I write as a member since the early 1970s of the Classical circus community, working as a ringmaster and manager in Great Britain and abroad. I am the former Chairman of the group of circus people whose participation in the DEFRA Circus Working Group over a lengthy discussion period contributed to an English Government Report (Wild Animals In Circuses, Nov 2007, commonly referred to as the ‘Radford Report’).

In contributing to the Radford Report, six specialist Academics reviewed evidence on both sides of the question. Three were nominated by the circus community, and three by organisations opposed to the use of animals in circuses. Despite this antipathy, the Academics’ conclusions were unanimous. They include the words:

<<On the basis of the scientific evidence submitted to it, the (Academic) Panel concluded that such an argument (to ban the use of wild animals in circuses) had not been made out.>>

and further note was made by the Chairman, a specialist Lawyer, that:

<<...Ministers do not have before them scientific evidence sufficient to demonstrate that travelling circuses are not compatible with meeting the welfare needs of any type of non-domesticated animal presently being used in the United Kingdom. It is further submitted that such a decision must be based on scientific evidence, and other considerations are extraneous, and therefore unlawful in the context of section 12. Furthermore, in the absence of compelling scientific evidence, any attempt to ban the use of an animal would fall foul of the principle of proportionality.>>

Good circuses welcome constructive criticism. They have responded to advice from the world's leading animal behaviourists and welfarists to ensure the behavioural needs of their animals are met to the same high standards as their physical welfare.

Circuses have themselves been the leaders in proposing and initiating moves to guarantee those high standards to the general public. The English government's current Licensing system for wild-animal circuses is an example of that proposal brought to fruition. Licences are granted only after DEFRA experts have made thorough and stringent inspections of a circus on tour and when resting. Those inspections include surprise visits, and cover every aspect including records of day-to-day care, nutrition and food stocks, transportation vehicles, and a huge amount of documentation covering every aspect. This inspection régime costs the tax-payer nothing; it is charged in full to the circuses involved.

My own personal contact with circus trainers has shown me the affection which exists between them and their animals. I appreciate that exceptional incidents have come to light, but my experience persuades me that these are indeed exceptional, and that the norm within the circus community is of partnership with the animals rather than domination, and certainly not cruelty. Radford confirmed that animal care
in circuses equals that given in zoos and safari parks, and that transportation is not an issue as the animals are so familiar with it as part of their regular routine.

No doubt you have heard from organisations with a vested interest in condemning circuses. That ‘interest’ includes both financial and political gain. Their published material is persuasive, hinging on emotive appeal, and is designed to generate outrage towards many whose work and/or lifestyle involves working with animals. As such, its accuracy is highly questionable. An eminent American animal behaviourist, Professor Ted Friend, wrote to the then UK government Minister Lord ‘Jeff’ Rooker that, when he and his colleagues were told their lengthy specialist researches on behalf of the US government were extensively quoted in one such document, they were ‘flattered’. However, on reading a copy, they were appalled to discover that their work had been (as his letter put it) ‘egregiously misrepresented’, with oddments cherry-picked to suit an anti-circus argument. Animal rights organisations fund University departments to produce such ‘reports’; integrity is sadly lacking.

‘Public surveys’ are also highly questionable. The result of Scotland’s public opinion poll on the issue shows that .02% of Scottish residents (half of the 2043 respondents don’t live in Scotland) are in favour of banning circus animals classified as ‘wild’ (a misleading term in itself, since it includes species such as camels, viewed in the rest of the world as ‘domesticated’). That .02% signifies just over 1000 people among the 5.3 million sent the survey. In contrast, 1000 first-hand witnesses of circus-style performing animal displays during only three days at a farm in Aberdeenshire during 2016-2017 all approved what they had seen. In further contrast, those people agreed their home postcodes could be published to the Scottish Parliament as proof of their integrity. I wonder if all the respondents to the official survey have shown themselves to be so open?

While I praise all those who work for the cause of animal welfare, I am suspicious of individuals and organisations who refuse to acknowledge welfare progress in favour of an animal rights agenda. The philosophy of animal rights is diametrically opposed to that of animal welfare. It seeks to end all contact between humans and animals. I do not believe measures towards such an agenda would be of ultimate benefit to either human beings or to the natural world of which we are all part. A brief glance at the same websites which condemn circuses confirms that farming, horse-racing, and even pet ownership are also targeted in a philosophy which, if encouraged, would radically affect many aspects of social and economic life, both personally and nationally.

No circus animals have been taken from the wild for generations; circuses are not a threat to wild populations of any species. Circuses show how humans and animals can work together in cooperative partnership; they may even help highlight the plight of their poacher-threatened cousins. The circus people live for their animals, and the traditional circus with animals is acknowledged to be an important aspect of our culture. The European Parliament voted strongly in favour of animal circuses as an important cultural phenomenon:

“Whereas it would be desirable for it to be recognized that the classical circus, including the presentation of animals, forms part of European culture”
I hope that, rather than condemning circuses in the face of the body of positive evidence provided by open-minded and truthful research, you will choose measures which protect both the circus, as a vigorous and cherished aspect of all our cultural heritage, and its animal performers. I believe it would be unethical to ignore that evidence and thus to remove the public’s right to choose.

Thank you for your consideration of these points. I shall be happy to provide further comment, documentation, etc., if requested.