I think the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) alluded to. That also contained an exception from stunning for slaughter for Jews and Muslims. Over the years the national rules governing religious slaughter have developed to provide protection to animals that are slaughtered in accordance with religious rites. That brings me to the current situation.

Our existing national rules on religious slaughter, which are set out in schedule 12 to the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter and Killing) Regulations 1995, provide greater protection than those contained in the European regulation. For example, there are requirements on how cattle can be restrained: we require bovines to be restrained only in pens that meet the requirements set down in the regulations. Such pens must be of suitable size and design, and include a suitable head restraint and a means of support that will take the animal’s weight during and following slaughter—a belly support. All pens must go through a rigorous procedure before approval is given.

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Furthermore, unlike member states such as France and the Netherlands, we do not allow inversion of cattle for religious slaughter. That ban followed the 1985 report of the then Farm Animal Welfare Council, which recommended that inversion should be banned. The reason it gave was

“the terror and discomfort which ensue from the inversion of cattle in the rotary pen”.

The FAWC went on to recommend

“that the law be amended to permit the use of a pen which restrains the animal in a standing position provided that the design of the pen, which must be approved by Ministers, incorporates effective restraint and support for the animal”.

Other recommendations from that important 1985 FAWC report have been part of our national rules for some 25 years. They include, for instance, that no animal should be placed in a restraining pen until the slaughterman is in position and ready to carry out the incision. The regulations also require that a captive bolt gun must be kept close to the restraining pen in case of any emergency—for example, if the animal does not become unconscious due to the occlusion of the arteries in its neck.

Miss McIntosh: The Bowood episode clearly shows that the regulations might not be being followed to the letter, so who is responsible for ensuring that they are?

George Eustice: The food business operator—the operator of the abattoir—is legally required to

ensure that those are followed, but I point out that an official veterinarian is present at every abattoir and it is their job to enforce them. I shall return to the issue of enforcement later.

In addition, the regulations require that before each animal is slaughtered, the knife must be checked to ensure it is sharp and undamaged, and that the cut must be a rapid and uninterrupted movement that cuts both carotid arteries and veins.

Other national rules concern the so-called standstill times for cattle, sheep and goats: following the neck cut, the animal cannot be moved, in the case of bovines, until it is unconscious and at least 30 seconds have passed, or, in the case of sheep and goats, until at least 20 seconds have passed. The standstill times aim to provide protection from avoidable pain, suffering and distress caused, for example, by unnecessary movement while the animal is still conscious.

Although there are no standstill rules as such for poultry, there are still a number of national rules that aim to minimise pain, suffering and distress. Following the neck cut, no further dressing procedure can be carried out on the bird until it is unconscious and at least two minutes have elapsed, in the case of turkeys and geese; for all other birds it is 90 seconds.

I set those regulations out in detail because it is important to recognise that there are special, strict requirements where religious slaughter is carried out. However, hon. Members should recognise another important point: none of the exemptions we have for religious slaughter exempt any operator from their obligations under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. It is the role of the official veterinarians in the abattoirs to decide when it may be necessary to go in, as required under the regulations, and use a bolt gun where something goes wrong. I shall return to that point later.

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As my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering pointed out, there are also differing requirements right across Europe, as provided for in the European regulations. In Germany, for example, abattoirs have to prove the religious needs and the number of animals to be slaughtered to satisfy the needs of the religious community concerned before being granted a licence. My hon. Friend asked whether we could look at that further, as did the shadow Minister. It is an interesting area and following this debate, given the apparent support from hon. Members, I would be willing to look at it. However, the existing standstill times are already a powerful disincentive for the mainstreaming of religious slaughter, because they make the process much slower. It is therefore not really in the interests of any abattoir to conduct religious slaughter in accordance with the regulations unless it is for a specific need.

Mr David Jones: Why are such a high proportion of sheep and goats being killed by the non-stun method? The figure is 15%, as we have heard, whereas the Jewish and Muslim population of this country accounts for only some 5% of the total population.

George Eustice: I am not sure. I will have to check those particular figures. We know, for instance, that around 73% of all halal meat slaughtered is already stunned before it is slaughtered, and as many hon. Members pointed out, the amount of kosher meat on the market is a very small proportion. However, this is an interesting area, and it is something that I have looked at. I do not think that it gets away from the broader dilemma of the debate, but nevertheless, it is worthy of further consideration.

In the Netherlands, all animals must be stunned if they have not lost consciousness within 40 seconds of the cut. In France, there must be a post-cut stun if cattle are still conscious after 90 seconds. Other countries—notably Finland, Austria, Estonia and Slovakia—go further in requiring immediate post-cut stunning, whereas Denmark requires post-cut stunning in bovines only.

Further afield, as several hon. Members have pointed out, under Australian law, stunning at slaughter is required, but there is an option for a state or meat inspection authority to provide an exemption and approve an abattoir for ritual slaughter without prior stunning for the domestic market, but post-cut stunning is still a requirement for those animals.

