

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair] — Animal Slaughter (Religious Methods) November 4 2014

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(Damian Hinds.)


9:30 am





Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I welcome the Under-**Secretary of State** for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend **George Eustice**, to his place. I thank Mr **Speaker** for allowing me time for this vital debate. It is good to see the **shadow Minister, Huw Irranca-Davies**, here.

When the all-party group on beef and lamb, of which I am honoured to be the chairman, decided to conduct an inquiry into the welfare of animals slaughtered in accordance with religious rites, I knew we were entering a highly polarised and often poorly understood area of public discourse. Discussions in the media have often produced more heat than light, and I hope the group's report and today's debate will provide more of the latter.

There are no easy solutions to what is legally, scientifically and culturally a complicated set of circumstances. However, given the legitimate concerns of the public, animal welfare organisations and religious communities, it is worth having the debate in a calm and transparent way. For that reason, the group proceeded on the basis that the inquiry's ultimate aim should be to improve animal welfare at the time of slaughter. Throughout the inquiry, we were careful to make distinctions between halal and shechita, the different methods of non-stun slaughter and the species being considered. We took evidence, in writing and in oral evidence sessions, from a wide range of stakeholders, including industry experts, Shechita UK, the Halal Food Authority,  veterinary professionals, the Minister and the **European Commission**.

European law requires that all animals are stunned before slaughter. However, a derogation permits member states to allow non-stunning in the case of slaughter in observance with religious beliefs. That is an important point. By law, animals have to be stunned before slaughter to ensure they suffer as little pain as possible, and the relevant **laws** were informed  by scientific and veterinary evidence. Halal and shechita methods of slaughter are exempt from those scientifically established regulations not because they meet a different set of animal welfare standards, but because they are a matter of freedom of religious and cultural expression. In an ideal world, I would  all livestock to be stunned before slaughter, but that must be reconciled with the United Kingdom's proud record of religious tolerance and our history of allowing communities to eat meat prepared in accordance with their faith.

The report has identified several areas where greater research is needed, and I hope the Government take our recommendations on board when considering regulations

on food labelling and welfare at the time of slaughter. As we move forward, it is particularly important to note that, under the halal method of slaughter, the animal must be killed as a result of a sharp blade cutting its jugular vein, so that death is caused by bleeding out. The way the animal dies is important, and there is much diversity of opinion among UK Muslims on whether stunned slaughter is halal. Some in the Muslim community believe that there is a danger that stunning the animal will result in its being killed by the stunning rather than by bleeding out, and that stunning is therefore not halal.

About 90% of lambs and 88% of chickens slaughtered under halal are stunned before slaughter, so the likelihood and duration of pain at the time of slaughter is likely to be much less. However, that still leaves a large number of animals that are not stunned before slaughter. It is estimated that 3% of cattle, 10% of sheep and goats, and 4% of poultry slaughtered in **Great Britain** are not pre-stunned. One estimate is that 114 million animals are killed annually in the UK using the halal method, while a further 2.1 million are killed under the shechita method. The value of the halal market is estimated at between £1 billion and £2 billion.

Being able to prove that the stun is recoverable and will not kill the animal, but will instead render it insensitive to pain, is vital if we are to increase the number of animals stunned before slaughter. Some witnesses we took evidence from will accept no stunning during the slaughtering process, while others, including the Halal Food Authority, will permit some, but not all, methods of stunning.

We took evidence, for example, on the use of post-cut stunning—stunning immediately after the animal's neck is cut. Although it is not as desirable as pre-stunning, evidence from studies in **New Zealand** shows that post-cut stunning reduces the duration of pain at the time of slaughter, while ensuring that the cause of death is bleed-out, making this method of stunning halal-compliant.



Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire, Liberal Democrat)

I pay tribute to the work the hon. Gentleman did in chairing the all-party group. Some of the evidence we received showed that **New Zealand** has developed a process called “stun to live”. An animal that has been stunned is used to demonstrate that if it is not slaughtered, it will regain consciousness and continue to live. That is satisfactory to some Muslim people.



Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

That was exactly what we heard. The crux of the matter is that any stunning that takes place under a halal system must be recoverable to be seen as halal-compliant. Not all in the Muslim community agree with that, but many do, and I would like the Government to do more research on that. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his **intervention**.

The inquiry highlighted that the **majority** of studies have been about halal slaughter. There is therefore a deficit in our veterinary understanding of the shechita method of

slaughter in the Jewish community, which permits no form of stunning. In its evidence, the [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#) said it had sought to include the shechita method of slaughter in its studies, but that it had not yet been successful in doing so. I therefore urge the Government to carry on that work and to look at the shechita method.



David Simpson (Shadow DUP Spokesperson (Communities and Local Government); Upper Bann, DUP)

I declare an interest in the agri-food business. I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and I congratulate him on the work he has done on the issue. Does he accept that those who export meat right across the world are put in a difficult position? They want to ensure the welfare of the animal, which is vital, but they are forced to go down a certain route when they export. They also have to look after their employees. In order to win contracts, therefore, they sometimes have to change their methods.



Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

There is a balance to be struck. [New Zealand](#) exports a lot of meat to the middle east. It still does partial stunning, and the Muslim community seems largely to accept that. Work can therefore be done on the issue. There is also an argument that stunning in the slaughterhouses makes things easier and safer for the slaughtermen. There are therefore issues about the welfare not only of the animals, but of those doing the slaughtering.



Eric Ollerenshaw (Lancaster and Fleetwood, Conservative)

I add my congratulations on the way my hon. Friend chaired the work on this fairly balanced report. One of the issues that we did not get to the bottom of, certainly in the meetings I attended, was the sheer scale of mis-stunning. That was raised by Shechita UK. Nowhere did there seem to be any particular figures on how much mis-stunning there is.



Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

Yes. I am hoping that in a moment the [Minister](#) with responsibility for farming will give us more figures. I think we should have closed circuit television cameras in all slaughterhouses, whether they are using shechita or halal methods, or stun systems for the general meat trade. I think that the amount of mis-stunning is sometimes exaggerated. On the other hand, mis-stunning of animals should not happen. It is very bad animal welfare, and we need to stamp it out. We need to be certain how big the



problem is. If the system of stunning in a slaughterhouse is not correct, it should be replaced. I have no time for mis-stunning.



Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton, Conservative)

I know that my hon. Friend works closely with the **British Veterinary Association**, for which I am sure we all have the highest regard. Is it the case that if an animal is stressed, that is reflected in the state of the meat? Is that not damaging for the market?





Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

Yes; my hon. Friend, the Chair of the **Select Committee** on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, makes an interesting point. We believe that if an animal is stressed, there will be an effect on the flavour of the meat. It is in the interest of not only the animal but the industry to make sure that it is as little stressed as possible when it comes through the slaughterhouse, but of course, the act of slaughter is in itself very difficult.


