

The Countryside March

A dangerous development in British politics

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The quarter-million-strong “Countryside March” through London on March 1 was an attempt by powerful sections of the ruling class to inaugurate a new English national movement.

Millions of pounds were spent to make it the biggest right-wing demonstration in British history. The day started out with breakfast at the plush Savoy hotel. The march was accompanied by March FM, a radio station set up for the event. Hundreds of special trains and buses were laid on from all over the country. The entire leadership of the Tory Party and the Liberal Party took part, while the Labour government was officially represented by the Environment Minister, Michael Meacher, wearing his country tweeds.

The march was portrayed in the media as a popular movement opposing the Labour government’s disdain for the countryside, but the organisers, Countryside Alliance (CA), declared their main policy to be opposition to a proposed parliamentary ban on fox hunting. This is emblematic of the real social interests involved.

The hunt is a traditional pastime of the English landed aristocracy dating back many centuries. Within the narrow and highly privileged circles that enjoy the benefits of inherited estates, family fortunes and noble titles, many consider the hunt to be no less a national institution than the Royal family or the House of Lords.

Fox hunting has long been a symbol of aristocratic exclusiveness. The select few invited to participate include the business elite, and not a few matters of high policy are decided in the course of a day spent chasing down a fox.

For as long as the landed gentry have indulged in this extravagant hobby, poor farmers, tenants and rural workers have despised it as a galling reminder of their own oppression and the excesses of their oppressors.

The organisers of the Countryside March also opposed Labour’s proposed “right to roam” legislation which would give hikers access to the large tracts of uncultivated land owned by wealthy landholders.

The background of the CA gives some indication of the powerful sections of the ruling class who are behind it. Its headquarters are in the building of the British Field Sports Society, which was bought by an “unnamed benefactor” in 1995. Membership in the BFSS soared after the government

introduced a ban on handguns in the wake of the 1996 Dunblane massacre in Scotland, when 16 school children and their teacher were killed by a crazed gunman.

The Countryside Business Group (CBG), set up to defend rural sports businesses, moved into the BFSS’s refurbished building, as did the Countryside Movement (CM), chaired by Lord Steel, the former Liberal Party leader who is paid £90,000 per annum to head the organisation.

The BFSS, CBG and CM amalgamated as the Countryside Alliance before the last general election. The board includes American millionaire Eric Bettelheim, Lord Peel, chairman of the Game Conservancy Trust, Lord Stockton, the Duke of Westminster, and Alain Drach, chairman of the gun makers Holland and Holland.

The Duke of Westminster, one of the richest men in Britain, is reported to have made an unsecured loan of £1.3 million to the CA. Property interests are also represented by Sunley Holdings, Pillar Property Investment, and construction magnate Sir Robert McAlpine. A former treasurer of the Tory Party, McAlpine became the main supporter of the anti-European Referendum Party of the late Sir James Goldsmith.

Financial backing has also come from America, including the American Master of Foxhounds Association, Sotheby’s auction house in New York, leading venture capitalist Willem F.P. de Vogel and C. Martin Wood III, senior vice president of Flowers bakeries.

Despite this pedigree, the CA was able to present itself as a coalition of broader concerns and attract disparate social forces behind its vague banner of defending Britain’s “country heritage.” It did this by feigning concern for the plight of the rural poor and small farmers, whose income has been slashed by 40 per cent because of the high value of the pound and the effect of mad cow disease on the beef market.

Many smaller farmers are being driven into bankruptcy, and one in three agricultural jobs has been lost since 1971. Studies show that a fifth of the rural population are living in poverty. There has been a drastic decline in public transport provision, with 93 per cent of villages having no railway and 71 per cent no buses. Some 80 per cent of villages have no doctor, and 50 per cent have no school.

The Labour government’s cuts in the welfare state are

making these conditions worse, just as in the urban centres. But the CA's propaganda blamed this on Labour being an "urban party" that was showing the traditional disdain of "townies" for the countryside. On Friday night before the march, thousands of beacons were lit on hilltops throughout England in protest against the Labour government. From Elizabethan times, this has been a way of warning of an invasion of the country by hostile forces.

