

# Flogging a dead fox: why hunting is still on the agenda – and why it has nothing to do with animals

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*The political preoccupation with hunting in the UK does not reflect a central concern for animal issues – it is symptomatic of the marginalisation of animals in politics, writes [Lucy J Parry](#).*



A [pledge](#) to debate the Hunting Act is back on the Tories' election manifesto once again – following the failure to follow up on the same promise in 2010. But why is it even on there? Opinion polls consistently show that the [UK public is opposed](#) to fox hunting, and yet this is an animal issue that just doesn't seem to go away. But the political preoccupation with hunting in the UK does not reflect a central concern for animal issues – it is symptomatic of the marginalisation of animals in politics. Furthermore, with the election looming it looks likely that party politics will dominate the debates once more, with animals relegated to the back benches.

Debates around the hunting ban in 2004 sparked some of the most vehement discussion and campaigning ever seen on animal issues in the UK. However, as Alison Plumb and David Marsh demonstrated in [their analysis](#) of the extensive parliamentary time given to the bill, over time debates developed along party lines – with the perceived focus moving further away from the issue at hand, instead reflecting classic party political bickering with MPs citing 'class warfare' and 'revenge for the miners' as reasons for the government pushing the bill through.

At the same time, there was an overt attempt by the pro-hunting lobby to capture a wider target audience for its cause. Although originally founded as an amalgam of field sports groups, the Countryside Alliance sought to widen their support base through self-selection as a representative of rural identity in Britain. Thus it was argued that the hunting ban represented part of a greater general threat to the rural way of life and reflected a meaningful rural-urban divide.

The consequences of this politicisation meant that although hunting was ostensibly an issue about animals, the animals themselves became a marginal character in their own story. [Michael Woods](#) has argued that this marginalisation of animals is symptomatic of rural political issues in general; despite the increasing salience of rural issues in the political mainstream, animals remain voiceless and powerless in political discourse.

However, a cursory analysis of more recent pro-hunting literature suggests that the hunting debate has perhaps evolved in the past decade to focus more on the animals affected. [Recent publications](#) from the Countryside Alliance are notable in their discursive shift to conservation and animal welfare arguments for hunting with hounds, as opposed to the defence of rural identity. Whilst this could signal an important move to place animals back at the heart of this debate, this shift is not necessarily conducive to animal protection.

Prominent on both sides of the current hunting debate is the prevalence of scientific knowledge. Whilst the use of scientific evidence is necessary in animal issues, it can come at the expense of ethical and social dimensions if construed as a kind of value-neutral trump card. The problem with this approach is that it fails to acknowledge that science itself is necessarily socially and politically situated and thus has a tendency to undermine important moral aspects of animal issues. Presenting science as entirely objective has, I argue, led to scientific knowledge being perceived as the most valid representation of nonhuman animals. This was the early approach of Habermas in his exclusion of animals from his discourse ethic; through initially suggesting that our knowledge of animals could only ever be instrumental he posited a distinction between the scientific and social realms. However, others (notably [Robyn Eckersley](#)) have since persuasively argued that science, no matter how rigorous, still constitutes part of the social realm rather than existing in a political void.

In a recent survey, the Countryside Alliance argues that the public's opposition to culling wild animals is fuelled by the 'disneyfication of the countryside'. According to this narrative, those against culling are portrayed as over-emotional urbanites, ignorant of the facts of rural life. By contrast, those who take part in these activities are level-headed pragmatists who understand the "reality" of the countryside; the pro-cull argument is underpinned by the ontological assumption that the British countryside is a man-made construction requires management and control. In crude terms, this amounts to the construction of a discursive dichotomy, where objections to hunting, shooting and culling with a cultural, social or ethical basis are rejected out of hand as simply false. On the other hand, justification for culling is construed as rational and based upon "objective" scientific evidence. However, if we consider the broader historical and social context of hunting, shooting and culling it becomes evident that the pro-cull discourse presented here is as deeply embedded in cultural and ethical arguments as the so-called 'bambi effect' that it argues against.

Instead of attempting to represent fallacious objective interests in such debates, I argue for a reconceptualization of representation where knowledge claims about the represented are not the be all and end all of the representative process. Scientific knowledge does play an essential supporting role in the debate of animal issues – but is not the trump card, instead forming one of many discursive ingredients. Instead, scientific knowledge claims must be contested alongside ethical and social arguments and it is the contestation of discourses that provides *democratic* legitimacy – not science alone. Ethics is widely accepted as playing a prominent role in the public understanding of science, and there is no reason why it cannot play a similarly valid part in the political representation of animals as well.

But to return to party politics – what is the future for hunting? Angela Roberts from the [Centre for Animals and Social Justice](#) predicts that hunting is unlikely to return if the Conservative Party fail to gain a majority in the forthcoming General Election, with any coalition party more likely than not to block an attempted repeal. Moreover, a [recent YouGov poll](#) shows that hunting is less salient for the public than previously. But the issue is likely to remain contentious in the run up to the election and is very much back on the party political agenda. Vote-OK, a campaign group set up at the time of the ban, is back in action campaigning in marginal constituencies for pro-hunting Conservative MPs as they have done in past elections (claiming to have helped win 36 Tory seats in 2010), in the knowledge that the easiest way to repeal is through a majority Conservative government. [Media speculation](#) suggests that inclusion of a manifesto pledge on hunting is a Tory attempt to retain traditional rural supporters from switching allegiance to UKIP, who have proposed local referendums on the issue. Nigel Farage has already accused Labour [of inciting class warfare](#) by asking him to clarify UKIP's position on fox hunting.

The challenge for animal advocates now is not to deny the cultural and social significance of fox hunting, but to include the full range of possible perspectives on the issue and contest those various discursive claims in the public sphere in open debate – rather than falling back onto relying solely on purported objective evidence and dogmatic party politics.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Beau Considine](#) CC BY-SA 2.0*

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