The revelations of horsemeat contamination in 2013 highlighted the importance that consumers place on the origin of their food, and the trust that they place in

retailers to guarantee that. When that trust is broken, it is felt across the industry. An animal passes through a number of stages from the farm gate to the fork. That is why it

 is important that the meat should be properly labelled to allow consumers of all faiths to make informed decisions when they buy their meat. It is the all-party group's belief that labelling should be considered, and it should be on the basis of stun or non-stun

 methods—not halal versus kosher—because consumers are thought to have a sufficient understanding of what the terms “stunned” or “non-stunned” mean. The group believes, however, that more work can be done to clarify, for consumers of halal and kosher meat, and the wider public, what the terms entail, specifically. That applies particularly to halal, where there is disagreement about the permissibility of stunning, as I mentioned earlier.

The report also makes a recommendation for research to be reviewed and new research to be undertaken where necessary to determine the effect of stunning on the residual

 blood content left in meat, in comparison with that produced from slaughter without stunning.



Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire, Liberal Democrat)

I was very pleased by the all-party group's conclusion that meat should be labelled as stunned or non-stunned. That will give consumers greater understanding. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in the hospitality trade—restaurants and pubs where meat is served—it is sometimes very difficult for traceability to be established for consumers?



Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

That is a good point. The labelling system is more difficult in the case of restaurant meat, processed meat, and meat products. We need to remember that quite a lot of meat from animals slaughtered in the halal system and the shechita system—the kosher system—does not land up in that particular food chain. Quite a lot of it goes into the general meat trade. That is an issue that requires us to think seriously about labelling. In addition to existing research, a report has recently been published by Colin Brewer, an academic psychiatrist, and Peter Osin, a consultant pathologist, comparing halal and kosher beef with ordinary beef and a piece of venison from a shot deer. Microscopic slides revealed that they all retained similar amounts of red blood cells. Their report concluded:

“If ritual slaughter not only causes levels of avoidable pain and distress to meat animals...but also fails in its stated purpose of removing as much blood as possible, compared with other methods, then it becomes more difficult to justify and defend”.

There are measures that the Government can introduce in the short term to help improve the welfare of animals slaughtered in accordance with religious rites. First, the Government should review whether compulsory **CCTV** in abattoirs should be introduced to make sure that there is oversight and that guidance is being followed for all—I emphasise that I mean all—methods of slaughter. There must also be a review of the current guidance available to operators conducting religious slaughter. There is some guidance available, but during the inquiry we were concerned about the lack of guidance that we found on the actual methods of cutting the neck of the animal. Providing greater guidance would undoubtedly minimise the risk of mis-slaughtering and reduce the duration of pain felt.

The **Food Standards Agency** does not publish information on the number of mis-slaughtered animals, and holds details only of when mis-cuts have occurred—not of whether the associated slaughter was carried out using a stun or non-stun process. That makes it hard to judge its effectiveness and how it compares with different stunning methods. What is clear is that there are gaps in our understanding of the slaughter process. Our inquiry identified several areas where more research is needed, such as on the measurement of pain in animals at the time of slaughter and on demonstrating the recoverability of certain stunning methods to reassure religious communities that they are compatible with their religion.

There is a danger that an outright ban on religious slaughter would not improve the welfare of animals at the point of slaughter. At the moment about 80% of the halal meat produced in this country has been stunned. Driving our halal and shechita meat industry abroad to countries without our robust animal welfare standards and our supply chain traceability might result in more animals being slaughtered without stunning.

I want to thank **Weber Shandwick**, which is retained by **EBLEX**, the organisation for beef and lamb levy payers in England, to act as the all-party group’s secretariat. I thank all the individuals and organisations who submitted written evidence and who appeared before our oral evidence sessions, as well as the other members of the all-party group. My particular respect goes to **Roger Williams**, who attended all our meetings. We conducted the inquiry in a pretty cool, calm way, and took some good evidence. I hope that the **Minister** will take many of our points on board. We present our report as a

serious piece of work. I should like there to be some animal welfare benefit, and to be able to deal with our Muslim and Jewish communities to find a way forward, so that more animals will be stunned at slaughter.



Philip Hollobone (Kettering, Conservative)

Order. The debate runs till 11 o'clock and I want to call the Front-Bench spokesmen no later than 10.40, and ideally before then. Six hon. Members want to speak, and perhaps they will be aware of timing when they make their remarks.

9:49 am



Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate **Neil Parish** on securing this debate. I particularly welcome his opening comments that the debate should be conducted calmly and transparently, as he did in the presentation of his case, and it is important that that approach is maintained. I want to draw attention to some issues relating to shechita, Jewish **laws** on slaughter methods. Muslims have similar concerns, but I will confine my remarks to Jewish methods of slaughter and kashrut.

My first point is that this issue is very important to the whole Jewish community. It recognises its rights as part of British society as well as enabling individual Jewish people who observe the laws of kashrut to eat meat and poultry. Any interference with their ability to do so would be a gross infringement of civil rights. The Jewish laws of kashrut are part of a wider concern for animal welfare. Shechita is carried out by trained, licensed experts. Animals are killed by a single cut to the throat in a prescribed way from a special surgically sharp knife that is regularly inspected. Blood flow to the brain is immediately cut off with consequential inability to feel pain and subsequent rapid death. There are too many other rules of kashrut to enumerate here, but it is important to point out that they are all related to enhancing animal welfare.

Criticism of Jewish methods of slaughter, of shechita, claims or often assumes that other methods of slaughter are more humane. Those other methods include stunning by penetrative bolt or by electrocution. They include chickens being shackled by their ankles and dipped into a water bath and electrocuted, and pigs herded into a room and gassed. None of those methods are pleasant.

What are the facts about allegations of cruelty in Jewish methods of slaughter compared with other methods? It is important to recognise, as has happened in this debate, that mechanical stunning has a high failure rate. Many more animals suffer because of inadequate stunning than are killed altogether by shechita. The report of the **EU** Food Safety Authority stated that failure rates for penetrative captive bolt stunning may be as high as 6.6%—2 million cows. It also reported that failure for non-penetrative captive bolt stunning and electric stunning could be as high as 31%—10 million cows. In

comparison, the total number of cattle killed by shechita in any one year is 20,000. It is clearly accepted, and has been by hon. Members this morning, that there are many cases of failed stunning and it is extremely important to register that. It is sometimes assumed that that is a superior method to shechita.

In addition to that report, a more recent one from [Animal Aid](#), "The Humane Slaughter Myth", recorded the results of filming in three random slaughterhouses in 2009. Among other things, it found pigs, sheep and calves inadequately stunned by electrocution and recounted horrific scenes of those animals trying to escape, howling and thrashing around. It reported injured animals who were then slaughtered and ewes watching their young killed. It is important to note that both practices are specifically prohibited under a range of intricate Jewish laws that prohibit cruelty to animals and make them not kosher and not able to be eaten by Jews observing kashrut.



Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire, Liberal Democrat)

I thank the hon. Lady for her sensible and calm approach to this matter. One of our concerns when we took evidence was that not all animals killed by the shechita method were found to be of kosher standard or quality and had to go into the general meat trade. Can anything be done to ensure that only animals that will be suitable for kosher meat are killed by the shechita method?



Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

Some parts of animals are prohibited from being eaten by people who observe the [laws](#) of kashrut and they are often sold in other parts of the food chain. That is part of the system. I know that there are issues about labelling slaughtering methods. I do not think that labelling would be objected to in principle, but it should apply to all types of killing and all situations in which killing takes place.



Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

I am grateful for the calm way we are debating this matter. We found from the evidence presented to us that in some big slaughterhouses not all slaughtering is necessarily checked by the Jewish community and some animals go through the system and end up in the normal food chain without going through the shechita system. There is a way to tighten up on that. The issue involves not just parts of the animals but whole animals that go through the system and are not fully checked. We could do more about that.



Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside, Labour)

I accept that further steps could be taken, but my essential concern is about preserving the rights of the Jewish community as part of British society to maintain its traditions and religious **laws** that are all designed to enhance animal welfare. I am greatly concerned about the often unstated assumption that stunning is more humane and that animals that are not killed according to Jewish laws do not suffer. The evidence simply does not substantiate that.

Shechita is humane. It is part of a body of Jewish laws designed to improve animal welfare and is vital to the Jewish community. The debate will continue and it is important that it does so calmly, recognising the rights of animals to the highest welfare standards and also recognising the rights of all communities within the United Kingdom.

9:57 am



Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon, Conservative)

On 16 January, the **other place** debated religious slaughter, showing a high level of scientific, practical and religious expertise. For example, **Lord Winston** and **Lord Sacks** gave scientific and religious justifications of shechita slaughter that I would recommend to anyone who is interested. I appreciate the non-emotive tone used by my hon. Friend **Neil Parish**. As **Mrs Ellman** said, let us be under no illusions about how emotive the issue is for the Orthodox Jewish British community. In the event of a ban on non-stunned meat—I appreciate that that has not been recommended by my hon. Friend—they would either have to import their meat or move to a place where they could eat it and maintain their civil liberties.

The report of July 2014 by the all-party group on beef and lamb, chaired by my hon. Friend, set out areas for future debate and asked as many questions as it answered. In particular, it accepted that concerns over shechita slaughter are not supported by scientific evidence and called for more research. I note the report's statement that it is worth debating

“whether the right to Freedom of Religious Expression outweighs animal welfare considerations”.

However, that is not the right starting point from a Jewish point of view, which is that a single knife cut stuns, kills and exsanguinates in a single act. Accordingly, the Jewish view is that shechita is the most humane and animal welfare friendly method of slaughter and is not to be weighed against or bargained with freedom of religious expression.

A conceptual problem is that modern slaughter practice, including stunning, is based on mechanised, mass market, cheap food requirements. That is not the starting point for shechita, where the quality of and respect to be given to each animal is key.

Another issue relates to whether or to what extent the animal feels pain during slaughter. The report acknowledges that there is a “knowledge deficit” about whether a neck cut is painful or not. That issue was raised by Lord Winston in the other place, who said:

“I emphasise that what has been said about pain is another assumption. Of course animals may move after the brain is severed but the brain itself does not perceive pain if it is damaged and, in fact, none of the organs below the skin has pain fibres. You have

some pain fibres in your trachea but they are very small. The evidence that animals suffer severe pain after one cut with an extremely sharp knife is extremely arguable. The truth is that, once you are unconscious, nobody knows what the perception of death or pain is.”—[Official Report, *House of Lords*, 16 January 2014; Vol. 751, c. GC200.]

I should point out that many other academics see shechita as just as humane as other slaughter methods. Moreover, it is certainly considered to be more humane than what happens to the chickens that are hung and electrocuted, the pigs that are gassed, and the cows that can be mis-stunned before the second, later act of slaughter takes place. All that avoids the issues surrounding the trapping of animals or the shooting of game from a distance, which is why many **Jews and Muslims** ask why shechita and halal should be looked at in isolation.

That question also attaches to the issue of labelling. Jewish rules were, of course, the first to initiate labelling, and all meat consumed as kosher needs to be labelled as such. However, it is then asked why kosher and halal meat in general—say, put in dog food—should have to be labelled, when meat slaughtered or stunned by other means need not. Moreover, are we not missing the broader point? Namely, would the consumer not be as interested in knowing how the animal lived as much as how it died—for instance, what drugs it was given or what density of population and conditions it lived in? Should those issues not also be included in the labelling debate? Personally, I think that they should, and that the all-party group report should be looked at in that wider context.

10:02 am



Shabana Mahmood (Shadow Minister (Treasury); Birmingham, Ladywood, Labour)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate **Neil Parish** on securing the debate and the hon. Members who took part in the production of this report. I follow on from my hon. Friend **Mrs Ellman** and **Mr Djanogly** in welcoming not only the atmosphere of calm in this debate and the transparent way in which it has been conducted so far, but the overall tone of the report produced by the **APPG**. It feels better to have this type of debate, rather than the one we had earlier in the year, followed by extensive media reporting, which was deeply divisive and caused a great deal of upset and pain to religious communities, who felt that their religious freedoms were under attack in an atmosphere of misinformation and sensationalist media reporting, which we should all do our best to avoid.

I am a practising Muslim, so the issues relating to access to religious slaughter matter to me personally; they also matter to many thousands of my constituents who are also Muslim. I represent a **constituency** with a large Muslim population, but I also represent other communities who have spoken to me about issues relating to religious slaughter—in particular, the Sikh community in my constituency, who worry that they are inadvertently consuming meat that, according to their religious **laws**, they would not be allowed to consume. That is why I will focus most of my remarks on the key issue of labelling, which is very important in order to give religious communities—people of practising religious faith—the opportunity to access meat that is in accordance with religious belief, and for those who wish to reject that meat, either on grounds of views



on the humaneness of the method of slaughter or because of other religious views. They should also be protected.

I just say that I absolutely fully support this country's current legislative framework, which allows religious communities to have access to meat that has not been stunned prior to slaughter. I think it is an important protection for religious freedom in our legislative framework and it should be retained. If it was not, as the hon. Member for Huntingdon said, religious communities would be forced to import meat or consider their long-term future in this country, and that would be a big and important moment for religious minority communities in our country.

The report says a great deal about labelling, much of which I support. As a person of practising religious faith, it is important to me that when I am buying meat, I am able to know whether that meat is halal and whether it has been stunned prior to slaughter. I was a bit troubled by some evidence given to the APPG by the Halal Food Authority in particular, which was uneasy about labelling, because it felt that if people knew that the meat had been stunned prior to slaughter, it would lead to a rejection of halal meat that had been stunned. I think that is a misunderstanding both of what is happening in our communities today and of the essential rights of consumers to know what they are buying. We should not be trying to hoodwink communities into accepting practices that result from mass production and mechanised processes, when, if people knew about those, they would utterly reject and feel very strongly about them.



