

‘Trust at bay as townsmen close in’

by Marion Shoard

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Today the 52 members of the council of the National Trust must take one of the most important decisions in the organisation's 95-year history: what to do about last month's vote by Trust members for a ban on the hunting of deer with hounds on the Trust's land. If the council imposes such a ban, which would cripple the sport in its West Country stronghold, the rural establishment will be outraged. To defy the members' vote could trigger a revolt and mass resignations. Either way, the Trust - Britain's largest landowner after the state and the crown - will be placed in the forefront of the growing struggle for control of our changing countryside.

Today's hard choice has not come about by chance. As a statutory body laden with tax and legal privileges which is also Britain's largest voluntary organisation, the Trust has always played an ambiguous role in our national life. Over the years, those who run it have chosen to throw its weight firmly behind the traditional rural order, arguing that the interests of conservation will best be served by "good neighbourly" relations with other landowners.

This approach has benefited established rural interests. Some aristocratic families are able to retain their traditional trappings only through deals by which they remain in largely undisturbed occupation of their stately homes while the Trust foots the repair bills. Trust tenants are not even required to permit public access to much of the magnificent countryside which has supposedly been acquired on behalf of the nation.

Such practices have won for the Trust the understanding and support of the rural establishment. But in a less deferential and increasingly democratic Britain, they were bound to be questioned sooner or later. The urban majority to whom the Trust is ultimately responsible strongly disapproves of some country practices. In the past, the Trust's half-appointed, half-elected, council could afford to ignore these views, but recent efforts to strengthen the organisation's finances have brought the council into unexpectedly fierce collision with the people in whose name it supposedly acts.

During the 1970s and '80s, the Trust embarked on a hugely successful recruitment drive, which has given it nearly two million paid-up members. Many joined simply for the discounts on entry charges to those Trust properties that have been turned into tourist attractions (drawing 10 million visitors a year). But all members have the right to vote on Trust policy, and though such votes are not constitutionally binding on the council, in a democratic age they inevitably carry immense weight.

Hunting was always the likeliest flashpoint. Recent opinion polls suggest that around 70 per cent of adults think all hunting should be banned. Some members proposed a complete ban on hunting on Trust property in 1988, but on the urgent advice of the council, their resolution was defeated. So (although much more narrowly) was a similar resolution last month. However, the gentle and appealing red deer evokes even more feeling among townspeople than the fox, hare or mink. A separate resolution calling for a ban on deer hunting alone was passed by 68,679 votes to 63,985. Although this vote involved only 6.5 per cent of the Trust's members, the council cannot lightly disregard it.

Already the council faces allegations of high-handedness in the way it runs the Trust. Earlier this year Rodney Legg, the chairman of the Open Spaces Society, called the Trust an elitist club, as he began a campaign for more public access to Trust land. Mr Legg has now demanded a complete restructuring of the Trust, putting full control in the hands of the members. If the council flouts the clearly expressed will of the membership over such an emotive issue as deer hunting, it will play into the hands of all those seeking to democratise the Trust. If instead it gives in, members will feel encouraged to submit further resolutions aimed at promoting change in the rural régime. Either way, Trust land could eventually be used as a means of undermining all those country practices, ranging from fox-hunting to chemical farming, to which townspeople take exception.

Few of the present members of the council will want to see the Trust changed in this way, by either route. But what can they do? Their options are limited.

They can refuse to implement a ban and try to justify this course to Trust members. They could easily demonstrate that a ban would alienate landowners. Much of the land on Exmoor which would be affected by a deer-hunting ban was donated to the Trust in 1944 by Sir Richard Acland. Before he died three weeks ago, he threatened to take legal action to prevent any ban being applied to his former holding. But Trust members incensed by the suffering of the deer are unlikely to be moved by the prospective wrath of the animals' persecutors.

Alternatively, the council can implement the ban and try to persuade landowners to accept it. That, however, will not be easy. Already the joint master of the Quantock Staghounds is threatening to shoot his 70 hounds in front of the press if the ban goes ahead. In such a climate, landowners may well consider the implementation of a ban an unforgivable betrayal.

Some members of the council may try to put off a decision by setting up a working party to find out more facts, even though the facts are all too clear to everyone. The council would perhaps be wiser to grasp the nettle now and impose the ban. But whichever course is chosen, the National Trust is henceforth likely to play a much more assertive role in the life of our countryside.

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