

Hunting the Hunters

by Marion Shoard

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Huntsmen and women cantering through the wan winter landscape should make the most of their sport. Within a few years, it may be a thing of the past. Next month's Commons debate on Kevin McNamara's private member's bill to outlaw fox-hunting, stag-hunting and hare-coursing will mark the huntsman's reluctant arrival in the centre of the political stage.

This particular bill cannot become law before the election, but Labour has promised that if it wins it will hold a free vote on whether the hunting of foxes, deer and other mammals with hounds should be banned. In a Labour-dominated House of Commons, a majority would almost certainly favour a ban. If, however, the vote were lost, fox-hunting might still fall victim to another Labour proposal. A new law making it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to a wild mammal might be interpreted by the courts as outlawing hunting completely, or at least crucial elements of the sport, such as terrier-work.

Lack of an overall majority might not stop Labour from implementing these plans. Since 1989, the Liberal Democrats have been committed to an outright ban on hunting. But would even a Tory victory protect the hunt indefinitely? The landed gentry are now almost unrepresented in the cabinet, while well-known Tories like Sir Teddy Taylor and Dame Janet Fookes are backing next month's anti-hunting bill. John Major owes nothing to the rural establishment, is president of the Huntingdon RSPCA and, most important of all, is acutely sensitive to the wishes of an electorate which is beginning to demand to be heard on this issue.

Last month a Gallup survey found that 80 per cent of voters disapprove of fox-hunting. This is not surprising. What was less predictable was that virtually the same figure, 79 per cent, pronounced themselves in favour of a ban on hunting. In the past, people have been quick to disapprove of what they have seen as abuse of animals, but have shown some respect for the right of others to make their own decisions about it when deliberate cruelty is not involved. Now, however, there seems to be a growing determination by the anti-hunting majority to impose its point of view.

Behind this increasing proscriptiveness lies a revolution in attitudes to animal life. As Christianity has withered, so has the Judaeo-Christian idea that man is entitled to dominion over beasts. In its place has come the quasi-religion of one earth, shared by threatened creatures, with man as just one species among many. In such a world, animal rights take on the characteristics of human rights: like human rights they are to be upheld even against abusers who do not acknowledge their validity. It becomes as outrageous to hunt foxes for fun, as it seems today (but did not always) to hunt aboriginal human beings.

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Not only fox-hunting is threatened by such attitudes. Much else in our lives may have to change as well. Plymouth's Labour council has drawn up an animal rights charter which would ban not only hunting but shooting and all fishing with barbed hooks on or from council land, along with boiling lobsters, whipping horses and giving goldfish as prizes at fetes. Brighton Dolphinarium has shut, and Oxford and Cambridge, the last A-level examining board to insist on compulsory dissection for biology students, has now given in.

All this is far from being mere eccentricity on the part of the animal-obsessed British. The European Commission is planning set minimum standards for zoos, the European Parliament is gunning for cosmetics testing, and a Spanish town has banned bull-fighting. Australia gave us that modern martyr Kerry Bishop of Neighbours, the pregnant mother killed by a stray shot while campaigning against duck-hunters.

As attention focuses more and more on animals and their rights it is hard to see how they can eventually be denied one basic right that would change human life much more than a ban on hunting. If it is wrong to hunt animals for pleasure, how can it be right to eat them for pleasure, however humanely they are despatched? A growing number of schoolchildren refuse to eat red meat, to the considerable inconvenience of the school meals service. Once the huntsman is deprived of his prey, how long will it be before the target is the Sunday roast?

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