As we have plenty of time, I want to move on to other points that hon. Members have raised. Having discussed this issue with my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice), who was one of my predecessors in this role, I know that this is something he has looked at. I can tell him that I have looked at it in equal detail since and that finding a consensus among the various parties concerned is no easier than it ever was. However, I want to pick up on a few issues that he highlighted.

My right hon. Friend described a situation in an abattoir in which several sheep were in a V restrainer conveyor simultaneously. That would be a breach of the existing regulations. There should never be more than one sheep in a sheep restrainer for the purposes of religious slaughter, because, as I have pointed out, the requirement is very clear that they cannot go into the slaughter pen—in this case, the V restrainer—until they

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are ready to be slaughtered. That is very important, because sheep have a natural tendency to want to flock, and putting them in a restrainer where they are held firm, while there are the standstill times and other sheep taking 15 or 20 seconds ahead of them, is not right. That is a breach of the existing regulations.

My right hon. Friend raised valid points on the time to unconsciousness. I remember well him describing to me seeing cattle take up to six minutes to lose consciousness. I hear various ranges for the time to loss of consciousness. There is a consensus that chickens are normally unconscious within 15 to 20 seconds. Likewise, I am told that 10 to 15 seconds is typical in the case of sheep, as he pointed out, and sometimes it is a little longer. However, when it comes to cattle, it is clear that there can be quite wide variances. He says that he witnessed cattle taking between four and six minutes to lose consciousness. I have discussed the matter with our veterinary advisers, some of whom have worked as OVs in abattoirs, and they tell me that it is more typical that, after around 40 seconds, the animal will collapse and go off its legs, and be supported by the restraining pen, and that it will typically then lose consciousness after 1 minute 20 seconds. That is still quite a lot of time, but it is why France has a cut-off point of 1 minute 30 seconds, after which a post-cut stun is required. At the other extreme, I have met former staff of the FSA who have told me that they have seen shechita abattoirs do this particularly effectively, with the animal collapsing within 10 seconds.

It is also clear that in many of these abattoirs, both halal and shechita—the best ones—where anything goes wrong, they are in quickly with the bolt gun to put the animal out of any pain. That is why I want again to talk about the Animal Welfare Act 2006, under which there is a requirement on an abattoir operator not to cause any unnecessary suffering to an animal. Where something goes wrong—where, for example, it takes up to five or six minutes for the animal to lose consciousness—there is a clear rationale for an official veterinarian to intervene earlier to say that something had gone wrong and that, as required under the regulations, the animal should be dispatched with a bolt gun.

Further to the fact that I have never been able to get a clear answer on exactly how long it takes for bovines in particular to lose consciousness, some months ago I asked our deputy chief veterinary officer to conduct a piece of work with the FSA to look at the matter afresh and see whether we can, without changing any laws, ensure that we have consistent application of the existing laws and consistent understanding of when it is appropriate for an OV to require that post-cut shot to be taken.

Let me move on to other points. Various hon. Members questioned the science of whether it is better for the welfare of the animals for them to be stunned prior to slaughter. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) made the good point, which I will concede, that at the time when halal and kosher were designed, they were very much about respect for the animal and sparing it any unnecessary pain. The genesis of both halal and kosher was about animal welfare, albeit that was some time ago.

I also completely accept that there can be good and bad abattoirs. It may be that conventional abattoirs would also mistreat the animals. I completely recognise the point that there are big differences. The only thing that I would say—this is where there is strong cross-party

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consensus—is that we have to look at the scientific evidence that we have, and the argument that says that the cut itself is equivalent to a stun is not borne out by the scientific evidence. As the shadow Minister pointed out, we had in 2003 the Farm Animal Welfare Committee report, which concluded that non-stun slaughter could cause distress and suffering. In 2004, we had the European Food Safety Authority report, which also concluded that it was preferable to have stunning of all animals. In 2009, the EU DIALREL report reached the same conclusion. It looked at neurological surveys of animals that were being slaughtered in order to establish scientifically whether they were experiencing pain. More recently, work in New Zealand has confirmed the same. It is therefore important that we recognise the basis on which the exemption exists. It is not because we think that somehow religious slaughter, be it halal or shechita, is a more humane way to slaughter animals than what mainstream abattoirs do today. It is because we respect the religious rights of those communities and we have accommodated them in the long-standing derogations that we have in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) raised the issue of CCTV, on which we have recently had a report from the Farm Animal Welfare Committee. It stops short of saying that there should be compulsory use of CCTV in slaughterhouses. We should recognise that the place in her constituency about which concerns were raised did have CCTV, so it is no panacea on its own. However, the FAWC report does conclude that many advantages come with CCTV. It can also help business managers to manage their operation. For instance, it can reveal lameness in sheep in the lairage pens that would not otherwise be detected. If used correctly, CCTV can be a very useful tool to help business managers to ensure that they are compliant with the regulation and to manage their business operations.