I agree with the point made by Shechita UK and the Association of Non-Stun Abattoirs about the extent of labelling. Let us say the starting position is the belief that consumers should know what has happened to meat—whether it has been slaughtered in accordance with religious principles and about the method of stunning. None of those is a particularly pleasant way to treat animals. **Sometimes I** think we feel that we can sanitise the whole process of eating meat. At the end of the day, an animal is being killed, and, for people of religious faith, the killing of an animal is a really big deal, which is why so many **Muslims and Jews**, in particular, are so wedded to the methods laid down in their holy books for the killing of an animal. A life is being taken and therefore, it can only be done in the precise way that God has ordained, according to God's law, and that is why that matters so very much. When there is mass production and so much meat being produced in a mechanised way, it is difficult to stick to the principles laid down in the holy books, and some kind of further understanding of what happens in those processes is really important. However, we cannot take away from the fundamental act that is being done, and it is important that consumers understand that more. It is not just a nicely packaged pink bit of meat that we buy in the supermarket; something happened to it before, and the more information that we can give people, the more we can shine a light on practices in the industry, and actually, sometimes shining a light puts pressure on industry to look at better methods that would be more acceptable to the public.

Labelling is something that we should all support, but we should not just go for the basic level, and we should not just say that the burden on industry would be too great if we gave more information. That sounds to me almost as though we are trying to hide from the public what really happens in some abattoirs. We should be totally open and transparent, and labelling should not just extend to whether the animal is stunned or



non-stunned; we should look at the method of stunning as well as the method of slaughter, and we should seek to educate the public as much as possible. That would matter a lot not only to people of religious faith, but to people who have no religious faith but want to know how an animal has been treated, and ultimately, how it died.

10:08 am



Lee Scott (Ilford North, Conservative)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend **Neil Parish**, not only on the report, but on the way he has conducted this debate, as others have as well, because it is an emotive subject and it is very important that we tackle it in a calm, collected way.

It will not surprise my hon. Friend to know that I do not agree with everything that he said, but the truth of the matter is that my constituents and I—I only eat kosher meat, as he knows—believe passionately that the welfare of the animal is vital. To that end and after earlier debates, I thought, along with my hon. Friend **Mike Freer**, that it was necessary to visit an abattoir and see the process at first hand. We did that—I visited kosher and non-kosher abattoirs—and I am going to be very honest: as **Shabana Mahmood** said, anyone who says that there is a pleasant way of killing an animal is kidding themselves. There is not a pleasant way of killing an animal.

We must also consider the wider aspects of the issue. As my hon. Friend **Mr Djanogly** said, what happened before the animal was killed is also important. Was the animal living in terrible circumstances? It could be killed in the most humane way possible, but if it lived its whole life in terrible circumstances, that is also not a pleasant thing to think about.

What is shechita? Shechita is the Jewish religious humane method of animal slaughter for food. It is the only method of preparing meat and poultry in accordance with Jewish tradition—meat and poultry that an observant Jew can eat. As was said by my hon.

Friend **Mrs Ellman**—I call her my hon. Friend even though I should say “the hon. Member”—shechita is carried out by a trained person called a shochet, who has been trained for many years before taking up the profession.



Matthew Offord (Hendon, Conservative)

Can my hon. Friend confirm that the shochet holds two licences? One is issued by the **Food Standards Agency** and the other by the Rabbinical Commission for the Licensing of Shochetim. That rabbinical commission is a statutory body established by Parliament under the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995.



Lee Scott (Ilford North, Conservative)

My hon. Friend is perfectly right: that is the case.

The chalaf is the surgically sharp instrument that is used, and the incision made cuts off the blood supply to the brain straight away. Shechita conforms to the [EU](#) definition of stunning. Immediately, the brain is inactive and the animal feels no pain—to the best of our knowledge. With any form of killing at an abattoir, we do not know exactly what an animal might go through.

Let me move on to labelling. The Jewish community is not against food labelling; in fact, we invented it. The hechsher, which is on every piece of kosher meat to prove that it is kosher so that the community can eat it, has existed since time immemorial; it has always been there. However, it would be inappropriate if meat was labelled in a way that was purely of a religious nature. If it is to be labelled, every aspect has to be covered. We have heard about some of the methods of killing animals or stunning animals, such as gassing and electrocution, and we have heard a lot about mis-stuns. There are reports that the figure could be as high as 20 million. We do not know how many animals are mis-stunned. That is perfectly true, but we should know. That should be recorded as well, because if we are to start recording, if we are to start labelling, that has to be across the board.

I believe that one of the great things about our country is the freedom of people to practise their religions and live according to their holy books as they believe they should. I believe that it is vital that that be allowed to continue, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton rightly mentioned, all that would happen if it was not would be that meat was imported from areas that are perhaps far less stringent than we are in the United Kingdom.

They were not from my own [constituency](#), but I received e-mails before this debate in which people said that they were concerned not about how the animal was killed, but about whether a religious prayer had been said over the animal. I do not think that that has any role to play in this whatever. We are talking about how the animal is treated—the welfare of the animal. I believe that whatever side of the debate we come from, we all want the same, which is for the animal to have the best possible life and the least pain possible when it is killed, and I believe that shechita does meet that.

10:13 am



Matthew Offord (Hendon, Conservative)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to hear so many great speeches. In my [constituency](#), I have two significant groups to which the issue of food labelling causes great concern: the Muslim community and the Jewish community. I speak mainly from the Jewish perspective, as I know more about shechita than halal meat production, but I also speak as someone who passionately believes in animal welfare and, having been a vegetarian for the last 35 years, I think that my actions demonstrate that more than my words.

As I said, I am more informed about the production of kosher meat through the shechita method. That is the only method of preparing meat and poultry in accordance with Jewish tradition. Both [Mrs Ellman](#) and my hon. Friend [Mr Scott](#) went

through the technical aspects of shechita, but one point that I want to clarify is that under the shechita method, the blood supply to the animal's brain ceases immediately. Consciousness is irreversibly lost and, with it, the ability of the animal to feel pain. I believe that it is quick, effective and safe, and it ensures that the animal is not subjected to any avoidable pain.

That is in contrast to conventional mechanised slaughter, which uses industrial methods that I do not believe members of the public would be very enthusiastic about if they witnessed how an animal was incapacitated before its death. In conventional mechanised slaughter, a high throughput of animals must be maintained for commercial reasons. That creates many animal welfare issues, such as workers using cattle prods or kicking or pushing animals to usher them quickly along the production line.

However, the main difference between shechita and conventional mechanised slaughter is in the way in which the animals are stunned. I believe, as do other hon. Members, that shechita conforms to the [EU](#) definition of stunning:

“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. Mechanical methods, on the other hand, may include captive bolt shooting, gassing, electrocution, drowning, trapping and clubbing. This is where I have a problem with the premise that mechanised slaughter is preferable to other methods, such as those termed as religious slaughter. Mechanised methods frequently go wrong, leaving the animal in great and prolonged distress.

Many people are unaware that mechanised methods were originally conceived by large-scale factory abattoirs to speed up the process and stop the animal thrashing around at the point of slaughter, so that the production line could move more quickly. Acceptance of the use of such methods has been adopted by those who express animal welfare concerns in order to allay their own conscience. The use of evidence on mechanised methods in support of the animal welfare benefits is inconclusive and—this is the crux of my concern—I consider the failure rates to be unacceptably high.

By contrast, the shechita process has to be slow and methodical. Any animal or bird that is even slightly harmed before slaughter is not considered suitable for kosher consumption. Special care is taken to ensure that animals are well treated and calm ahead of slaughter, not only because that is mandated but because any other approach would make kosher meat production near impossible.

