

Britain's Labour government kowtows to fox hunting lobby

Julie Hyland

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Britain's pro-fox hunting lobby staged a show of strength on December 26, the traditional Boxing Day holiday. Press reports claimed that some 300,000 people around the country showed up for fox hunts on the main day of the sport's annual calendar. Most were onlookers, gathered to watch the red-coated horse riders—fortified by hip flasks of port—and their pack of hounds chase any unsuspecting fox to shouts of “Tally Ho!”.

The grossly exaggerated turn-out, (anti-hunt groups put the total number at no more than 60,000) was designed to intimidate the Blair Labour government which, on December 20, finally introduced parliamentary legislation that could lead to a ban on hunting with hounds in England and Wales. This provoked some 1,500 demonstrators, styling themselves as “rural freedom fighters”, to gather outside parliament to protest against the moves. In the event, MPs voted by 373 to 158 to allow a new Hunting Bill to move to the Committee stage in the House of Commons. A free vote is due to take place next month when MPs will be able to choose between several options, including a total ban. Whatever they decide, the Bill will then move on to the House of Lords—Britain's second chamber—where it will almost certainly run into trouble.

Labour pledged to introduce legislation to outlaw fox hunting when it first took office more than three years ago. The past decade has seen an increase in activities by hunt saboteurs and others opposed to the sport, which ends only when the fox, pursued for miles, has been ripped to shreds by the hounds. Animal Rights activists condemn the sport as “barbaric” and argue that there are more humane ways to deal with the pest problem associated with the fox.

Opposition to fox hunting has a far broader resonance than the animal rights lobby, however. Opinion polls indicate a two-thirds majority in favour of an immediate ban on fox hunting. Sections of the establishment are also

in favour of action over the issue, regarding hunting with hounds as backward and unseemly.

The pro-hunt lobby, backed by the Countryside Alliance, like to present themselves as a beleaguered minority—misunderstood rural folk being picked on by “townies”. This was the theme at one of the largest Boxing Day hunt gatherings, a favourite of the Prince of Wales, held on the Duke of Beaufort's estate in south Gloucestershire. Addressing the several hundred strong gathering, Master of the Hounds Captain Ian Farquhar claimed that the hunt was “an integral part” of rural life and was “a club that binds a local community together regardless of age, background or income.”

Farquhar's invocation of a rural idyll notwithstanding, fox hunting as it is currently practiced emerged in the eighteenth century at a time of acute social polarisation in agricultural areas. Paternalistic feudal relations in the villages had long ago been torn apart by the enclosure of the common lands and the imposition of brutal anti-trespassing and poaching laws. By the 18th century, the Industrial Revolution and the growth of modern-day British capitalism had reduced thousands to destitution, while making the rich even wealthier.

The upper classes adopted ever more extravagant and ostentatious lifestyles. The privilege to hunt, previously the sole preserve of the aristocracy, was extended to all landowners. Massive country estates and palaces were built. In the past, stag hunting had been the preserve of the aristocracy and small-scale hare and fox hunting that of the country squires. But by the late 1700s, the hunting of foxes for pleasure took off amongst wider layers of the *nouveaux riches*. The sport was ideally suited to grandiose displays of wealth as well as the celebration of a rigid social hierarchy—an elite of aristocrats, nobles and the bourgeoisie who owned large tracts of farm land, were wealthy enough to maintain horses, hounds and their keepers and their subservient tenants and labourers who

could be called upon to do the fetching and carrying.

These divisions are still present in the sport—the gentlemen riders on horseback surrounded by a wide range of attendants, all having their allocated position in this hierarchy. Even today many of those employed by the hunt live in tied cottages, dependent on the landlord's good graces for a roof over their heads. The pro-fox hunting lobby has cynically sought to utilise this obscene situation to claim that in banning hunting with hounds, the government will be responsible for throwing whole families onto the street because the landowners will evict them if a ban goes through.

Given the sport's evolution, it is small wonder that the pro-hunt lobby have made the defence of property rights one of their key arguments, threatening to take the government before the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds that the Hunting Bill infringes upon the fundamental right for “peaceful enjoyment of property”.

The Countryside Alliance has urged its supporters to stand by for “a call to arms” to defeat the Bill. Richard Burge, the alliance's chief executive, thundered, “The purpose of Parliament is to defend minorities, their liberties and their way of life. If some MPs are unwise enough to pursue their personal prejudices against a legitimate minority through the criminal law, they should be under no illusion of the implacable resistance they will face from the alliance. This will include the largest march for civil liberty.”

In parliament, Conservative Party MPs attacked the ban proposal as illiberal, whilst former Conservative minister Michael Heseltine described it as a form of “class war”. Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major condemned the government for trying to turn the nation against “a minority of red-nosed toffs”.

Such claims are ridiculous. A ban on fox hunting would in no way threaten class relations, which are based not on shared pastimes but on wealth, privilege and private ownership, which the Blair government has no intention of challenging. Having maintained the House of Lords—merely reducing the number of hereditary peers entitled to sit there—Labour will be just as respectful in its dealings with the “Sport of Nobles”.

The government's Hunting Bill is prompted by more pragmatic calculations. Having abandoned its previous policy of social reforms, Labour has little to distinguish it politically from the Tories. That is one of the reasons that it has placed so much emphasis on constitutional and legal changes, such as devolving power to local governments and reform of the House of Lords. Prime Minister Blair

hopes that such measures will give his government some progressive coloration and help to shore up the authority of largely discredited institutions. Its pledge to take action over fox hunting has the advantage of making it appear that the government is weighing in against privilege and elitism at the very time that its own policies are dramatically increasing social inequalities.

Nonetheless, Tory protests point to the fear amongst sections of the ruling class that Labour's measures might inadvertently call into question the entire present structure of social and political relations.

Blair has gone to great lengths to dispel such concerns. In another concession to the pro-hunting lobby, the government had earlier established an Inquiry to look into the impact on the countryside of banning fox hunting. To chair the Inquiry, Blair chose Lord Burns, a former Treasury permanent secretary credited with helping implement Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's monetarist policies in the 1980s. Burns is regarded as such a Thatcherite stalwart that the former premier described him as “one of us”. In the Spring, Burns reported back that some 8,000 jobs could be threatened by a ban on hunting and that while hunting “seriously compromised the welfare of the fox”, all methods of killing raised welfare issues.

It was only after 22 failed attempts to introduce a curb on fox hunting by means of parliamentary motions tabled by individual backbench MPs, rather than as government-sponsored legislation, that Jack Straw announced the new Hunting Bill. Even so, the Home Secretary made clear that the government was neutral on the issue and that MPs would be given a free vote on a number of options—making it a matter of personal conscience rather than government policy. Straw also stressed that he preferred the “middle way” option of a licensing scheme, in which any one wanting to participate in the sport would have to apply to the Hunting Authority. Other options, which have yet to be finalised, include local referendums, self-regulation and a complete ban on hunting with hounds, backed by a fine of up to £5,000 for illegal hunting.



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