My hon. Friend also mentioned enforcement. I will come to that at the end. Labelling was the other issue that a number of hon. Members raised, and I want to deal with that. There is a European Commission working group. The shadow Minister asked about the timing of the report. It is one of those EU reports that has been delayed and delayed. We initially expected it last summer, then we expected it in the new year, and the latest update that I have had is that it is still some months away, which I think reflects the fact that this is a difficult issue to get right.

Let me give some general pointers. First, there is a very clear legal definition, both in our own law and in European law, of what stunned means for the purposes of abattoirs. It is rendering an animal insensitive to pain instantly or almost instantly, so I think that we can be clear that we could have “Stunned” or “Unstunned” as a form of labelling. My right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire made a very good point about the inability to enforce that sometimes. It would not be easy and it would not necessarily protect all those people who were buying their food from catering establishments, either. There are difficulties in labelling things just as “Halal” or “Kosher”. As a number of hon. Members pointed out, not all parts of the carcass are deemed kosher, even though the animal may have been slaughtered by kosher methods, and there is no single, uniform interpretation of what halal means. Different imams have different interpretations of the rules. We therefore await the report from the European Commission.

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I have heard it said that there could be labelling that just said “Unstunned” if the animal had not been stunned, but again this, like other issues, is not easy.

Ms Abbott: I am always gripped by discussions about the European Commission, but will the Minister comment on the point that concerns my constituents, which is that for some of the people involved in the push against halal and shechita, animal welfare is merely a flag of convenience?

That is what concerns my constituents. They are very happy to make slaughter safer and more humane, but they are worried about the motivation of some of the people who are pushing this issue and who keep coming back to it.

George Eustice: I know that the hon. Lady made that point previously. I do not think that there has been anything in the debate today to suggest that that is the case among hon. Members taking part in it, and indeed the motion itself makes it absolutely clear that it is looking just at the animal welfare issue, so I am not sure that we should go down that route.

In conclusion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) pointed out, the Government have no plans at all to ban religious slaughter. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that there is no intention to ban religious slaughter. However, everyone agrees that we need good enforcement of our existing legislation.

Huw Irranca-Davies: Does the Minister see any scope for progress on post-cut stunning, which would be a real step forward? Several hon. Members raised that.

George Eustice: Yes, and I am going to come to that, but my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton mentioned enforcement and I can confirm that today, following a number of incidents, the FSA has begun a series of unannounced inspections of GB slaughterhouses, and by the end of March all approved slaughterhouses will have been subject to an unannounced inspection.

On the shadow Minister's point, in the longer term, we may be able to learn lessons from other countries. Some other countries have managed to accommodate or reconcile the beliefs of Jewish and Muslim communities while having a slightly different approach from us. A number of countries, including Holland and France, do have a requirement for a post-cut stun in a particular time scale. It is not easy to get consensus among the religious communities for that, but we should also recognise, as I said at the beginning, that in many respects our national rules are better than those elsewhere in Europe, especially on the issue of inversion, which is, according to all advice, quite serious.

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We have had a very good, informative debate, covering a wide range of issues. It has been a pleasure to be here to debate this issue again.

7.27 pm

Mr Hollobone: It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the conclusion of the debate, Mr Havard. We must all thank the petitioners—the people who signed the petition to allow us to have the debate. Should any of the 116,000 be watching—some very good people have come along to the Public Gallery—I hope that they will have been impressed by the range of views and the way in which the debate was conducted.

A former DEFRA Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Sir James Paice), made extremely informative remarks. The Chairman of the EFRA Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh), expressed her constituents' shock at affairs at Bowood abattoir. The Chairman of another Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellum), represented the Jewish community extremely well. A practising Muslim, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), expressed the views of those who consume halal products. A Jewish MP who does not eat kosher food, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), has beaten the rest of us, because he has already taken the case to No. 10 and got the Prime Minister on board. The representative of one of the largest Jewish communities in the UK, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), stressed the high standards of training in shechita abattoirs. Indeed, three Members have visited abattoirs, and there is nothing like seeing things at first hand. The chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for beef and lamb, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton

(Neil Parish), made an excellent contribution. A former Cabinet member from north Wales, my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), also gave us his views and stressed the need to look at the German system.

This issue is not going to go away. No doubt we will be back in a few weeks' time with the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) representing the 125,000 people who have signed the e-petition in favour of religious slaughter. Labelling is a key issue. The extent of mis-stunning has shocked us all. I have not heard anyone speak out against CCTV in all slaughterhouses, and a very strong case was made for post-cut stunning.

I hope the Minister has been impressed by the strength and variety of contributions made to him. I am sure that he will stick to his commitment to look at these issues in greater detail, because the public out there want Parliament—our Parliament—to do something about this.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.