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Baying Mob

Gangs of thugs rampage through the countryside. Yet the police look the other way, and the government does nothing.

Something is going badly wrong in the countryside. For years, despite abundant video evidence, bloodsports enthusiasts have intimidated and attacked people who criticise and seek to monitor them, with apparent impunity.

There is film footage of a man beating the windows of a car with a dead fox¹, of a huntsman on horseback appearing to assault an observer² with a whip, of horses being ridden into hunt monitors³, of a woman being slapped round the face and thrown to the ground⁴, of two men, one masked and one in a balaclava, apparently trying to smash the windows of the car and then pursuing it on a quad bike⁵, of a large vehicle with its plates obscured, ramming⁶ a car full of people. These are just a few among the many acts of violence reported by people trying to prevent illegal hunting.

The attacks appear to be escalating. Last week, two men in balaclavas drove a Land Rover up to the gates leading to TV presenter Chris Packham's house⁷ and set light to it, causing an explosion and a fire that inflicted thousands of pounds worth of damage. This surely qualifies as terrorism. It's the latest of many attempts to intimidate⁸ him, which appear to be connected to his opposition to hunting and the illegal persecution of birds of prey.

It's not the first time that someone opposed to hunting has been the victim of an arson attack. In 2018, a Somerset farmer, Paul Chant, was assaulted when he tried to stop a hunt from rampaging across his land, part of which he uses as an animal sanctuary. A few days later, he attended an anti-hunt protest. Hours afterwards, his car and an outbuilding were torched⁹, and he had to be treated in hospital for smoke inhalation. He believes these events are linked.

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/fox-hunt-boxing-day-dead-van-video-kirk-smeaton-yorkshire-a9261431.html>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/cheshire-hunt-fox-hunting-protester-beaten-video-police-a8705761.html>

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/fox-hunt-yorkshire-middleton-derwent-saboteurs-a8810306.html>

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/man-fox-hunt-warwickshire-female-saboteur-film-animal-rights-assault-birdingbury-a8052536.html>

⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/masked-pro-hunt-gang-quad-bikes-threaten-protesters-trying-protect-foxes-a9273751.html>

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hunt-saboteurs-car-rammed-video-grove-rufford-newark-a8830231.html>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/10/chris-packham-vows-to-continue-activism-after-arson-attack-on-home>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/ChrisGPackham/status/1446932226839564374>

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hunt-farmer-arson-fire-attack-mendip-priddy-somerset-land-hounds-paul-chant-a8704391.html>

The victims of such attacks have frequently complained about what they see as a failure by the police to respond to their emergency calls, or to follow up afterwards. A dossier compiled¹⁰ by the group Action Against Foxhunting documents 81 cases, in many of which telephone calls to the police were not returned, or illegal hunting, violence and other crimes were not investigated.

Hunting animals with dogs has been illegal in England and Wales since 2005, although the law included exemptions. Hunts are permitted to follow a scent trail laid down in advance.

But “*trail hunting*” appears to be widely used as a cover for pursuing animals. There are repeated instances of hounds chasing foxes and deer across people’s farms and gardens¹¹, frightening or killing livestock¹² and pets¹³ and inflicting great distress on local people.

People who try to defend their land from these intrusions have been intimidated, and in some cases forced to close their businesses or leave their homes¹⁴. Every winter, parts of the countryside succumb to mob rule. And the police, all too often, stand by.

I think there’s likely to be a connection between the failure to police bloodsports effectively and the apparently escalating violence against objectors. A sense of impunity is also likely to be strengthened by major legal deficiencies. The Hunting Act is hard to enforce, as it’s easy for a trail hunt “*accidentally*” to pursue and kill a fox or a deer. It contains several loopholes¹⁵ that make such “*accidents*” even harder to prosecute.

The only effective remedy is surely to ban all forms of hunting with hounds, including trail hunts.

Other bloodsports also enjoy remarkable legal exemptions. An attempt to introduce a provision for vicarious liability in England, ensuring that estate owners could be prosecuted when their gamekeepers illegally kill birds of prey, was struck down by an environment minister who happened to own a grouse moor¹⁶ and a pheasant shoot. The amazing legal contortions needed to allow pheasant shooting¹⁷ to continue create the impression that there is one law for the rich and quite another for the poor.

