I find myself writing to you after hearing that the Scottish Parliament has now included in its manifesto, a bill which would effectively seek to ‘ban the use of wild animals’ in travelling circuses in Scotland.

As someone who regularly visits Circuses all over the UK, as well as in mainland Europe, I write to you as someone who thinks the idea of a ban is nonsense, unjust and unfair and I for one, fully support the inclusion of both wild and domestic animals in the Circus.

Animals have always been an important part of our circus heritage and have always been a popular part of a circus programme and for many people today, they still are important and often that many still attend a particular circus.

For many people the circus is the nearest they can get to a large and powerful wild animal. It could and no doubt will be argued that you can see animals in a zoo or on TV or on the internet and therefore they serve no purpose in a circus environment.

Whilst you can see animals in the zoo, or on a TV screen, none of these provide the up close and personal touch that a Circus can and does. You can’t touch a camel, zebra or maybe even an elephant in a zoo and certainly not on a TV screen BUT you can in a Circus!

You can see the long eyelashes of a camel on the TV screen but you don’t get a real sense of the overall length because its on a TV screen BUT you can in a Circus!

As an animal lover and a circus supporter, I would like to know why this bill has been put forward into the manifesto?

Is it because the mass majority of the general public want the ban?

Does the vast majority of the Scottish public support a ban on wild animals in circuses?

Have the Scottish public even be properly consulted on this proposal for a ban?

Do the Scottish public even know of this proposal to potentially seek to ban wild animals in travelling circuses?

Personally, no I do not believe the Scottish public wish to see animals banned. Animals are an important part of circus for many people. I appreciate in the past couple of years, there hasn’t been a circus with wild animals on tour in Scotland but
that doesn’t mean one wouldn’t want to tour Scotland in the near future, as circuses generally are very well supported, in the big towns/cities, as well as in the smaller communities and Scotland has always been known for generating good business for circuses.

The public do ask for animals, often enquiring at the box office if the circus they are stood outside of, has any animal content. Many are disappointed to learn that ‘no’ might be the answer they receive today. No doubt on the other hand, some people may well be pleased at the ‘no’ answer!

BUT and it’s a big but, NO ONE has ever asked the population of the UK and that includes Scotland if they support a ban on performing animals and therefore to introduce such a ban, based on the feelings/wishes of what will be a small minority, is un-fair, un-just and out of proportion with the majority wishes. Please remember that circuses have far more happy customers and customers that want to see animals, than people who would rather not see animals performing and who campaign against animals in the circus.

The only time any form of public consultation in the UK into circus wild animals was carried out, it was done in such a way, that it was conducted during a period (December to March) when circuses couldn’t get in touch with their main supporters (ie the general public who week in week out support circuses by purchasing tickets and watching the performance) and really the only people who knew about it were the supporters of the animal rights group who arranged it with a supportive Member of Parliament and true ardent circus enthusiasts. As it turned out there was just over 10,000 responses, the organisers claiming the majority of which were in favour of a ban but with many votes proved to be coming from outside the UK, it was hardly the victory the animal rights groups promoted via sections of the media and on-line and hardly a fair representation of the wishes of the majority of the population. One animal rights group even had to withdraw from circulation tens of thousands of printed leaflets due to misrepresenting the facts from this flawed poll.

Is it because the circus animals welfare and overall treatment/life/care is bad?

It is a common misconception pedalled by animal rights groups and some so called animal welfare groups that circuses do not care for their animals correctly, that the animal housing is not suitable and that the basic training is in itself cruel.

There has only ever been two independent scientific studies into the welfare of animals in UK circuses and both of these came out overall, in favour of animals being within the circus environment.

The first was originally commissioned by the RSPCA during the very late 1980’s and was carried out by Dr Marthe Kiley-Worthington, an animal behaviourist and animal trainer herself, who with over 3000 man hours of detailed observations staged over an eighteen month period, Dr Kiley-Worthington studied all aspects of the circus animals lives. This included both wild and domestic animals, in circuses large and small and covered the animals during loading, unloading and transit between venues, daily life in their stables area, during training/practise sessions and during the actual public performances.
Dr Kiley-Worthington noted that the animals were not stressed by the training/performances, the extra noises generated by the public, the loading/unloading or indeed travelling between venues and the animal training was professionally carried out. Dr Kiley-Worthington also stated she found no evidence of any cruelty.

