

# Animal-Rights Terrorism and the Demise of Political Debate

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**W**inning over the many may be difficult but remains essential for defeating the few.

This summer, the United Kingdom Home Office launched a crackdown on animal-rights protestors who intimidate or harass people associated directly, or indirectly, with experiments on animals. The move followed action against the construction of an £18 million biomedical research facility at South Parks Road in Oxford. This had led the main contractor, Walter Lily & Co Ltd, like the concrete suppliers RMC before them, to pull out of the project to replace and update the university's animal-testing facilities.

Both companies are subsidiaries of Montpellier plc, whose executive cars had been damaged with paint. The parent company's investors had also received spoof letters purporting to come from the senior management team, and advising them to withdraw their interests in the company or risk being identified on a website run by activists. Why anyone would think that a company would threaten its own shareholders is not evident, but this led to a 20 per cent drop in the share price as some investors bailed out.

Earlier in the year, Cambridge University shelved its own plans to build a neuroscience study centre, which would have housed a primate research laboratory. This followed a similar campaign to that in Oxford, made worse by five years of delay in obtaining planning permission.

Estimated costs for the facility, including measures to protect it, had spiralled from £24 million to £32 million.

Nearby, Britain's biggest animal testing laboratory, Huntingdon Life Sciences, has become an almost permanent protest site. There have been sporadic clashes against the police charged with protecting the facility. Its director has been physically attacked, requiring hospital treatment, whilst other members of staff suffer continually from various forms of abuse.

Over recent years, a small element within animal-rights groups appears to have started targeting suppliers, including junior staff and their families, as well as researchers, in their campaigns. They are held to use smear tactics and threats against staff and their children, bombard them and their families with malicious telephone calls, post and e-mails, and a tiny number have gone on to damage property, use crude incendiary devices and launch physical assaults.

Certainly, there would appear to have been a significant increase in both the number and severity of incidents involving such campaigners. In the first few months of this year there were 54 attacks on the homes of company directors and employees. By May, there had been 117 arrests, compared with 15 for the same period in 2003. However, these figures could also reflect more reporting of such incidents, as well as a growing willingness on behalf of the authorities to take action.

The Home Office decision to tighten-up and strengthen existing police powers, however, may not satisfy scientists and businesses, who had been lobbying for new, more specific legislation. The proposed enforcement plans, which will include extending anti-stalking laws and making use of anti-social behaviour orders to curb the activities of the more extreme elements, fall far short of bringing in the army to protect supplies and facilities, as some had called for in order to make the government show its support for such research.

Accordingly, this autumn, a leading City of London organisation, whose members control pension funds worth £650 billion, are set to take matters into their own hands. They argue that the UK has already lost over £1 billion in investment as companies take their business elsewhere, dissuaded by the unreceptive climate to their work here. It is claimed that they will be announcing details of a £25 million bounty for any information leading to the arrest of the purported ring-leaders. Notably, this is more than the reward available from the CIA for the capture of Osama bin Laden, which currently stands at \$25 million.

So, are animal-rights activists, terrorists on a par with the likes of al Qa'ida? Certainly they share a similar anti-human outlook. But it is also clear that those criticising the protestors lack resolve in winning this debate. Despite the horrendous-sounding nature of some of the incidents concerned, it remains the

case that they are few and far between. And there already exist laws to deal with criminal damage and assault. The police themselves have estimated that there are only 20-or-so hard-core animal-rights activists in the UK responsible for carrying out such direct action.

If the protestors succeed it will have less to do with their own ruthlessness and organisation than with the defensiveness of those they confront. And this lack of real resilience goes to the very heart of the issue itself – a reluctance by scientists, corporations and politicians to stand up for the benefits and necessity of animal research. For instance, some of the advocates of animal research had pointed to the fact that neither of the proposed new facilities in Oxford or Cambridge would have led to an increase in the number of animal experiments conducted. This rather concedes the point that there is a problem with such research in the first place.

Others have suggested that by closing down facilities in the UK, experiments will simply be conducted abroad where, it is assumed, regulation regarding animal welfare is less stringent. Apart from the stereotypically racist undercurrent to this line of argument, it also lends itself to considering that animal, rather than human welfare, should be the priority. No number of expert or lay ethics committees can get away from the fact that some experiments involve putting chemicals in animals' eyes or planting electrodes in their brains. So there is little room for squeamish evasion by posing as champions of animal welfare.

No scientist enjoys using animals in experimental procedures, but nor should they be forced, by adapting to the current guidelines that emphasise a strategy of refinement, reduction and replacement (the so-called three Rs), to curtail the drive to explore and innovate. Scientists themselves have been particularly poor at standing up against this sentimental tide

of regulation that would have precluded many of the insights and advances we, and they, benefit from today.

Despite accusations by some that such experiments do not transpose to understanding the effects of drugs or other products upon the human metabolism, they have already led to treatments, vaccines and cures for diseases and conditions such as polio, leukemia, asthma and diabetes. They remain a necessary step to sifting out unexpected reactions and identifying future potentialities. And without these procedures there would be little hope for our future understanding of how to treat other human afflictions, such as cancer, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease.

So, it is not violence alone that forces some companies out of this market. For targeted individuals, the tactics of some activists may well be intimidating, but it is the reluctance of government and the scientists and corporations involved to defend the principle of animal research that provides an opening for cranky, immature threats, as well as extremists. This situation is then further exacerbated by a stream of cancellations and concessions by the authorities concerned. It is this moral and intellectual cowardice that they seek to compensate for through calls for legislative coercion.

It was the government that stalled on giving the go-ahead to the Cambridge primate centre and it was the Labour Party that withdrew its own pension fund investment from Huntingdon Life Sciences, subsequent to being pressured by the Political Animal Lobby. More recently, it was the chair of the science and technology Commons Select Committee who declined to appear on the BBC's flagship Newsnight programme for fear of being targeted.

Without forcing a broader public debate on the matter and engaging wider

support, the authorities will continue to lack real resilience in the face of a handful of activists and cave in too easily. Accordingly, those few who do raise their heads above the parapet are readily targeted and live their lives under siege. But the knee-jerk response, to secure society and its facilities from the outside, rather than winning the argument from the inside, will offer little long-term benefit. Rather, we will all be losers from the assumption that a solution lies in restricting the actions of a few.

Winning this fundamental argument could offer any government that is truly committed to engaging the public in a dialogue, a tremendous opportunity to re-establish some of the essential bonds of social discourse that have become eroded in recent years. It would also go some way towards challenging the profoundly anti-human, anti-modern, anti-Western views of the animal-rights lobby. These views are almost entirely Western in origin and go on to inform other, more extreme, nihilist terrorists.

Sadly, so far the response of the various authorities to the purported threat posed to society by a tiny number of extremist campaigners, rather betrays their own sense of confusion and isolation. It is this crisis of confidence and insecurity amongst the elite of society, and their unwillingness to resolve this through principled political debate that both undermines them and encourages others. Worse, by seeking to short-circuit or bypass the internal process of political engagement with the external imposition of further rules and restrictions, they end up revealing a contempt for ordinary people on a par with that of any terrorist. ■

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