

Countryside Alliance: Britain's Tory Party rears its ugly head

Harvey Thompson, Chris Marsden
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Around 400,000 people took part in the Countryside Alliance march in London on Sunday, September 22, making it the largest demonstration seen in the capital since the 19th century.

The pro-Conservative Party press depicted the demonstration as the march of the “humble farmer”, a swelling of outrage from the marginalised countryside towards the arrogance of the “urban establishment” in parliament.

Leading the chorus was the *Daily Telegraph*, which, beginning with the front-page banner headline “407,791 voices cry freedom”, devoted its first five pages of Monday’s issue to the march and promised an eight-page souvenir supplement the following day.

Editor Charles Moore made pointed threats directed at the government in his piece entitled, “Were you listening Tony Blair? We were talking to you”. After comparing Blair with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe—“the only other world leader currently trying to take on white farmers”—he warned, “If I were the Prime Minister, I would worry that I had established a reputation for persecuting the most viscerally British of my fellow countrymen. The consent of the governed is a very important concept in a parliamentary democracy, more important in some respects, than a simple parliamentary majority.”

In the *Times*, William Rees-Mogg sought to explain the main grievances of the marchers, remarking; “These are not mainly complaints made by the wealthier people who live in the countryside; this was not in any way a march of grandees, but of ordinary country people who work hard for modest incomes.” Rees-Mogg went on to wax lyrical on peaceful village life and to evoke a “tolerant, moderate and stable” image of “English country people” who had been driven to despair by an authoritarian government: “It is an achievement of a kind to have brought these people to the boil, an achievement of bad government. Once brought to the boil, as I think they have been, they will not easily be turned aside from their objectives,” he threatened.

An editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s the *Sun*, which has been critically sympathetic to the Labour government, alleged, “Labour is fighting a class war in the country and we do not like the spectacle. It is trying to settle old scores by taking on ‘the toffs’. But the countryside marchers were not toffs—they were real people, hard working people, genuine people. Yet New Labour thinks it can ignore them all ... But watch out Tony. It takes a lot to get Middle England to join a protest march. If you arrogantly ignore people, they will get angry.”

Political editor Trevor Kavanagh went on to attack the supposedly muddleheaded notions amongst Labour Party lefts and animal rights activists campaigning for a ban on fox hunting, saying; “They will ignore the regional accents, working men’s clothes and the threat to thousands of hunt-related jobs in areas of high unemployment. For

such hard-liners, the idea that this is also a working class sport is incomprehensible. For them, fox hunting is the domain of a plummy-toned squire-archy.”

So what exactly was the grandly titled “Livelihood and Liberty march”? Was it really Middle England on the march, or even a movement of the rural poor? Hardly. The march expressed the social and political interests of precisely those whom the Tory press was at pains to deny were in charge—Britain’s squirearchy. The landed gentry rubbed shoulders with the real urban establishment, the super rich who have bought their own stately homes and celebrities both major and minor—including actor Vinnie Jones, whose fondness for grouse shooting has cast the film “Lock, Stock and Two Smoking barrels” in an entirely new light. All were dressed in tweed caps, Barbour jackets and green wellies to emphasise their status as “True-born Englishmen and sons of the soil, don’cha know?”

Just how badly judged the efforts to capture popular sympathy were was evident in the decision to have a family lead off the march with a sleeping one-year-old girl in a pram decorated with a banner that read, “When I grow up I want to go hunting with my Daddy.”

The Countryside Alliance was set up just before the general election of 1997 from an amalgam of the British Field Sports Association (BFSA), the Countryside Business Group (CBG) and the Countryside Movement—all of which are intimately connected and well-funded.

Lord David Steel, the former Liberal Party leader, was paid £90,000 per annum to head the Countryside Alliance and its board included American millionaire Eric Bettelheim, Lord Peel, chairman of the Game Conservancy Trust, Lord Stockton, the Duke of Westminster (one of the richest men in Britain, who is reported to have made an initial unsecured loan of £1.3 million to the CA), and Alain Drach, chairman of the gun makers Holland and Holland.

Significant real estate interests were 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 from the United States included 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.

In March of 1998 the CA staged its first national demonstration.

This time round almost a million pounds alone is believed to have been spent on 37 specially chartered trains, 2,500 coaches and the closure of 22 major roads.

Along the route ending in Parliament Square, five giant video screens were erected relaying selected images from the carefully stage-

managed affair. A huge specially constructed double-arch bridge (with the march slogan printed across the top and clearly visible from the air by press helicopters) was put into place for the marchers to file under as they approached the final corner before the Houses of Parliament. The exclusive membership clubs lining Pall Mall and St James's opened their doors to some marchers so they could purchase champagne and other thirst-quenching tipples. The Institute of Directors building was taken over for the day.