As the findings of this report didn’t match the beliefs of the RSPCA head office, they refused to publish it and also distanced themselves away from it and from Dr Kiley-Worthington herself.

The second report was entitled the ‘Radford Report’ and this was the published report of the Circus Working Group, chaired by Mike Radford and which came about around 2006/7. The Circus Working Group was originally made up of six independent scientists nominated on behalf of the Circus industry and six nominated by and on behalf of the opposing animal rights groups. All twelve had numerous site visits to circuses, watched training sessions, spoke with animal trainers, animal care staff and then studied all the submitted evidence and at the end, the overall conclusion was that there was no real evidence to support a ban on performing animals in the Circus.

So, the only two independent reports into the welfare of circus animals BOTH conclude that the welfare of the animals is being provided and that there was no justification for a ban and no real evidence to support a ban!

[REDACTED TEXT]

I was very pleased when Defra in England finally launched the Regulations for Wild Animals in Circus 2013, as this gave any circus that wished to include wild animals a high standard to meet, to follow and to keep to at all times. The fact that Circuses in England are now licensed in 2017 by the Secretary of State for the FIFTH year [REDACTED TEXT], this tells me and anyone who may have concerns on the welfare of performing animals in travelling circuses, that circuses are actually doing a good job of achieving, maintaining and demonstrating high standards of animal welfare.

I believe the UK circus industry has generally an overall pretty impressive track record when it comes to animal welfare and for doing what is right for their animal co stars. Circus animals have I feel, overall a much more active life than animals within any other setting. They receive some basic training showing off their natural abilities, based on the reward method commonly known as positive reinforcement and they move locations generally once a week giving the animals new sights, sounds and smells. Surely that has to be good for the brain! Stimulation I believe its called!

Animals in circuses are not an outdated view of animals, wild or domestic. Animals are for some people, the main reason for going to the circus. Animals make circus today unique, different to the average all human circus.
In the circus environment you can get up to and touch some wild animals, whereas in other environments you certainly cannot do that. Because circus animals are cleaned, groomed and handled daily, they are used to human contact, which is why they are less predictable than animals within other environments and why they are approachable not only by their keepers, grooms, and trainers but also by other circus visitors. This is why circus animals are very often used for TV programmes, TV advertisements and also in feature films.

I certainly feel that if wild animals were to be banned, it would have a negative impact on circuses generally when and if visiting Scotland and it would also hinder the film and TV making programmes. Other settings which include wild animals do not work as closely with their charges, they are cleaned out, fed and watered but that’s it, there is less hands on work with their animals and certainly in 99% of animals in a zoo for example, there is no direct public/animal contact. This I believe lessens the impact and understanding of the animals.

Wild animals are wild animals whether they are in the true wild (whatever there is left of that), or indeed a circus. However any wild animal currently anywhere in the UK has no idea what the true wild is, let alone where it is, because they are all captive bred, often by the animal owners themselves, other circuses or occasionally coming to circuses as surplus zoo stock. Circus performances include animals such as zebras, camels, reindeer, these all being animals that most people wouldn't consider as being wild. If you asked the public to name a wild animal they might expect to see at a circus; I bet they would all say lions, tigers, elephants and maybe bears and monkeys. I believe circuses do respect their animals and that’s why circus animal routines are designed to show what animals can do naturally and that’s why thought is also given to the animals housing and exercise. People forget that camels, zebra and reindeer are grazing animals and during the day, they do just that, in large outdoor paddocks, exactly the same as they do in any other setting. Big cats spend most of their day sleeping, again they can do that in the circus and when they wish, they too have outdoor exercise facilities, with recreational toys and even showers or swimming pools. So the circus does allow wild animals to express their 'wild' behaviours and because they live and work with animals 24/7, they not only understand animals but they allow the animals to be animals. It should be remembered that circuses tend to be run by families with generations of experience in not only circus but with animals and therefore animal training and animal welfare. Animal welfare was going on in Circuses decades before animal rights groups, animal welfare groups, concerned members of the public and Government regulations came into being!

