

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM

PRESENTED BY



Is it time for a legal definition of veganism?

Committee Room 15, Tuesday 19 July 2018

Christina Rees MP, Chair of APPG on Vegetarianism and Veganism opened the meeting and introduced two MPs in attendance: Darren Jones MP and Kerry McCarthy MP.

Dr Jeanette Rowley, International Vegan Rights Alliance

- Two main points to consider when looking at a legal definition is food labelling and how the definition may or may not help vegans.
- When discussing a legal definition of veganism, we need to understand what veganism means. One catch-all definition of veganism does not exist; there are many different reasons and philosophies as to why people choose to adopt a vegan lifestyle. A legal definition would need to encompass and embody all types of vegans. An example of the different types of vegans include: environmental vegans, ethical vegans, dietary vegans. Some practice weekend veganism or partake in events like Veganuary. How can we ground and articulate a definition that is accepted internationally?
- One clear benefit a legal definition would yield is to protect vegans from EU food products. What constitutes a vegan product in the EU does not translate in the UK.
- A phrase, 'vegans should ditch the dogma,' has been used and is both insulting and demeaning. A legal definition could help ethical vegans in particular to reclaim the dogma.
- At present vegans are protected under EU law under Article 9, Freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In the UK this equates to the Equality Act 2010, which means that vegans have the same legal protections as those who hold religious beliefs. However does this protection include people who are vegan for the weekend or for one day a week?
- Because vegans are protected under EU and UK human rights law, it is not a top priority for veganism to have a legal definition. However in Canada people professing a belief must provide proof, which can cause difficulties in legal cases. Similarly, in Austria veganism is equated to a hobby.
- Maybe a review of the current definition and a discussion around the philosophy of the word might help to articulate the definition better?

Edwina Bowles

- Some parts of the Animal Welfare Act derive from EU law. The definition of animal cruelty is on the back of scientific evidence. At present the Animal Welfare Act protects, 'vertebrae other than man'.
- There exist big problems when trying to enforce cruelty against animals. For example, pig tail docking is not prosecuted in 70% circumstances; thousands of violations occur in the transport of livestock to slaughterhouses.
- The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs needs to amend a definition to include that crustaceans feel pain, which is backed up scientifically.

Annie Evans and Natacha Rodrigues – The Vegan Society

- At first glance vegan classified food appears obvious however some products such as E numbers contain animal derivatives.
- The Vegan Society educates manufacturers to make sure standards are met. The definition of veganism put forward by The Vegan Society is widely understood internationally to promote development of alternative foods and environmental protection. The Vegan Society Trademark is widely used and the Society's definition is used and recognised worldwide.
- Many vegans struggle with identifying truly vegan products. A clear vegan symbol on products would simplify buying products for many vegans.
- Since 1990 the Vegan Trademark has been providing vegans with assurance that the products they are consuming are vegan. The Vegan Society goes beyond checking each ingredient to see if it is animal free; it also makes sure that the process is cruelty free; nothing has been tested on animals.
- The Vegan Society wants to see improved labelling and to extend the term to reflect what happens in the manufacturing and supply chain process. More transparency in labelling will help to grow the vegan cause.
- The Vegan Society also welcomes stricter guidelines on where and how the term 'vegan' is used.

Audience Q&A

On the subject of animal derivatives in everyday products such as the new banknotes, would a legal definition help to protect vegans against being forced to handle products that are not vegan? JR responded by saying that there are problems when it comes to proportionality and whether it was a legitimate aim. The same polymers are contained in our plastic cards so vegans have been handling these products for a long time. The response from the Bank of England would be that there is no other way to fulfil this process. It was then argued that maybe this is why a legal definition is needed.

The discussion then turned to what would happen if the legal definition was used by the livestock industry to try and define other products in a way that would negatively impact vegans. JR said this is a legitimate concern as illustrated by past behaviour of the dairy industry. CR and EB both agreed that a definition would help to protect vegans and an expansion of the definition philosophically would help to achieve this.

A question from the audience navigated the conversation to 2020 when an official EU definition of veganism will be coming into play. AE stated that The Vegan Society would like to be heavily involved with this process because it is protective over the way the word is used. If an EU definition comes into practice, then there will need to be an increased focus on EU labelling. The Chair of The Vegan Society, Stephen Walsh, agreed and stated that the EU definition should not stray from the consensus around The Vegan Society definition and that The Vegan Society had already contributed text along with the European Vegetarian Union as part of a consultation.

Discussion turned to labelling and how many foods are vegan but are not labelled as such. This can cause people to second guess and not trust foods without clear vegan labelling. The panel agreed that without a legal definition, vegans have no protection over foods that state, 'this product is suitable for vegans' because there is no legal definition of the word. CR pointed out that when things are labelled as vegan they need to be held to the strict definition of the word.

On the topic of the word veganism, an audience member pointed out that although The Vegan Society invented the word, it does not own it. There was an example of an American company that tried to patent the word, but was denied. The word belongs to the world. The question was raised of whether supermarkets have to meet minimum standards in order to label their products vegan. While guidelines exist they are not legally binding. A legal definition would make these guidelines less ambiguous. CR brought up the issue of how local authority budget cuts have affected bodies on the ground such as Trading Standards. While guidelines are in place, front line staff are hard pressed and resources are scarce. Enforcing vegan guidelines is not at the top of their priorities.

The discussion then turned to what differences a legal definition would make. JR said it was hard to say without knowing what the legal definition would entail. At the moment it is broad, which is a good thing; there would be difficulty if the legal definition became restrictive and exclusionary. EB said a legal definition would need to encompass a legal definition of the philosophy and legal labelling requirements.

The meeting ended on a positive note, with an audience member highlighting how far the vegan movement had come in the last 25 years. This has taken a lot of hard work and campaigning. The achievements gained in the last 25 years for vegans should not be underestimated.