The "Liberty" referred to in the march title signified the right to hunt foxes and the attempt to wed this with concern for the "Livelihood" of the rural poor could not hide the class character of such an appeal. The *Financial Times* pointed out that the "gentlemen farmers" were led off by bagpipers calling themselves the Pinstripe Highlanders—city workers residing in the countryside. "Ewan McGarrie, one of the kilt-clad group and communications directors for a City company, was marching for the right of the countryside to be left alone... Kim Fraser, a financial consultant, was marching for liberty. 'I believe people should be allowed to do what they want to do,' he said, swigging whisky from his hip flask between tunes."

According to the FT, more than half of all those who participated in the march were from the affluent AB socio-economic groups. Only four percent of the marchers worked in unskilled, manual jobs compared with 25 percent of the rural population as a whole. Around 80 percent were Tory voters, up from the 70 percent of the 1998 march.

This latter statistic points to the real significance of the march. It was a day out for Britain's Conservatives to protest at the government's meddling in their favoured sport. They were forced to do so because of the marginalisation of their traditional party, out of weakness rather than strength, hence the presence of party leader Iain Duncan Smith on the platform.

The movement also became a focus for the grumblings of the parasites of the House of Windsor. Prince Charles instructed his mistress Camilla Parker Bowles not to attend, and reportedly stopped sons Prince's Harry and William from participating disguised as badgers. All satisfied themselves by joining in parties at top venues after the event. But a private letter written by Charles to Tony Blair, in which he concurred with the views of many well-to-do farmers that they were as a group more "victimised" than ethnic minorities and gay people, was leaked to the press on the eve of the march. Also leaked was an apparently overheard remark in which the prince, on reflecting on a possible fox hunt ban, is said to have told a friend, "If Labour bans hunting I'll leave Britain and spend the rest of my life skiing."

Agriculture only employs around two percent of the British population, with many smaller farmers having been driven into bankruptcy, and one in three agricultural jobs lost since 1971. Those directly reliant on farming are therefore a minority even amongst Britain's 8-10 million-strong rural population.

More generally, rural areas are characterised by obscene social differences between the wealthy elite who commute to the city from their million-pound-plus homes and local people who can find only the lowest paid work. Last year countryside tourism, which employs around 38,000, is thought to have lost around £8 billion in revenue due to the foot-and-mouth crisis. Public transport is almost non-existent—93 percent of villages have no railway and 71 percent lack any bus service. Some 80 percent of villages have no doctor and over 50 percent have no school, with village schools being closed at a rate of six per year. With an estimated 80,000 homes needed in the

countryside, the homeless rate in some areas has risen 13 percent in the last five years. Three thousand village post offices are shutting down every year. Over the last decade 4,000 rural bank branches have closed. Pubs are closing at the rate of six per week. Four out of five rural parishes no longer have a shop.

But what does this mean? We are not dealing with an essentially rural problem. Studies show that a fifth of the rural population are living in poverty, which is exactly the same figure as poverty in urban areas. Labour's supposed disdain for the "countryside", which the march organisers sought to exploit, is in fact only one expression of its disdain for the working class, urban and rural.

In contrast the more wealthy farmers are looked after very well indeed. Sean Rickard, formerly chief economist of the National Farmers' Union (NFU), told the *Guardian* that farming gets £3 billion in direct subsidies annually, and more when price intervention payments are taken into account. "If you looked at the net worth of the farming industry—the value of their assets after their incomes—since 1992 it's risen by more than 60 percent. Their incomes may be low at the moment but it's all to do with the exchange rate—they are in the same position as manufacturing. They were compensated for BSE and foot and mouth. The cereal, milk, sheep and beef sectors get more than one-third of their revenue from the government."

The *Guardian* notes that farmers receive payments under the common agricultural policy worth around £5.75 billion a year, providing 40 percent of weekly farm income regardless of amount produced—around £150,000 a farm. On top of this they receive about £16,000 a farm for "sustainable farming" over three years, rate relief worth up to 100 percent of land and buildings and low duty on special red diesel (3.13p a litre vs. 51.82p a litre on ordinary diesel).

For all the attempts to project a vision of the countryside united against the uncaring townies, therefore, the relationship between the rural poor and the march organisers is akin to that of the Lord of the Manor to his gillies and beaters—or to stretch the analogy further back in time, to his serfs and vassals.

It is widely believed that Blair and those closest to him are in favour of a form of regulated or licensed hunting and will offer this as a compromise. But the right to continue wearing the hunting pink will not satisfy the movers and shakers behind the Countryside Alliance. Its establishment was an attempt by sections of the ruling class to overcome the collapse of their traditional political mechanism of rule, the Tory Party. The rout suffered by the Conservatives in the general election of 1997 was so great that they were wiped out as an electoral presence in many major cities and even lost over 100 rural seats to Labour. That is why thousands of Tory Party functionaries and supporters in their traditional shire county heartlands have turned their attention to building the Countryside Alliance. It is a vehicle for a right-wing agenda epitomised by the demand of the rich to do whatever they want, without any semblance of democratic restraint.



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