I believe that a longstanding culture war, in which people who describe themselves as “*real*” or “*authentic*” countryfolk vilify “*incomers*” and “*townies*” (those whose parents were not born in the community), also helps to create a permissive environment for intimidation and violence. I’ve even seen some rural people in the UK describe themselves as “*indigenous*”¹⁸, a theme taken up by the for-

¹⁰ https://www.actionagainstfoxhunting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Counting-the-Crimes-Final-3_9.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/pandemonium-hits-fox-hunt-sees-9926133>

¹² <https://theferret.scot/covert-footage-accuses-fox-hunts-of-sheep-worrying/>

¹³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hunt-hounds-cat-kill-bakewell-b1780109.html>

¹⁴ https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/fox-hunting-uk-britain-mobs-driving-communities-apart-a7948516.html

¹⁵ <https://animalrightsandwrongs.uk/2019/02/what-is-hunting-with-dogs/>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/04/wildlife-land-aristocracy>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/28/britain-plutocrats-landed-gentry-shotgun-owners>

¹⁸ https://dartmoormagazine.co.uk/product/issue-126-spring-2017/?attribute_pa_magazine-type=digital-pdf

mer Conservative MP Rory Stewart¹⁹. In reality, the British countryside has a long history of population turnover and migration²⁰. “Authenticity” is a dangerous myth.

The closed mindset these attitudes help to foster appears to be reflected in some aspects of rural policing. While in London, four times as many Black people are stopped and searched today as white people as a result of institutional bias, in Suffolk, they are 17 times more likely to be stopped, and in Dorset, 25 times more likely²¹.

You might have imagined that the “party of law and order” would take an interest in blatant lawbreaking in the countryside. It does, but generally on the wrong side. In 2005, when the *Hunting Act* was about to come into force, Boris Johnson, who was then a backbench MP, wrote a column in the *Spectator*²², urging hunts to “defy the police and the magistrates and the government”. So don’t expect much help from that quarter.

Contrast the silence from politicians and the absence of editorials in the billionaire press about the attack on Chris Packham with the furious response to the protests by Insulate Britain. I understand why these protests are controversial, and I recognise that they might have caused, albeit inadvertently, real harm to people, though some of the claims about them turn out to be untrue²³. But while politicians say nothing about deliberate acts of violence in the countryside, and make no attempt to amend glaring deficiencies in policing and the law, the Insulate Britain protesters have been condemned by the prime minister and used by the home secretary, Priti Patel, as an excuse to introduce even more draconian laws²⁴ against protest.

Among Patel’s new assaults on our liberties, announced in her speech to the Conservative party conference²⁵, is a power called a criminal disruption prevention order²⁶, which would forbid named people from attending particular protests, even when there’s no evidence that they are planning any criminal activity. When Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary examined this proposal (when it was first mooted, the measure had the more candid title of a “protest banning order”), it concluded²⁷ that it would be incompatible with human rights legislation, as it would “completely remove an individual’s right to attend a protest”.

Among many possible uses, it could be deployed against the people trying to monitor and stop illegal hunting.

¹⁹ <https://www.rorystewart.co.uk/swindale-future-landscape/>

²⁰ <https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/british-history-after-1450/population-history-england-15411871?format=PB&isbn=9780521356886>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2018/oct/13/racial-bias-police-stop-and-search-policy-black-people-report>

²² <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-end-of-part-of-england>

²³ <https://twitter.com/georgemonbiot/status/1445647843230842892>

²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/oct/03/patel-pledges-six-months-in-prison-or-big-fines-for-motorway-protesters>

²⁵ <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/priti-patel-2021-speech-to-conservative-party-conference/>

²⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tougher-penalties-for-protests-causing-disruption-on-motorways>

²⁷ <https://www.justiceinspectores.gov.uk/hmicfrs/wp-content/uploads/getting-the-balance-right-an-inspection-of-how-effectively-the-police-deal-with-protests.pdf>

As the contrast between these cases suggests, the political outrage and the new measures being introduced have little to do with “public order”. Their purpose is to shut down challenges to existing power. Patel’s illiberal laws, on top of all the other restrictions on protest²⁸ brought in by successive governments since 1986, will help to clear an uncontested space for the Conservatives and the interests they favour. They are riding roughshod over us.

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²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/09/bankers-protesters-squatters-america>