Wild animals in circuses can be educational. Circus can with schools cooperation offer more educational aspects and can offer hands on opportunities for school groups. They can see the size of animals, learn about where they come from, what they eat, what they do in the so called wild, how they react to human contact. You can touch, feel and smell a camel, a zebra or indeed maybe an elephant. You can gaze into a camels eye or see how long its eyelashes are!
NO other animal husbandry system offers this hands on educational facility with so called wild animals and at such close range. Some circuses with wild animals are already offering this to schools who will work with circuses and I believe this is something which should be further developed and almost certainly encouraged.

Conservation is a totally different subject and with the destruction of the world’s natural habitat by man, animal husbandry systems such as circuses should be encouraged to breed and keep wild animals for future generations to witness and enjoy, rather than be discouraged from doing so and banned. To ban wild animals in circuses serves no purpose whatsoever, other than pleasing a small but noisy minority who campaign against circuses with animals. Wild animals are still wild animals and yes even in the circus, are treated as such, their natural instincts are not ignored or suppressed.

Overall, I believe all animals in the circus can and do have a very good life, they are kept clean, warm, well fed, groomed daily, they have the best vets when needed, plenty of fresh air and exercise and now in addition to all that, numerous inspections often unannounced by Defra yearly to make sure the circuses are doing properly what they are supposed to be doing and that is looking after their animals. The fact that circuses got licensed by Defra in the first place, should tell you something! I am aware that the standards Defra set were high and the fact that circuses applied, met the standards and got issued with a license yet again, I feel is brilliant.

Circuses in England with wild animals are unique in the world, as they are the ONLY circuses worldwide with a license issued to work with wild animals by a Government. Scotland could be next!!!!! Surely something to think about!

WHY is it the opponents of circus animals always want a ban. Why is a ban the only option? There are always two sides to every argument and its about time, the Circus was allowed the opportunity to be heard and put their side to the argument.

In summary, wild animals are very much an important aspect of circus, they are well loved by not only their owners and trainers but by the circus going public and for many, animals are the reason for attending the circus. They add a diverse and unique aspect to the circus programme through their natural noises, colours, their movements and their own natural performing abilities, something which is missing from the various all human circus shows, who present nothing more than a continual flow of acrobats however good they may be.

Although they may well be in a circus, wild animals in a circus are no different to wild animals anywhere else. ANY species of wild animals not suited to being within the circus, are not in circus already but the animals that are currently within circus are more than suited as proven by the RSPCA and Circus Working Group reports and circus can and is making sure their needs are met. Circus trainers know what the
animals can do, what the animals need on a daily basis and they make sure they and their staff provide it.

Circuses want the best for their animals that’s why they make sure the animals get what they need. They don’t do it because of some rule that says they have to do it, they do it because they want to and they want the best for their animals.

It isn’t in the circuses best interests not to do the right thing by their animal stars. I find it very strange that an industry that provides good honest clean family entertainment can be harassed by in some cases perhaps well meaning people who in fact know very little about the circus way of life, the lives of the animals within the circuses care, how animals are trained and cared for and for what really goes on in a circus on a daily basis. I really believe that anyone who thinks animals in the circus is wrong, cruel or outdated, should actually go and work for a month on a circus and they would see the love, the care and the dedication to the animals.

Circus is labelled by some as being cruel! Circus isn’t cruel to animals. If circus were cruel, the courts would be full of circuses charged with cruelty offences. Please ask supporters of the ‘Ban’ bill to name all the circuses taken to court and charged with cruelty offences, lets say over the past 30-50 years.

I actually doubt they would be able to do that. Certainly within my lifetime (I was born in 1971, so I am 46 years old this coming October) I am not aware of any circus being taken to court and charged with any animal cruelty charges.

