

THE SLAUGHTER

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‘Her mother died before her eyes, she never knew her father, and she was condemned to death at five days old.’

Anthony Browne, in The Observer 29th April 2001

Phoenix the calf was found alive under the bodies of the rest of her herd in the cremation pit on Friday 13th April, Good Friday. The Exeter farmers who took her home told the government they had bungled. So the government sent vets to kill her, the family sent for the TV crews and wouldn't hand her over, and then the government, which goes to the polls soon, changed its mind, and Phoenix may live. Pigs and sheep still do. Why?. Because it's policy.

This isn't another animal rights column. It's a diatribe about pride. I'm living in a land stinking of death. Animal rights activists have done virtually nothing about the slaughter, over the last two months, of more than two and a half million British animals, breeding and food stock, pets and healthy beasts. They have been given lethal injections, shot in front of their mothers, slaughtered in their home paddocks or milking sheds, allowed to drown in mud pits from which they 'can't be moved' or, as we know from Phoenix's plight, buried alive in pits, in case they might carry or catch foot and mouth disease: because the government has to be seen to be doing something heroic.

This disease is no risk to human health. It does not kill the infected animal. It can be vaccinated against. All this death has been wrought in the name of European farming policy and, allegedly, on the best scientific advice, according to the Minister, and the Prime Minister, and the Farmers Federation, and even the RSPCA.

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Only we have just now learned through a 'leaked' memo (the UK still doesn't have Freedom of Information laws) that it wasn't.

According to the Sunday Times, Dr Paul Kitching, one of the leading experts on the disease, believes the policy of mass culling to stop the epidemic was mistaken and unnecessary. At least 25% of the samples submitted from 'infected' farms were not showing up as positive in lab tests. Four hundred (at least) of the 1600 farms condemned never had the disease. That means that when the culls on the neighbourhood farms ('clearances' within 3 kilometers of an infected farm) are taken into account, at least 550,000 animals have been slaughtered for no reason at all and the same number need only have been kept under observation. The policy was, moreover, wrong in the first place. Its 'fundamental flaw' was in the predictions developed by the Ministry, on the basis of the last big UK outbreak in 1967. That epidemic hit mostly cows and pigs. The Ministry didn't take into account that this outbreak affected sheep, which are not as infectious.

We have also just learned that the Army supplied untreated waste food to the farm where the outbreak is thought to have started. So maybe, just maybe, government caused the outbreak, then bungled its management and then kept on shooting and slicing and injecting and burning, to build public confidence, in an epidemic of wooden-headedness: a refusal to act on the evidence..

If our exploitation of animals can be justified on utilitarian grounds and if human welfare is so important that it justifies their sacrifice and suffering yet nothing, ever, justifies causing pain, panic and fear to save face. And nothing ever, ever justifies waste.