Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

Oct 20, 2015 10:54 BST

COMMENT: In defence of Britain's last lion tamer

Ron Beadle, Professor of Organization and Business Ethics, writes in defence of Britain's last lion tamer for The Conversation.

Greeted by protesters at almost every turn, Thomas Chipperfield has spent the past year touring his lions and tigers across Wales.

Known as Britain's last lion tamer, Chipperfield appears at An Evening of Lions and Tigers with a troupe of trained lions and tigers. Of just three UK circuses presenting wild animals, his is the last show displaying wild cats. But

he works under the constant threat of having to close down.

The threat to his work is legal rather than commercial. Many in the industry have told me that customers prefer circuses to have animals and Chipperfield's own small show continues to find an audience. But a bill to ban wild animals in circuses was drafted in 2013 and the government maintains that this will be introduced when parliamentary time is found. Now the Welsh government is also thinking about outlawing the practice.

Circuses have been regulated since the mid-1920s and under licensing conditions passed in 2012 they are subject to regular inspections against strict standards for animal welfare. Back in 2007 a major government study found that the welfare of circus animals differed little from those in zoos. Their stress levels and breeding patterns suggested there was no evidence to warrant a general ban.

Indeed there have been only two prosecutions of circuses for animal cruelty in the UK over the past 35 years. Unlike lethal entertainments such as horse-racing, reports have found that circus animals are at vanishingly little risk of harm.

Indeed, as Chipperfield himself says: "You can't afford to mistreat a lion or tiger, because eventually they will turn. They will realise they are a lot stronger, faster and more dangerous than you, and it can only end very badly."

For these reasons the 2013 draft bill was not presented as animal welfare legislation but as an ethical issue. In other words, Chipperfield and other animal presenters are under threat because their critics oppose the idea of animals being used for entertainment.

The modern circus is a British invention; founded nearly 250 years ago by Philip Astley, a former cavalry officer who added clowns and jugglers from the fairgrounds to his exhibition of horse-riding on London's South Bank. It had to fight for legitimacy from the start but it became the world's first mass popular entertainment.

Now, in 2015, to call something a circus is to abuse it. It is to ridicule the hundreds of people who still criss-cross the country, come wind, rain or snow,

to bring their unique brand of live entertainment to those who want to see it. If you want to find an oppressed community in 2015, look no further than the circus.

If Chipperfield really does become Britain's last lion tamer it will be because legislation is passed imposing the ethical standards of some upon the activities of others. This imposition of public taste should concern anyone who believes in commercial freedom – even if it is pursued with the best intentions.

Imagine the outcry that would arise should horse-racing ever be threatened with such a ban. Were that to happen the defence would centre on commercial freedom and the maintenance of a traditional way of life. Exactly the same can be said of the circus but the difference is that it has far fewer advocates and miniscule resources.

My recent research with directors of travelling circuses demonstrates their desire to maintain a way of life that is truly unique. One said: "Circus to me is a way of life. It isn't a job. I always say I've never had a job; this is my life that I've decided to do and I've decided to do it for all this time. We work all day to be in that ring, that's what we do, all of the building up and pulling down is all because of that ring, that round thing in the middle there with sawdust … hallowed ground."

I wonder how many of us feel the same way about our work? Those who object to animals in circuses are free not to go. They are free to protest outside - but should their views require everyone else to do the same?

This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.

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