In my lifetime and to the best of my knowledge, only TWO animal trainers have be taken to court and charged with any form of cruelty charges. [REDACTED TEXT]

Both these court cases generated much media coverage and that was because by their nature they were unique, rather than common place.

And by that, I mean, nearly every week the media are often depicting stories of true animal abuse and cruelty to pet dogs, horses in fields, swans on the river and the courts are dealing with such cases BUT these are acts of cruelty and abuse by normal everyday townspeople and NOT circus animal trainers.

So, in my opinion the British circus is really NOT a cruel circus at all.

I really hope all the Ministers really consider fully all the evidence that can be put in front of them and the true circus going publics opinion. You will no doubt receive a number of letters or emails supporting the bill and the majority of those will be from concerned members of the public who maybe haven’t been to a Circus and are
supporting the bill based on what others may have told them or they are supporters of the major animal rights groups. In areas of the country where protestors are more visible than in other areas, I yet have to see them supporting and attending an all human circus! Protesting against animal use is their aim, their cause and sometimes their only job!

I personally believe there is NO need to ban wild animals from appearing in circuses. By all means work with Circuses and such agencies that represent circuses and animal trainers and create strict workable regulations but I repeat, I believe there is no need for a ban.

If, on the other hand, the Ministers don’t understand what they are tasked with and don’t understand anything about animals in the circus and their decision goes the other way, it will be a sad day for the animals, a sad day for Scottish true circus goers and the circus community both in Scotland, the whole of the UK and worldwide.

For all too long, the circus industry has been made out to be in the wrong and the public, Councils, MP’s, Ministers, the media and even Governments have been conned into thinking that animals in the circus was wrong by a small by noisy minority of people who will go to whatever lengths to achieve their aims. Animal rights protestors persuaded(!) many councils to ban performing animals on the pretext it was cruel to the animals. Surely, it would have been better in the interests of animal welfare to maintain circuses in town parks and under council rule, in order to prevent any such activity if it was in fact happening. On council sites, the council could of insisted on local vets or animal health inspectors coming down and inspecting the circus animals.

If that had happened twenty years ago, things would be great BUT it didn’t. Many councils chose to ignore the circus industry and listen to the protestors, often because they were residents of that town and the circus wasn’t!

What’s next after circus and its animals? Zoo’s perhaps, or even working dogs and horses or god forbid, domestic pets and birds! Food for thought!

I should point out, I do not work for any circus and I never have done so but I do have a huge interest in animals and in circuses generally. I have been a circus enthusiast for over 35 years and I have been a member of the Circus Friends Association (CFA) since 1987, a CFA committee member for 10 years (2007-2017), CFA President for 4 years (2012-2016) and for the past 10 years, I have been a circus correspondent, reviewer and photographer for ‘The Worlds Fair’, the showman’s weekly newspaper.

Because of my above positions connected to the Circus world and due to my
passion for animals and circus, I was invited to work alongside the Circus Guild of GB and its members. This is something I have now done for the past seven years, holding until recently, the position of Secretary, which I thoroughly enjoyed. The Guild represents its member circuses with wild animals to the English Government and to the DEFRA departments and officials. The Guild can and will also work with circuses and animal trainers outside the UK as and when it can offer support and help.

These numerous positions have put me in direct touch with virtually every circus in the whole of the UK and in touch with every animal and animal trainer. In the whole of my time around circuses and its animals, both here in the UK or on my travels abroad, I have yet to see any form of animal abuse or indeed any form of animal cruelty and IF I had, I would of done something about it, as animal cruelty is something that I do not support and IF I had seen any abuse or cruelty, I certainly wouldn’t be writing to you in support of circuses today.

Circus with animals, both wild and domestic I believe has a future and a great future and that is because people are interested in it and do want to see it. Do the right thing for animals and for Circus.

Work with circus and create a workable but strict Regulation system that instils and maintains high standards of animal welfare for now and for the future.

If I can be of any more help or supply you with any further information, please do get in touch with me.