

Campaign to ban wild circus animals wins huge public support

By Martin Hickman, Consumer Affairs Correspondent

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An overwhelming majority of the public backs a ban on wild animals performing in circuses. A total of 71 per cent favour a ban, with 21 per cent opposed and 7 per cent saying they don't know, according to an opinion poll commissioned by *The Independent*.

The Government is expected to announce within days that it has rejected a ban in favour of a system of voluntary self-regulation by circuses.

Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are sympathetic to ending the days of wild animals in the big top but Downing Street has blocked a ban because of concerns about increasing "red tape", according to animal welfare organisations.

Around 20 wild animals including tigers, zebras and pythons perform in three British circuses. The Great British Circus is breeding lions for future performances.

More than 1,000 members of the public were surveyed about the issue by pollsters ComRes on 3 May. They were asked: "Would you support or oppose a ban on the use of wild animals such as lions and tigers from circuses?"

A ban was backed by supporters of all three main political parties – Conservatives by 70 per cent, Labour by 76 per cent and Liberal Democrats by 83 per cent.

Support was lower among followers of the SNP (64 per cent), Ukip (43 per cent) and BNP (41 per cent). But even in those parties – and in every one of the 30 political, geographic and demographic groups surveyed – there was no majority support for the status quo.

Women were more in favour of a ban than men (76 per cent versus 66 per cent), and younger people more in favour than old.

Support for a ban was slightly stronger among people in lower social classes D and E (75 per cent) than among A and B professionals (70 per cent).

The findings are consistent with the results of previous opinion polls. A MORI poll in 1999 found 72 per cent support for a ban, rising to 80 per cent in 2005. A year later Ipsos-MORI found 63 per cent and ICM 64 per cent of people in favour of a ban.

More than 10,000 people have signed *The Independent's* online petition calling for the Government to announce a ban, while hundreds of Twitterers have urged their followers to sign.

The three circuses – the Great British Circus, Circus Mondao and Peter Jolly's – say their wild animals are well cared for, are not forced to perform tricks and have large enough enclosures.

Animal welfare experts at the RSPCA and the British Veterinary Association, among others, say wild animals should not perform tricks in the big top because of the constant travel, loud crowds, and smaller enclosures than those in zoos.

The RSPCA, BVA, Captive Animals Protection Society and the Born Free Foundation are backing *The Independent's* campaign.

Animal Defenders International, the organisation which shot the undercover footage of a groom beating Anne the elephant at Bobby Roberts Super Circus, yesterday gave its support.

ADI has been campaigning to end the use of wild animals in circuses for a decade. Helder Constantino, its head of parliamentary affairs, said: "It's time for the Government to end this anachronism once and for all, and ADI wholeheartedly support *The Independent's* campaign to ban the use of animals in circuses."

The petition has been so succesful that we have decided to double the petition target to 20,000 signatories. Please help by sharing this article and links to the petition at independent.co.uk/circusanimals