

Sheryl Fink: Canadian government sacrifices cats and dogs for seal hunt

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By Sheryl Fink

An internal government memo recently came to light urging Canada's agriculture minister, **Gerry Ritz**, not to join the United States and Europe in banning cat and dog fur imports. Government officials fear that such action could weaken Canada's position against countries that have banned imports of seal fur products.

The news that cat and dog fur products can be readily purchased in this country likely comes as a shock to many Canadians. Most of us would be repulsed by the idea of wearing Tigger and Fido, even those of us who [eat meat](#) and wear leather.

Cat and dog fur is most often used as trim for garments and trinkets. Fur may be dyed, shaved, and otherwise altered so that it bears little resemblance to the animal from which it came. Such fur—if labelled at all—is often mislabelled, since exporting countries are well aware of our reluctance to wear clothing made from cats and dogs.

It is for these reasons that the U.S., Australia, Switzerland, and the European Union have all banned imports of cat and dog fur. It is for these very same reasons that the EU implemented a ban on seal fur products this past summer. Europeans don't want to wear seal fur any more than Canadians want to wear cat or dog fur.

The difference is that in Europe, national values and public opinion actually play a role in shaping public policy. In Canada, regional special interests such as the sealing industry often trump national values and majority public opinion.

Countless public opinion polls show that the vast majority of Canadians oppose the [commercial seal hunt](#) and would like to see an end to this inhumane, antiquated, and economically unviable industry. But in attempt to win seats in Newfoundland our political parties trip over themselves to support the sealing industry. Only the Green party has a policy to end federal assistance to the seal hunt, and to provide sustainable economic alternatives and compensation to sealers for any lost income.

Canada's Conservative government responded to the EU seal ban with retorts that Europeans were ignorant, emotional urbanites who were clearly misinformed and blinded by sentimentality. Presumably they think the same of the majority of Canadians who oppose commercial sealing.

Stockwell Day, Canada's minister of international trade, has announced his intent to challenge the EU seal product ban at the World Trade Organization—yet another move that goes against Canadian public opinion. Trade experts estimate that such a challenge will cost Canadians at least \$10 million, all for an industry that employs only a few thousand fishermen for a few days, and brought in little more than a million dollars this year.

Whether or not such a challenge is successful remains to be seen, as the EU has undoubtedly considered the WTO compatibility of their ban. But the revelation that Canada is using the WTO challenge as an excuse to ignore the Canadian consumers' concerns about purchasing cat and dog fur is political opportunism at its worst.

It takes courage for politicians to do what is right for Canadians. Last month, Liberal MP **Anita Neville** introduced a private member's bill that would ban the importation of cat and dog fur. Such legislation would undoubtedly be welcomed by most Canadians. But so long as the desire to win seats in Newfoundland—and the influence of the nearly \$1-billion fur industry—holds more clout with political parties than voters in the rest of Canada, our government will continue to accept unlabelled fur into this country, including the skins of cats and dogs, and they will continue to waste our money on handouts to the sealing industry.

It will take a much louder voice from all Canadians, and more courageous members of Parliament, to break this stronghold. Opposition to the [inhumane treatment of animals](#)—be it cats, dogs, or seals—and not wanting to provide markets for their skins does not make us “ignorant” or “emotional”. Rather, it shows an informed, compassionate, and concerned citizenry. When our government is so far out of step with public opinion, perhaps it really is time for new leadership.

Sheryl Fink is a senior researcher for the [International Fund for Animal Welfare](#).