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The welfare of chickens [1]

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Ministers confirmed this week that battery hen cages will be banned in Britain by 2012. UK Environment secretary Hilary Benn described the move as "long overdue".

Maybe. But I certainly thought that battery cages for chickens had been banned some time ago. When my own father, Antony Fisher, raised chickens back in the 1960s, they were not kept in cages even then. They were kept in what is called deep litter. They were on shavings bedding, loose in huge buildings so they could move around and scratch in their bedding as they do naturally. True, their space was limited, but it was infinitely better than a life in battery cages (which are only used for egg-laying chickens anyway).

None of us, including farmers, want to see animals kept in cruel conditions. In richer countries like ours, we can afford better conditions for our animals, but then our farmers find themselves undercut by foreign producers who keep their animals in conditions that have been banned here years ago. So overall, sadly, the number of animals kept in bad conditions has not changed.

It's possible that technology will change this. We now can - and do - track the entire life history of cattle and other animals, so we know the conditions they were raised in. The same might be true of chickens. Of course, it costs money to be sure of the source of any agricultural product, and many families are more concerned with the price of their food, than how it was produced. There are human needs in this equation too. One thing is for certain, though - government regulation is rather less likely to promote animal welfare than is a market driven by concerned human beings.

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