Dyers Cottage
Broad Parkham
Nr Bideford
North Devon EX39 5PJ

T: 01237 451517
F: 01237 451327
E: john@liburne.com

16 May 2010

**Re: Repeal of the Hunting Act**

I believe the repeal of the Hunting Act would be a dreadful mistake. If you currently would support its repeal then I am writing to try and convince you to re-consider your position and hopefully to persuade you to oppose any attempts to remove it from the statute book. I would be very grateful if you would take the time to read and consider my argument... it is all I ask.

Some have argued this is a side-show others that it is an erosion of civil-liberties. I would argue it is neither. There are however some fundamental questions raised about how we should conduct ourselves as our society evolves and becomes more sophisticated.

The moral framework of a society is not static but evolves with new knowledge. The knowledge we have today about the origins of thought and consciousness must inform the moral judgements we make about hunting. It is not a right. It may be a tradition, but that is not sufficient justification for its continuance.

I would therefore contend that to juxtapose the words ‘blood’ and ‘sport’ cannot be supported in a society that has gained this knowledge and has any pretensions to being aware, analytic and ultimately moral.

These insights mean that it cannot be maintained any longer that killing anything for fun is acceptable. To do so would be an act of profound and inexcusable ignorance. For completeness I must add that there is also little point addressing the proposition that the fox enjoys the chase. This is obviously pure nonsense and thankfully not an argument you hear articulated much these days.

First and foremost, the act of killing, or terminating a life has to be judged as the end of an individual’s existence. To judge the death in terms of a population is to ignore the individual’s suffering and loss.

Some years ago it was maintained that without language one could not have thought. This was not devised to aggrandise human-kind above the rest of the animal kingdom, of which we all are a member, however it was adopted by many, including hunters, to justify their position. It was always a very naïve position but it is now quite untenable.

The study of artificial neural networks particularly and the more general discipline of artificial life demonstrates that even an entity with just say 100 neurons can display very complex behaviours. A famous example is Prof Widrow’s truck-backer-upper which was a network of artificial neurons that was trained to control backing up a truck with a trailer to a loading platform. Anybody who has done this knows how tricky this is.

Just stop and think for a moment about the complex behaviour of a fly. How does it do that? The point is that even the most basic life-form can display very complex behaviour. This can be demonstrated with very simple artificial-life programs.

This exemplifies a principle of complex systems whereby they can display emergent properties. This simply means that where you have complexity then discernable properties will emerge, you will not just get a jumble of unrelated characteristics. This is the basis of consciousness. It is not rooted in any particular aspect of the brain, it is a consequence of its organisation and its complexity.

A fox or rabbit is a billion times more complex than an AI experiment. They do feel emotion, loss, fear, pleasure. There is a great deal in the literature to support this view (Prof Marc Bekoff, Prof Marian Dawkins, etc, etc). They have different perceptions, needs and priorities to you and me but they have a will and a desire to live … like you and me.

I had a dog, a boxer… he was a sensitive creature, he was some times happy and playful, some times unhappy or depressed. He was driven by perceptions and priorities which I often did not understand but he was without any doubt a sentient being.

During our daily intercourse we, that is human beings, constantly demonstrate how bad we are at understanding or accepting a different perspective to our own. This within our own species. It is therefore not surprising that we seem in general to be unable to see those outside our species with anything but a utilitarian view.

The arguments about the practical benefits of hunting are mostly logically flawed or couched in emotional claims to an understanding of animal welfare that only a country dweller could possess. I was brought up on a farm and have lived most of my life in the country. In my experience the town versus country argument is without substance. Some farmers and some pet owners are equally culpable of an attitude to animals that takes little or no account of their sentience. In general, I believe this is cultural rather than intentional cruelty and this has to be the key to change.

The country-side in the UK needs to be managed. It has not been for many centuries a self-sustaining organism. It requires intervention and control. One aspect of this may well be the control of some populations, although this is by no means established. The guiding principal must be that where population control is necessary it must be carried out by professional and trained individuals and should not be regarded as a ‘sport’ but part of the thoughtful management of the country side.

Hunting therefore must not resume. Those that go hunting are not preserving our heritage or a way of life. They are perpetuating what must now be regarded as a cruel and immoral entertainment which must necessarily offend anyone who analyses the issue from the point of view of the object of their sport.

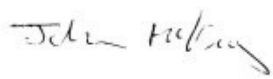
All this being said, people’s livelihoods should not be ripped from under them. This is equally cruel and unthinking. However, the Hunting Act has been in place for some time and has not caused the widespread hardship that was predicted. However, where it has, then the country-side must be helped to adapt to new ways of making a living and the culture of hunting overtaken by a more intelligent view through education.

Live stock farming inevitably has the occasional casualty, and disposal of the carcass in areas where there is a hunt is helped by the hunt using the carcass to feed the hounds. A ban on hunting with hounds has meant that some smaller farmers have needed to find other means of disposing of carcasses. Can help be provided? Where a hunt is disbanded can the local farrier get help?

There are many such issues that arise from the Hunting Act and its proper enforcement but they do not add up to anything more than problems to be addressed. The simple fact remains that as a society we must make moral judgements based on our current understandings and not conveniently ignore insights when they conflict with self-interest and tradition.

If you have read this far... thank you !

Kind regards,



John McKay