The hon. Member for [Liverpool, Riverside](#), mentioned the [European Food Safety Authority's](#) 2004 report on the “Welfare Aspects of Animal Stunning and Killing Methods”. That identified a failure rate of up to 2 million cows for penetrating captive bolt stunning in conventional mechanical slaughter and, with non-penetrating captive bolt stunning and electric stunning, it can rise as high as 10 million cows, so we are looking at 12 million to 14 million cows being mis-stunned each year.

In the Jewish community, the number of cows consumed through the shechita method is just 20,000, so I have to ask why there is this great concern about the 20,000 cows that pass through the shechita and kosher process when 12 million cows are possibly mis-stunned each year. No one seems to like to answer that question. Recently, the [FSA](#) was asked that very question.



Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

I think that my hon. Friend is mixing his figures. I think that he is taking the 20,000 cattle in the UK that are slaughtered under the shechita system and probably taking a European-wide figure for mis-stunning. I would not think the figure was anywhere near that for mis-stunning in this country, so that ought to be corrected. It is nowhere near 14 million; I hope to God it is not.



Matthew Offord (Hendon, Conservative)

That helpfully illustrates my next point, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. Statistics produced by the **Food Standards Agency** on the number of mis-stuns are a requirement under legislation and—recent parliamentary questions have asked about this—they show that an unrealistically low number of mis-stuns have been reported in the UK. For example, in 2011, just six cattle were officially reported as having been mis-stunned. My hon. Friend will accept that that is an unrealistic number, too. Following a series of follow-up questions to the Department, the previous **Minister** conceded that those statistics may not be complete and may represent only a fraction of the actual numbers. I look forward to the Food Standards Agency reviewing its reporting methods. Many researchers believe, as my hon. Friend the Member for **Ilford North** said, that shechita is at least as humane as other methods, if not preferable in light of the animal welfare benefits, although others, such as my hon. Friend **Neil Parish**, believe that conventional animal slaughter is preferable. However, there is agreement that making any assessment of the pain felt by an animal is incredibly difficult. As a result, the Government's position has always been that the scientific evidence in this area is inconclusive. No study has ever replicated shechita in a laboratory environment, and therefore no accurate scientific assessment of shechita has ever been carried out. It seems incongruous to me to presuppose that consumers do not have a right to know that an animal has been slaughtered by mechanical methods, or mechanically stunned prior to slaughter by one of the legal methods that I have mentioned. All of those, including the mis-stunnings, as I have said, are supposed to be recorded in slaughterhouses but are not. Labelling a meat product as not stunned before slaughter suggests that no stun takes place at all, when shechita in fact incorporates an effective stun at slaughter.

Some Muslims accept stunning as being consistent with halal, provided that the stun only renders the animal unconscious but does not kill it. That means that the animal will be alive but unconscious at the point of throat cutting. It will die from loss of blood, not from the stun. It is crucial for Muslims that the stun does not kill the animal, so they want to be assured that the stun is recoverable—that if the stun was not followed by throat cutting, the animal would recover consciousness.

I believe that labelling meat as not stunned before slaughter is pejorative and discriminatory, because it effectively places religious slaughter methods in a second-



class category. I call on the Government to end the constant criticism of religious practices by introducing comprehensive food labelling, or rather by producing religious food labelling. The **EU** strategy on animal welfare from 2012 to 2015 states that the Commission plans to study the issue of labelling meat that comes from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter. The study is likely to be published shortly. I urge the Government to seek the introduction of a fully comprehensive food labelling scheme, and not simply to use the half-truth about “meat from slaughter without stunning”.

10:21 am



Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green, Conservative)

I thank my hon. Friend **Neil Parish** for the report and for securing the debate. I read the report and was pleasantly surprised, because it was not what I was expecting. It is balanced, although I take issue with several points in it.

Before I took a view on religious slaughter, I thought I would go and see for myself. I am not sure how many hon. Members have visited a slaughterhouse, but my hon. Friend **Mr Scott** and I ventured out to Witney, of all places, so that we could see for ourselves. I have to say that from the cows' point of view, there is no such thing as a good death. From what I saw as a layman—I am not an expert—of both types of slaughter, the work of the shochetim in the religious slaughter appeared to be more humane than a bolt through the head. Let us not dance around the niceties—we are talking about a bolt fired at pressure through the centre of a cow's skull. As hon. Members have already said, all forms of slaughter are unpleasant. We must remember that one is not nice and fluffy while another is cruel.



Mike Gapes (Ilford South, Labour)

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman has just said. In that sense, would it not be more honest for the organisations that campaign against religious slaughter to campaign as well for all of us to become vegans?



Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green, Conservative)

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The campaign against religious slaughter is remarkably narrow. If someone is against slaughter, they should be against all slaughter, because neither method is humane from the point of view of the cow, lamb or chicken. Before we saw the slaughter, I spent some time learning who does the work of the slaughter. The shochetim are highly trained and have to train for many years. From some reports of religious slaughter, one might think that a shochet was a knife-wielding maniac who had wandered in off the street to slit the throats of cows. Shochetim have to undertake years of training and sit exams to prove that they are of a high calibre. Not only are they highly trained, but they are not allowed to operate unless they are at

peace and centred. If they have had a car accident or a row with their partner on their way in, or if they are out of sorts that day, they are simply not allowed to practise. A great deal of time and thought is put into ensuring not only that the animal is calm and uninjured, but that the person who uses the blade is equally calm and unperturbed. The process is calm on both sides—for the animal that is being slaughtered and the person who undertakes the slaughtering.

From what I saw, the person who operates a bolt gun undertakes far less training than the shochet who uses a blade. It is almost the case that a person could apply to a slaughterhouse, and within days and with minimal



training they could be operating a bolt gun on a cow. I reiterate that the use of the bolt is not humane, and we need to bear that important factor in mind when we compare the two types of slaughter. As the report says, the evidence is inconclusive about the pain experienced by an animal in the stunning involved in religious slaughter compared with stunning by a bolt through the head.

It is important that we use the term “religious slaughter”. The word “rite” is used too glibly, and we are not talking about a rite. Religious slaughter is not like dancing around the maypole; it is not something that we did in the past and from which we can now move on. It is an integral part of being Jewish or Muslim. It is not an option. If someone wants to practise their faith as a Jew or a Muslim, they have to keep kosher or halal. It is not something that they can choose to do on a Monday but choose not to do on a Tuesday. Religious slaughter is not a rite; it is an integral part of the faith.

Perhaps we should simply label meat. I am not fundamentally opposed to labelling, but why does the labelling have to say “stunned” or “not stunned”? In my view, that is an emotional response, not a factual one. It is discriminatory, as my hon. Friend [Dr Offord](#) has said, to pick out one or two factors. If we are going to label meat, it is important for the consumer to know whether a piece of meat was stunned or not stunned, gassed or electrified, drowned, trapped or clubbed—or indeed whether two, three or four attempts were required with a bolt through the brain before the animal was killed. If we are going to label, let us label honestly and not try to mislead the public.

I think that the report was a good one, and I fundamentally agree with the statement in the conclusion on page 16 that

“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.”

