The Burns Report and Animal Welfare

In December 1999 the Government established the Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs, chaired by Lord Burns, to examine the practical aspects of hunting deer, foxes, hares and mink with dogs. In addition research contracts were awarded that formed the basis of specialist seminars on animal welfare, the economic impact of a ban on hunting, social and cultural implications of a ban, drag hunting and the possible impact of a ban on hunting on agriculture and conservation. The Committee's report was published in June 2000.

Hunting: a serious threat to animal welfare

The animal welfare section of the Burns Report, written in the language of science, makes it clear that hunted animals suffer during the later stages of the chase and at the kill. Where necessary, wild mammals can be controlled by methods that do not involve pursuit, thus avoiding suffering during the chase. The suffering caused is therefore unnecessary, and unnecessary suffering is used as the definition of cruelty in British law. The Committee made the following observations on animal welfare:

● Despite the Committee’s view that there was a lack of firm scientific evidence in respect of foxes, hares and mink, it concluded that hunting with dogs ‘seriously compromises the welfare’ of foxes, deer, hares and mink.

● ‘Stalking, if carried out to a high standard and with the availability of a dog or dogs to help find any wounded deer that escape, is in principle the better method of culling deer from an animal welfare perspective. In particular it obviates the need to chase the deer in the way which occurs in hunting.’

● Evidence presented: ‘suggests that in the case of the killing of a fox by hounds above ground, death is not always effected by a single bite to the neck or shoulders by the leading hound resulting in dislocation of the cervical vertebrae’ as claimed by pro-hunting organisations. Post mortem evidence presented to the committee showed that ‘in a proportion of cases it (death) results from massive injuries to the chest and vital organs’. Although foxes killed by such injuries will normally die rapidly, the capture of the pursued animal is the end point of progressively deteriorating welfare.

Fox Control

Lord Burns determined that where a need to kill foxes is demonstrated or perceived, the Committee should look at alternative forms of control, and drew tentative conclusions about the effectiveness and welfare implications of the alternatives. On that basis, the Committee concluded that ‘lamping using rifles, if carried out properly and in appropriate circumstances, has fewer adverse welfare implications than hunting, including digging-out’. (Digging out usually involves
the use of terriers). However, the Committee also noted that 'in areas where lamping was not feasible or safe, there would be a greater use of other methods'. The Committee expressed concerns that some 'other methods' of control could have adverse welfare implications, for example snaring and inappropriate use of shotguns. However, even where lamping is difficult, for example in the remote uplands, Lord Burns indicated that dogs can be used to flush foxes from cover to waiting guns, thus avoiding the suffering caused by the chase and kill. 'In the event of a ban, it is possible that the welfare of foxes in upland areas could be affected adversely, unless dogs could be used, at least to flush foxes from cover'. CPHA member organisations accept this finding and support an exception to the Hunting Bill to allow flushing to guns where the quarry is not chased by dogs.

**Mounted Hunting ‘insignificant’ in fox control**

Individual foxes can cause local difficulties but little evidence was presented to support the view that the fox is a significant agricultural pest. However, as with its consideration of the welfare implications of hunting, the Committee considered the effectiveness of hunting in fox control against a background of perceived need. The Burns Report cites conclusions from its commissioned research:

- ‘The overall contribution of traditional fox hunting, within the overall total of control techniques involving dogs, is almost certainly insignificant in terms of the management of the fox population as a whole’.
- ‘Shooting… has a much greater capacity to reduce the fox populations’.
- The active use of artificial earths that provide shelter for foxes and encourage them to live in suitable places with a view to hunting ‘is inconsistent with the stated objective of controlling fox numbers through hunting’.

**The economic effects of a ban will be minimal**

The Burns Inquiry carried out a detailed analysis of the economic impact of a ban. In contrast to the various claims of job losses made by the pro-hunting organisations, Burns concluded:

- ‘The short-term loss would be limited, and extend not much further than those employed by the hunt and some employed by those hunt followers who immediately reduced their use of horses’.
- ‘In the long term, say seven to ten years, most (if not all) of the effects would be offset as resources were diverted to new activities and the rural economy adjusted to other economic forces’.
- ‘In terms of national resource use, the economic effects of a ban on hunting would be unlikely to be substantial, especially in the context of the drastic changes taking place in the agricultural sector’.

In Scotland, the Rural Development Committee of the Scottish Parliament concluded that in respect of hunting with dogs in Scotland, ‘economic factors alone are not enough to justify unnecessary suffering’.

The Burns report provides the evidence to apply a number of tests to hunting: necessity, effectiveness, economic necessity and animal welfare. In our view, hunting with dogs fails all these tests.