



Jim Barrington • ANIMAL WELFARE

Countryside Alliance COMMENT



IT'S no exaggeration to say that hunting with hounds is currently under severe threat. The illegally hacked Hunting Office webinar and National Trust vote to prohibit trail hunting have prompted some to wonder what the future will bring. Is hunting holding its own or on a slow slide into oblivion?

No coincidence that two further attacks on hunting have now appeared. John Blair, a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, has finally published his Bill aiming to prohibit hunting with dogs, the only part of the UK which has not been affected by a hunting ban. The Scottish Government, while ignoring the central finding of the Bonomy Report it commissioned, now moves to tighten the existing hunting ban. A consultation process is currently underway.

The politicians behind these measures rely on the fact that most people will not consider in any detail what will follow if hunting with hounds is curbed or prohibited. In Scotland, the only 'problem' with the *Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act* is that this law did not completely finish off Hunts, while Blair's Bill attempts to do precisely that in Northern Ireland. The effects of this law on wildlife doesn't receive a moment's consideration from these politicians.



The Scottish consultation presumes that steps taken in 2002 are the right ones and all that is needed are ever tighter restrictions. Blair's Bill goes further, seeking to ban trail hunting, while making every dog owner, not just Hunts, a potential criminal if they let their animal chase a wild mammal.

It's as if these anti-hunting politicians are in some kind of pathetic race to see who can be more extreme and claim they were the ones who finally delivered hunting's death blow.

A document produced in support of the Blair Bill contains the usual 'evidence' in the form of opinion polls, as if all that is required of politicians is to blindly vote in favour of such skewed findings. Phraseology designed to achieve the desired answers and a consultation

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that allowed anyone from literally anywhere in the world to take part can hardly be a true reflection of the views of people in Northern Ireland.

But the biggest omission in this document, and indeed in most anti-hunting propaganda, is a clear explanation of the wildlife management methods approved by groups opposed to hunting and why they think they are preferable to the use of hounds.

When an answer is forthcoming (a rare occurrence) it's usually along the lines of deterrence, such as electric fencing. Nothing wrong with this, but it depends on where and how it's used. Also, who wants the countryside criss-crossed with fencing?

An article by cricketing legend Ian Botham, now in the House of Lords, mentions one of the methods employed by the RSPB. Lord Botham refers to an RSPB manual for its reserves' wardens on how to 'deal with hedgehogs, otters, badgers, foxes – and even cats. It explains how to use irresistibly tasty 'bait' to lure wild animals to lick live wires. For badgers, the manual says staff should soak the cotton wool in 'honey, syrup, peanut butter or treacle.'

For foxes it describes using "dripping... from the Sunday roast or wrapping strips of bacon around the wires... at the height of a fox's nose." Lord Botham continues: "The document also explains how the fences kill some creatures: Hedgehogs are also prone to electrocution... because they tend to roll into a ball when shocked rather than to move away." It says "frogs have died from multiple shocks" and explains how deer get entangled in the electric fences.

Apparently, these recommendations are now withdrawn, but why would they have been considered acceptable in the first place? Far from what some groups would have us believe, reality isn't so comfortable, but it explains why the best policy on alternative methods is to keep quiet.

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COULD you imagine an Ireland without hunting? The very essence of the place is steeped in a culture of hunting, hounds, highly prized horses and the rural backdrop of an entire community that exists around it. And yet on Boxing Day last year there emerged from the Alliance Party (which paradoxically stands for championing cross community harmony) a man called John Blair MLA, who proposed a motion to outright ban all forms of hunting with dogs in Northern Ireland and even beyond that, to cancel trail hunting before it might have even been an option.

The Hunting of Wild Mammals (Northern Ireland) Bill was announced at Stormont on November 9, which effectively initiates the formalities of the legislative process to proceed through its various stages. The clock is now ticking.

Politicians and the 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in Northern Ireland are now perfectly positioned to review the case for hunting. In terms of animal welfare, the UK fox population has crashed since the *Hunting Act 2004* came into force. Minority rights and the case for the livelihoods and way of life of the 'Rural Brit' can now be viewed from a modern moral and legal perspective. Intangible Cultural Heritage, championed by UNESCO, has witnessed many countries worldwide enshrining protections for their rural heritage in law.

Same old misguided lines

As a result, Northern Irish MLAs in 2021 are able to benefit from a much greater degree of new evidence around the matter of hunting than was the case prior to the *Hunting Act 2004* in England and Wales. The same old misguided lines about class prejudice from the animal rights lobby are just outdated in today's diverse society and offer no fresh evidence, well past their 'sell by' date and frankly are beginning to smell like the ripe tripe that it is.

A veterinary opinion (from the Veterinary Association of Wildlife Management) states: "Hunting by hounds is the natural and most humane method of controlling the population of all four quarry species, fox, deer, hare and mink, in the countryside." This is supported by some 400 members of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

Apart from the fact that hunting, whether mounted, on foot or with trencher fed packs, as well as the world of terrier, sighthound or gundog work is genuinely a widely enjoyed and well supported cross community activity throughout Ireland, he seemed to be very confused when questioned on the detail of his proposed Bill.



He previously held positions in Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and should have known better. He has hugely underestimated the feeling of the Northern Irish people and their natural affiliation and respect for rural life. Maybe he has realised that he has been played and duped by the League Against Cruel Sports and their rather questionable survey, using him and his political position for their own ends?

We need to inject new arguments by new people into the ill-judged and prejudiced laws that have so negatively affected animal welfare, community minority rights and the protection of our cultural heritage. We have for too long been 'beguiled by our own guiding' and it is time for change.

Having spoken over the course of this year with Daniel Greenberg, the Parliamentary Counsel who drafted the *Hunting Act 2004*, it really is blindingly obvious to see that it is bad law based on prejudice, ignoring the science behind the matter of foxhunting and genuine animal welfare concerns and is just a shameful example of prejudice in governance at the hands of Tony Blair's Labour Party.

As was stated around the Burns Report into foxhunting "there was never any attempt to seek a working compromise". And as Dennis Skinner said: "It was for the miners." Nothing to do with animal welfare, no consultation or compromise with the people it ended up criminalising. I wonder how many miners in Northern and central England, let alone Wales, not only lost their jobs but also then were criminalised for one of their main passions in life, hunting with dogs?

As Mr Greenberg said: "What's actually happening here, is that we are legislating against a minority on a moral issue and I thought we didn't do that." The basis on which that law was passed is now

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