I prefer to use the word “beliefs”. In my view, the Government and the House should leave the matter there.

10:27 am



[Roger Williams](#) (Brecon and Radnorshire, Liberal Democrat)

I apologise for not having been present at the beginning of the debate. Along with [Neil Parish](#) and the [Minister](#), I was attending an event to celebrate the great British sausage, at which the maker of the best British sausage was awarded a prize. We were engaged in some of the issues that have been debated this morning.

I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton for chairing the all-party group and for the way in which the inquiry was carried out. I felt some trepidation when we set out on the inquiry, because I was afraid that emotion might cloud reality. However, I think that the evidence was taken in such a way as to allow us to concentrate on knowledge and scientific evidence.

There has been a suggestion that how animals live is more important than how they die. I do not think that anybody would disagree with the belief that animals should be kept in the best conditions and should die in the best conditions. We have free-range eggs, for example, and they are often labelled as such so that consumers can see how the animals were kept and reared. I support the all-party group's conclusion that meat should be labelled "stunned" or "not stunned". **The Minister** has expressed a view on that, and I understand that there are some European problems with going down that route, but perhaps he can explain how we can move towards that situation.

As well as having different methods of stunning and slaughter, we know that slaughterhouses are not always run in the best way. A lot can be done for animal welfare by improving slaughterhouses so that whichever method they use is used in the best possible way. During the inquiry one of the things that amazed me was the amount of scientific work on this subject. I thought the debate was based on anecdote or impression rather than evidence, but there has been a lot of work, which was taken into consideration when we came to our conclusions.

Evidence was given about how the anatomy of cattle differs from the anatomy of sheep. The shechita, or the cut, in cattle is less likely to reduce blood flow to the brain than in a sheep, which would lose consciousness very quickly. There is work to be done on that, too, and everyone acting in good faith will be able to reach a conclusion on how things can be improved. Indeed, one of the report's main conclusions is that this is a subject that needs to be understood, and one of the benefits of the report is that the public will now better understand some of the issues and that, across the industry, there is a commitment to animal welfare throughout an animal's life and at the point of death. I once again thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton for chairing the all-party group. He has done a great service both to the religious communities in this country and to the general public, who want to know how and in what conditions their food has been produced, including at the point of slaughter.



10:32 am



Huw Irranca-Davies (Shadow Minister (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs); Ogmore, Labour)

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken, particularly **Neil Parish**, for conducting themselves with real intelligence, insight, clarity on detail and compassion for the many interested parties in a fascinating but sensitive debate. I also thank the all-party group on beef and lamb and the hon. Gentleman, its chairman, for producing a genuinely thoughtful report on meat slaughtered in accordance with religious rites. Every member of that group—some of them are here today—is a thoughtful and insightful individual. I declare my interest as a member of that all-party group.

I congratulate the [APPG](#) on bringing light to this debate in place of heat. Some people have tried to use the subject of halal and kosher meat as a proxy for a generalised attack on Muslim and Jewish communities. The report rejects that dark populism and rightly focuses instead on animal welfare and informed consumer choice. The report also attempts to take an evidence-based approach, which will not be welcomed by some who have firm positions either in [opposition](#) to or in support of the methodologies underpinning the production of halal and kosher meat. It is worth saying that the two methodologies differ in their detail.

The report is the right way to advance our understanding and to encourage sound policy making. Although I welcome the report, I do not think it is the end of the matter. This is a notoriously difficult subject not simply because of the religious and cultural sensitivities but because of some of the technical detail and gaps in scientific certainty. The report, however, is a worthy attempt to understand the matter, and it makes some useful recommendations. The religious and cultural sensitivities deserve our full consideration, and they must of course be set against any legitimate, if contested, concerns about animal welfare and the desire for informed consumer choice expressed through labelling. The report addresses all those matters.

The facts are important in this debate, as sometimes the tabloid hyperbole can overtake the reality. Although shechita slaughter prohibits any form of stunning, more than 80% of halal animals are pre-stunned. The [Food Standards Agency](#) estimated in 2012 that 3% of cattle, 10% of goats and sheep and 4% of poultry were not pre-stunned as part of halal slaughter—let us get the facts on the record. Religious slaughter has strict oversight by official veterinarians from the [Meat Hygiene Service](#), and there are strict regulations governing meat hygiene and animal welfare and statutory regulations in each food business operator. The official veterinarians can give written or verbal advice on improvements, issue warnings and recommend prosecutions where necessary. Of course, several organisations have now come to the conclusion that slaughter without pre-stunning compromises animal welfare. Those organisations include the [British Veterinary Association](#)—of which I am delighted to be an honorary member—the [Royal Society](#) for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Farm Animal Welfare Committee, the [Humane Slaughter Association](#) and others. They have presented strong evidence to support their case for a ban on such slaughter. But equally, as we have heard, organisations such as Shechita UK contest that evidence and have presented powerful counter-arguments and evidence. Of course, shechita meat could not be produced if there were a requirement for pre-stunning before all slaughter, and there have been some well made points on that today.

The organisations that advocate a complete ban on slaughter without stunning also advocate an alternative way forward if there can be no ban. They propose working with religious communities to enhance the enforcement of existing welfare-at-slaughter legislation where non-stun slaughter takes place; to introduce immediate post-cut stunning; to ensure time and facilities for the official veterinarian to be able adequately to monitor welfare where non-stun slaughter takes place; and to educate consumers.





Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton, Conservative)

The **shadow Minister** is absolutely right. One of the problems with shechita is that the Jewish authorities just will not accept any post-stunning. I can understand the need for an animal to be conscious at the time of cut, but post-stunning would be very useful for large animals.



Huw Irranca-Davies (Shadow Minister (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs); Ogmore, Labour)

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. That is why we need to work on both the religious and cultural differences and methodologies to find a way forward that, as he rightly says, does not stamp on the liberties that come with the absolutely right and long history of not only tolerance but acceptance of those differences within UK society.



Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire, Conservative)

Will the hon. Gentleman say what a future **Labour Government**, if one should ever happen, will do? I hope that, like us, a future Labour Government would continue to allow religious slaughter, but there is one area that worries me. What happens to the beef, in particular, that is rejected? Does it not just go back into the food chain? Everybody else is therefore buying non-stunned meat without necessarily knowing.



Huw Irranca-Davies (Shadow Minister (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs); Ogmore, Labour)

If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I will fully lay out our position. I appreciate that he came late, but that was covered earlier in the debate. I will cover it in my speech. The proposals on an alternative way forward include educating consumers about animal welfare at slaughter—hon. Members have already addressed that point—and giving people confidence when they buy meat or meat products by providing reliable explanatory information about food labels or logos of assurance schemes that require stunning before slaughter so that people can make informed choices. The final proposal is the introduction of a simple logo for packaging to indicate meat obtained from non-stunned animals or the promotion of labelling from existing farm assurance schemes that require stunning before slaughter, such as the red tractor scheme. Those are reasonable and sensible proposals that focus not on the religious element of slaughter but on animal welfare and informed consumer choice. Do such suggestions meet with the **Minister's** approval? How will he act upon them?



