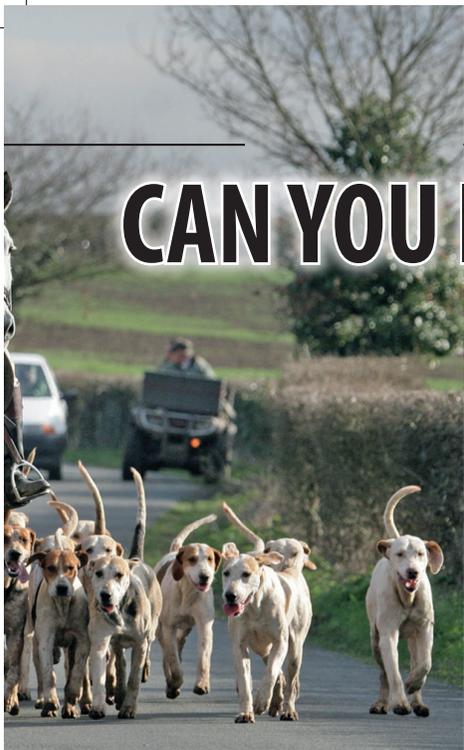


CAN YOU IMAGINE AN IRELAND WITHOUT HUNTING?



THE HUNTING OF WILD MAMMALS (NORTHERN IRELAND) BILL CAN...

heritage as country folk to be recognised for what it is and receive protections in law.

You wouldn't find a more 'woke' organisation than UNESCO and yet under their 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' label, which they describe as 'a practise, representation, expression, knowledge, or skills considered by UNESCO to be part of a place's cultural heritage', there are sub headings:

- **Social practices, rituals and festive events**
- **Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe**

Bingo! Thank you, UNESCO. We are slow on the uptake here and have painfully clung to examining the details of such flawed activities as trail hunting.

While possibly that is a reasonable holding position to keep the door open on the hunting debate while a proper series of actions are launched, it is, as clearly witnessed, a piece of legislation that can be further eroded and chipped away at until effectively hunting becomes that far away echo.

In Scotland, exactly that is happening right now. *The Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002* changed traditional foxhunting in Scotland into an activity less interesting for mounted followers, with a full pack of hounds being allowed to flush a fox from cover to a waiting line of shotguns.

This month, the SNP/Green Party Government is now seeking to reduce numbers, from a full pack to no more than two hounds, contrary to the findings of Lord Bony's report, which they themselves commissioned.

This is a really good, modern-day example of a Government ignoring any facts, scientific research or opinion and ploughing ahead regardless, to produce a deliberately inappropriate and prejudiced piece of legislation.

But countries like France, Slovenia, Hungary, Czech Republic and New Zealand have recently passed protections in law, based around animal welfare and management, cultural heritage and preservation of minority rights.

Last month Hungary hosted the 'One With Nature' International Festival of Hunting which ran for 20 days, attracting 1.4 million people, among them 50,000 inner city school children. The Hungarian Secretary of State, Dr Zoltan Kovacs could hardly believe the situation that we face here in the UK and urged us to form strong alliances. When quizzed, he opened up and wryly admitted that '...of course it is political, 2.4 million out of a 10 million population vote for whoever is going to represent their rural issues.'

Common sense prevailing

If unity is the answer, then I must finally give a nod to Chris Packham and his influence on the League Against Cruel Sports. They have been very well messaged and successful to date. However, recent attempts over this last year by his Wild Justice organisation to ban driven grouse shooting and remove the General Licence to control various pest bird species have failed and been voted down. This is a complete success story for shooting and conservation organisations and common sense prevailing in Parliament.

The parallels with the case for hunting are obvious. We need to get joined up.

Packham has just launched a further attempt to restrict the General

Licence for shooting avian pests in, wait for it, Northern Ireland. I never imagined that Mr Packham would hand it to us on a plate with such impeccable timing.

If he really wanted to 'get the backs up' of rural Northern Ireland and threaten hunting and shooting simultaneously to unite around a common cause against his misguided and prejudiced aims, then he couldn't have played it better. Maybe Mr Blair might use this moment to consider the damage his Bill will do to rural Northern Irish communities, the fox population and the wider cultural heritage of Ireland and slink away into cover?

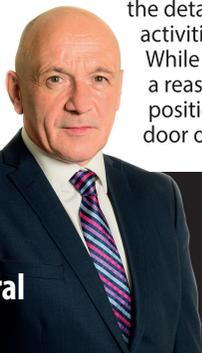
Could we do the same here, you might wonder? Well, I for one, firmly believe that we could from within the 17 per cent of our population considered to be 'rural'. If everyone who took part in any fieldsport, or had an interest in wildlife management and conservation, or simply had sympathy for the principles of the civil liberty and right to conduct an activity which science, study and research has consistently proved to be a sensible and reasonable thing to do, or who just appreciated being part of the timeless link with our ancestors and man's association with his best friend, the dog, for at least the last 40,000 years, or just enjoyed a release from the strains of modern living to ease their state of mind by being out and at one with nature, then who knows what that figure could be, 10 million of us maybe? Now that's got a politician's ear for sure.

The case for hunting will be settled in Northern Ireland by the people of Northern Ireland. Admittedly it's a tough stance to take as a politician but today's thinking on hunting as a naturally selective and essential wildlife management tool, its value to rural communities and its place within the cultural heritage of Ireland, makes it an important activity which must be protected.

open to scrutiny. It has failed and it doesn't work, for either side of the argument. It has failed the fox population it supposedly set out to protect because without the ability to naturally cull sick, old or injured foxes using Foxhounds, many more foxes are shot than previously.

It is estimated that the red fox population in parts of the UK has dropped between 40-60 per cent of its size pre-2005. Show me someone who has shot many foxes without wounding one, to limp away and die of sepsis or starvation and I'll show you a fox that escaped wounded having been caught by a pack of hounds.

Maybe Mr Blair might use this moment to consider the damage his Bill will do to rural Northern Irish communities



Can the animal rights organisations, who supposedly spent circa £15 million on bringing about the ban, taking up 700 hours of Parliamentary time during the Iraq War of 2003 which, in itself, was only afforded seven hours, demonstrate any success of the *Hunting Act 2004* in terms of animal welfare? Of course, they can't, because they have spent precisely not one penny on finding out whether or not it has. Why? Because they actually know that it hasn't had any positive impact and therefore, sensibly, wouldn't waste their time or money.

"Instead of an effective measure, therefore, *The Act* and the Bills for it were largely an exercise in what it has now become fashionable to describe as 'virtue signalling,'" as Daniel aptly summarised.

An opportunity, then, has emerged over the recent few years, namely minority rights. Your average rural Brit might be bemused and slightly baffled, if not dare I say it 'offended' by statues being toppled in our various cities but a result is that it has paved the way for our cultural

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