The setting up of the CA and its build-up over the past two years are in large measure an attempt by extreme right-wing sections of the ruling class to overcome the collapse of their traditional political mechanism of rule, the Tory Party. In the rout suffered by the Conservatives in the general election last May, the Tories were not only wiped out in the cities, they also lost over one hundred rural seats to Labour. That is why thousands of Tory Party members in their traditional shire county heartlands have turned their attention to building this movement. Polls revealed that over 70 per cent of the march were Tory voters.

The Blair government has demonstrated its commitment to defending the interests of big business, but layers of the ruling class are opposed to any government interference in their affairs. Blair thought he could win cheap popularity by banning fox hunting and introducing the "right to roam" legislation. At the same time, he was forced to make token gestures towards resolving the mad cow disease crisis, such as banning the sale of beef-on-the-bone. Britain's ruling elite responded by proclaiming these trivial measures to be a fundamental threat to civil liberties.

The rhetoric summoned up is redolent of the attacks by the right wing of the Republican Party on the Clinton administration's supposed "big government" tendencies. In both cases, the demand is for an end to all interference with commercial activities and an exclusive concentration on slashing welfare provisions.

As Paul Johnson in the *Daily Mail* put it: "Farmers feel, and I agree with them, that the demand for access is largely class warfare of the most spiteful kind.... The attack on hunting is also seen, correctly, as largely inspired by class warfare fed by urban ignorance, an abuse of legislative power by a parliamentary majority. It directly flies in the face of the principles which underlie our freedoms."

The Labour government conceded to the demands of the Countryside movement without even a token protest. On fox hunting they had already indicated that they wouldn't allow a bill put forward by an individual Labour MP enough time to get through parliamentary procedure. Home Secretary Jack Straw said this week that the government would also block a ban on fox hunting being introduced as an amendment to other legislation being put through by the government. The "right to roam" legislation has met the same fate. Landowners will now be given the choice of whether or not to allow people on their land.

A serious warning should be taken from the rise of the Countryside Alliance. The mobilisation of this reactionary movement has been encouraged by the Blair government's attack on social programs, its glorification of the profit system, and the absence of an independent working class movement to oppose such right-wing policies. It has been fed by the desperation of smaller farmers and others who feel their future threatened by the impact of the global market. Labour's agenda will only deepen their social misery.

At the same time, the Labour Party's support for devolution measures in Scotland and Wales has encouraged the rise of nationalism and regionalism. Editorial writers and right-wing pundits are working hard to develop a mythical English nationalism around the CA agenda. It centres on a supposed "golden age" in the late eighteenth century when, according to the *Daily Express*, "all our ancestors lived on the land." At that time, says Paul Johnson in his *Daily Mail* article, "country people formed the first true community." He goes on to assert that "country people are the essence of our race."

The February 28 lead article in the *Times* hailed the country marchers as the "guardians of a very English vision" that must be restored. Warning against accepting Karl Marx's dictum that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggle," the *Times* maintained, "if the history of Britain, and especially of England, is a dialectic, then it is better seen as the story of two nations which are not rich and poor, but urban and rural...."

"An England where the pink [fox hunting] coat vanishes from the village green, the landowner is shorn of rights and thus neglectful of obligations, and the din of the city shuts out the countryside's cries may be moving with the times. But it is less 'one nation' than a nation needs to be."

As these propagandists are well aware, Britain in the period they are glorifying was ruled by a small oligarchy and only a narrow and wealthy layer of the population had the right to vote. The press was restricted, political meetings were banned, and working poor were incarcerated or hung for the smallest offence.

The success of the Countryside march will be noted in ruling class circles. There are already plans to stand CA candidates in elections. In a movement which channels impoverished middle class layers like the small farmers and some rural workers against the urban working class, the ground is being prepared for the formation of a new, fascist-type nationalist party like those that already exist in other European countries.



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