An issue raised by some organisations that has attracted much attention is increasing informed consumer choice through clear labelling. The Labour party, of course, supports informed consumer choice and has been a champion of clearer food labelling for a range of issues, such as nutritional information. However, in the context of meat slaughtered in accordance with religious rites, the question becomes what the label should say. Should meat be labelled halal or kosher? That was roundly and rightly rejected by

parliamentarians of all parties when a private Member's Bill to that end was presented to Parliament last May. Should all different types of slaughter be labelled for the consumer? In that case, make room on the label for "slaughter by electrical current", or by carbon dioxide, inert gas, captive bolt pistol, gunshot or free bullet and so on. Some advocate doing so, as we have heard in this debate, and it would certainly satisfy the need for transparency, although it could reasonably be argued that it is not currently being demanded by consumers.



Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire, Liberal Democrat)

The hon. Gentleman sets out clearly some alternative methods of stunning, but one hon. Member who spoke in this debate—I am sure it was by mistake—included clubbing as a method of pre-stunning. We should put it on record that clubbing can in no way be seen as a legal method of stunning in this country.



Huw Irranca-Davies (Shadow Minister (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs); Ogmore, Labour)

The hon. Gentleman has corrected the record appropriately. I am not aware that clubbing is a legitimate method sanctioned within UK slaughterhouses, so I am not sure where it came from. The methods that I listed are legitimate, sanctioned and overseen by veterinarians, the **Food Standards Agency** and others.



Matthew Offord (Hendon, Conservative)



If that was me, it was certainly not my intention, and I apologise for making that assertion. I have been told that fish can be killed that way.



Huw Irranca-Davies (Shadow Minister (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs); Ogmore, Labour)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for clarifying that on record.

To return to the issue of labelling, how it could be done and the difficulties involved, should labelling focus on the issue of stunning or the absence thereof? That seems to be the crux of the consumer argument as well as the animal welfare argument. If that or any alternative labelling proposals are to be taken forward, Labour believes that any implementation of proposals affecting meat slaughtered in accordance with religious rites must involve full engagement with the faith groups affected, as well as with other interested parties. But—this is a significant “but”—surely that is best done at European level. I ask the **Minister** for an update on progress in European discussions on the issue. I will be raising it in my discussions with European colleagues this evening and tomorrow in Brussels, and it would be helpful to know what progress, if any, has been made.

The Minister will want to respond in detail to the points raised and to the recommendations in the report. I draw his attention to a couple of specific points.

Recommendation 5 relates to concerns about the accuracy of recording of mis-stunning and mis-slaughtering in slaughter practices unrelated to religious slaughter. A written answer to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton on 24 March 2014 revealed that under the **FSA** recording procedures, in the whole nation only nine cases of cattle mis-stunning were recorded for 2013-14, as well as one duck, three pigs, three sheep and one turkey. The Minister told **Mike Freer** on 1 April this year that a study into the accuracy of the data was unnecessary, but when pursued by me and others in written questions, he responded to me on 26 September:

“The **Food Standards Agency** (FSA) is due to complete a review into its monitoring and reporting of breaches of welfare legislation by the end of October. Previously” — this may explain things—

“only major and critical breaches were recorded, along with the actions taken to correct these. The FSA review is now also looking to strengthen recording of minor breaches.” I look forward to the results of that review, as many people look at the figures with disbelief.

I say to the Minister that if the principle is animal welfare, that principle must extend across all forms of slaughter, not simply slaughter done in accordance with religious rites. We look forward to hearing the results of the FSA review and what actions might follow.

Finally, what work has the Minister carried out to assess consumer awareness of the issues raised in this debate, such as meat slaughtered in accordance with religious rites or stunned and non-stunned meat production? It cannot be left to the tabloids or rabble-rousers to set the agenda. We must have, as we have had today, a well informed and calm public and policy debate that proposes appropriate solutions that apply the highest animal

welfare standards, provide clear and appropriate information for consumers and recognise and respect the cultural and religious practices of our diverse communities.

10:45 am



George Eustice (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Camborne and Redruth, Conservative)

I congratulate my hon. Friend **Neil Parish** on securing this important debate. As many Members have said, this issue is complex and sensitive. I had the pleasure of giving evidence to his all-party parliamentary group, and I thought that the report was engaging and got to grips with the details. As many hon. Members have said, it addressed the issue calmly and dispassionately, focusing on the evidence. I welcome his approach. Over the last six months or so, I have met representatives from all sides of the debate, including from Shechita UK, halal meat processors and Compassion in World Farming, to ensure that I have the fullest perspective of everyone’s views on the issue. I will start by setting out a little of the historical and international context to the debate. Like many debates, it has been running for a long time. Today, European and domestic regulations apply to the welfare of animals that are to be slaughtered, requiring that all animals be stunned before slaughter. However, as every hon. Member here knows,

there is a derogation to allow slaughter without stunning in accordance with religious rites for the production of halal or kosher meat only. The aim of the regulations is to ensure that animals are spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering at the time of killing.

However, our current national requirements on religious slaughter have a long history. Government first set down powers to prevent cruelty in slaughterhouses in the **Public Health Act**, which was as long ago as 1875. Byelaws made under that legislation required that animals be “effectually stunned”. After that, in 1904, a Committee was set up to ascertain the most humane practicable methods of slaughtering animals. **The Committee**’s report recommended that all animals to be slaughtered, without exception, should be stunned.

Following that report, the **Local Government Board** issued a circular proposing that the Committee’s recommendations should be implemented, but that 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. Interestingly, a similar requirement for shechita slaughter—that it is carried out by a Jewish slaughterman licensed by the Rabbinical Commission for the Licensing of Shochetim—still exists in our current national legislation.

The first national legislative requirement in **England and Wales** for stunning before slaughter was in the Slaughter of Animals Act 1933, which also retained an exception from stunning for religious slaughter by **Jews and Muslims**. Over the years, the national rules governing religious slaughter have developed to provide protection to animals slaughtered in accordance with religious rites.

Our existing national rules on religious slaughter provide greater protection than those contained in the European regulation. For example, there are requirements for how cattle can be restrained. In particular, we prohibit inversion during slaughter, and require bovines to be

restrained only in approved restraining pens. The requirements for bovine restraining pens are set down in national legislation. Other national rules concern so-called standstill times for cattle, sheep and goats; following the neck cut, the animal cannot be moved until at least 30 seconds have passed and the animal is unconscious, in the case of bovines, or at least 20 seconds have passed and the animal is unconscious, in the case of sheep and goats. The standstill times are aimed at providing protection from avoidable pain, suffering and distress caused, for example, by unnecessary movement while the animal is still conscious after its neck has been cut.

I turn now to what other countries are doing, to make some international comparisons. European legislation allows for national rules on religious slaughter, so there are differing rules across Europe. For example, in Germany abattoirs have to prove the “religious needs” and define the number of animals to be slaughtered so as to satisfy the needs of the religious community concerned before they are granted a licence. In the Netherlands, all animals must be stunned if they have not lost consciousness within 40 seconds of the cut being made. In France, there must be a post-cut stun if cattle are still conscious after 90 seconds. Other countries, such as Finland, Denmark, Austria, Estonia and Slovakia, go further by requiring immediate post-cut stunning. Further afield, 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 religious slaughter without prior stunning for the domestic market, but post-cut stunning is still required for these animals.

David Simpson, who was here earlier, mentioned the potential impact on exports and the concerns that some people have about what might happen to exports if we place additional restrictions on religious slaughter. I completely understand that argument. However, last year I met a farmer from Australia, who said that all Australian sheep are effectively slaughtered in accordance with halal requirements, because they are exported to some very important Muslim markets in Asia, but those sheep are also stunned post-cut.



The reason I highlight both the historical and the international context of this issue is that there has been a long-running debate about it, which legislators have wrestled with for well over a hundred years. I am not sure that we will resolve all the issues here today in this debate but we have had a very calm and insightful debate, which has certainly helped.

I will pick up on the points that some hon. Members have made. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton pointed out, one of the issues with halal is that there is no single definition of what constitutes “halal”. Often in the case of halal meat, the relevant Muslim authorities are content that the animal is stunned. Where that stunning is carried out during the course of religious slaughter, the stun must be effective under the legislation and the animals must also be stunned using a lawful stunning method. As was pointed out by a number of hon. Members, the **majority** of halal meat is stunned; around 88% of poultry in the UK is stunned.

Also, the **EU** welfare at slaughter regulation allows for “simple stunning”, which is sometimes referred to as “recoverable stunning”. Simple stunning does not kill the animal but renders it unconscious and insensible to pain and, if it is used, it must be followed as quickly as possible by a procedure that causes death, such as bleeding.

I will pick up on some of the issues that other hon. Members have raised. First, however, I will underline the Government’s position today, which builds on the long-standing position we have adopted in this country. Our position is that we would prefer that all animals are stunned before slaughter, but we recognise and respect the needs of religious communities, so we have always maintained this limited exemption, which is to be used only for meat produced for Jewish and Muslim communities. Last year, the **Prime Minister** made it very clear in a speech that the Government have no intention of abolishing religious slaughter in this country. However, it is equally important to note that none of the derogations that we have in place, which are set out through the Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995, exempt anyone from the requirements of the **Animal Welfare Act** 2006, which requires all abattoirs to avoid causing an animal avoidable pain.

My hon. Friend **Mr Djanogly** and a number of other hon. Members questioned the evidence that non-stunned slaughter causes more pain and suffering to an animal. I understand the arguments that he made; I have met representatives of Shechita UK and heard those arguments from them. However, that is not a view that is widely shared in the scientific or veterinary community.





Put bluntly, the situation is clear from most of the evidence. There are a number of reports. The Farm Animal Welfare Committee issued a report in 2003, which concluded that there was significant pain and distress where there was not stunning before slaughter. Likewise, in 2004 the [European Food Safety Authority](#) issued a similar opinion, maintaining that there was more pain and suffering if there was no stun. There was also the EU Dialrel report and project, which was conducted in 2009 and looked at the neurological behaviour of animals once they are slaughtered. That report, too, reached a similar conclusion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, and more recently there has been research in [New Zealand](#), which reached the same conclusion. So there is a large body of research that concludes that it is better for the welfare of the animal for it to be stunned, and it is for that reason that the Government would prefer it if all animals were stunned.



It is important to make that point, because although the Prime [Minister](#) has made it absolutely clear that we have no intention of banning religious slaughter, we must understand the basis on which that is done. It is not that we believe the welfare issues are any different between the two types of slaughter, nor that we believe shechita is a more welfare-friendly method of slaughter, but because we respect the rights of religious communities. That has been the long-standing position of every [UK Government](#), going back some 100 years.

A number of hon. Members, including the [shadow](#) Minister, [Huw Irranca-Davies](#), raised the issue of labelling. The [European Commission](#) is conducting a study on labelling at the moment; we expect it to conclude in December. Initially, it was planned that the study would be published this summer, but as usual—because this is a very contentious issue—it has taken the Commission rather longer than it thought. Nevertheless, we hope that the study will come by the end of the year, or perhaps the beginning of next year.

A number of hon. Members made the point that it would be wrong just to label meat as “stunned” or “unstunned”, and that a fairer way would be to list all the different methods of slaughter. The only thing I would say in response is 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. As I say, that is a clear definition and the scientific evidence does not support the argument that a cut without prior stunning achieves that. In addition, it would be complicated to list all the different methods of slaughter and, as the hon. Member for Ogmores said, I am not sure that there would be a huge consumer appetite for us to try to differentiate between all the different methods of slaughter.



I know that previously people have said that perhaps we should label meat as being “halal” or “kosher”, so that people know what they are buying. However, there are also difficulties with that, in that there is no single definition of “halal”, as many hon.

Members have said, and a further complication is that not all meat slaughtered by kosher methods is deemed “kosher”; for instance, the hind quarters of an animal are not deemed “kosher”, even though the animal is slaughtered by kosher methods. As I say, there are complications in the area of labelling, but we await the report from the European Commission and look forward to following it up.



I will also cover mis-stunning, which many hon. Members have mentioned. I can confirm that the [Food Standards Agency](#) has reviewed the way that it approaches mis-stunning. Previously, it only reported critical breaches that were observed by the official veterinarians in the slaughterhouse. We always accepted that that would not pick up every single mis-stun. Following representations that have been made, which is proof that this Parliament works when people ask questions of Ministers, I can confirm that we looked at this issue again and in future the [FSA](#) intends basically to monitor and record all breaches, whether or not they were critical.

The important thing to understand is that just because there is a mis-stun, that does not necessarily mean that the welfare outcome for the animal was dire. On occasions, and this usually happens with bovine animals, what a mis-stun means is that the first shot taken by the captive bolt did not quite achieve the intended task, and within seconds—almost literally—a second bolt is fired, which finishes the job. So it is wrong to equate mis-stunning with dire outcomes from an animal welfare point of view. Nevertheless, we are concerned about mis-stunning and will therefore monitor it.

I will finish by referring briefly to a few other points. [CCTV](#) in slaughterhouses is an issue; the [FAWC](#) is looking at it. The last time we had a consultation on it, we ruled out its use, on the basis that we did not think it would necessarily identify where there were problems, but we keep the issue under review.

Also, when it comes to the point my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton made about consistency of approach, I have asked the [FSA](#) and our vets in the [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs](#) to consider the approach they take to these issues, to ensure that there is consistency.

Finally, I will finish on the point that my hon. Friend [Roger Williams](#) made, namely that there is a difference between animal species. We know that sheep and chickens lose consciousness relatively quickly but sadly the same is not true for bovines, which can take up to 1 minute 20 seconds to lose consciousness.

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Philip Hollobone (Kettering, Conservative)

I thank all Members who took part in that important debate. If they are not staying for the debate on broadband in Cheltenham, will they be kind enough to leave the Chamber quickly and quietly? They no doubt have plenty to chew over as they leave. We now move on to the important subject of broadband in Cheltenham, in the name of Mr Martin Horwood.

- [Hansard source](#) (Citation: HC Deb, 4 November 2014, c170WH)