

Page last updated at 05:54 GMT, Tuesday, 7 April 2009 06:54 UK

E-mail this to a friend

Printable version

Hope grows for repeal of hunt law

By Flora Watkins
Today programme

As the final legal fox hunts took place before the ban became law in 2005, the mood among hunters was despondent.

There were gloomy predictions - interest in the sport would wane, thousands of hounds would have to be shot and hunt staff would be out of a job. Three hundred years of tradition were being wiped out, said hunt supporters.

But there was defiance too, with the Countryside Alliance vowing to overturn what it called a "temporary ban".

Four years on and the naysayers have been proved wrong. Not a single hunt has gone out of business, there are twice as many registered hounds as there were three years ago and - according to the Alliance - the number of people hunting is up by 11%.

With the Conservatives ahead of Labour in the opinion polls - and promising a free vote on the Hunting Act if they win the next election - supporters of hunting say repeal is now a probability rather than a possibility.

"It was as if the ceiling was falling in," says Nicky Sadler from the lobby group, Vote OK.

"We didn't know if hunting would survive. But today hunting is in very good shape, people are buoyant - and we're looking at a realistic possibility of repeal."

Vote OK was set up to target anti-hunting MPs in marginal seats. It operates from a farm in rural Gloucestershire - near David Cameron's Witney constituency.

Nicky Sadler estimates that they helped to oust 29 MPs in 2005 and says they'll target more than 140 constituencies in the next general election - expected to be in the spring of 2010.

"We're completely colour blind, it doesn't matter what party people represent. As long as they sign up to repeal of the Hunting Act, we'll support them," she says.

Political hunt

One supporter in the House of Commons is shadow justice minister Edward Garnier. He is the chairman of the Repeal Committee of the Countryside Alliance, which includes influential figures from politics and hunting.

A practising QC, Mr Garnier argues that the Hunting Act is "unfair and unworkable", citing a recent High Court judgement - which upheld an appeal from the first huntsman to be convicted of breaching the Act.

"This is a bad law - it is unclear, it is unfair and it is inept," he says.

"It's not producing the results which the proponents of it thought it would. It seems to me that no parliament can bind its successors and I have every right and every intention to address that issue and to make sure that we have a far better system of criminal law."

But given that the next election will be held in the context of deep economic crisis, are voters really going to be interested in the Hunting Act? Edward Garnier admits that it's the recession that's keeping people awake at night - but says the time is right to do the groundwork for repeal.

"I do think there is a real opportunity and I'm determined that that opportunity should arise in which Parliament can look at this issue again - and repeal the Hunting Act."

That stance has angered animal welfare groups, including the RSPCA and the League Against Cruel Sports - which argue that the law is both fair and enforceable.

The League Against Cruel Sports maintains that the recent High Court judgement was a victory for clarity in the law, setting out clear guidelines for the police to enforce the Act.

The League's chief executive, Douglas Batchelor, says the pro-hunting lobby has put its own gloss on the court's decision.

"It has continually criticised the legislation because it goes against their desire to kill for fun," he says.

"Parliament has already spent 700 hours on the hunting issue and has ended up with an Act which does away with the cruelty of chasing animals for fun before they're killed.

"That was a huge step forward - and the general public agree."

He is warning the Conservatives that any attempt to get the Act repealed will put the party back where the then chairman, Theresa May, put them in 2002 - when she said it was sometimes perceived by the public as the "nasty party".

"This just doesn't make political sense. I can see why - because of some of their traditional support base - they might be toying with the issue, but I would suggest that, having toyed with it, they put it firmly back in the toy cupboard and don't touch it again."



Fox hunters are optimistic that the ban will be overturned



A feared cull of out-of-work fox-hounds has not been necessary

AFTER THE BAN

- ♦ **18 February 2005** Ban on hunting a wild animal with dogs comes into force in England and Wales
- ♦ **October 2005** BBC survey finds that more people are taking part in fox hunting than before the ban
- ♦ **November 2007** Law Lords reject the Countryside Alliance's legal challenge to the ban on hunting with hounds
- ♦ **Boxing Day 2008** A record 6,000 people attend the traditional Oxford Boxing Day hunt
- ♦ **March 2009** Charges are dropped against Julian Barnfield, who would have been the first professional huntsman to be prosecuted for hunting a fox



Hunts are still legal as long as the fox is shot and not killed by dogs

Bookmark with: [What are these?](#)

Delicious Digg reddit Facebook StumbleUpon

E-mail this to a friend

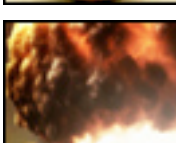
Printable version

BEST OF TODAY

FEATURES AND COMMENT



Mocking medals
Audio slideshow celebrating 400 years of dishonour



Armageddon hour
How Britain used to prepare for the end of the world



Fractured country
Why it is vital that the Taliban militants are defeated

- ▶ Karachi faces
- ▶ Peer pressure
- ▶ Cloudspotters
- ▶ Lifting the veil
- ▶ Revolting peasants
- ▶ Home cooking
- ▶ I want my mummy
- ▶ Captive audience
- ▶ Rock without a plan
- ▶ Going off organic
- ▶ Unbearable theatre
- ▶ Is breast best?
- ▶ Single-handed hero

VIDEO



The bells, the bells
Today presenter Evan Davis on the ropes for a lesson in bell ringing

▶ Watch



Pakistan studio
John Humphrys on presenting from Karachi

▶ Watch



Race of his life
Is Jenson Button the Scalextric champion?

▶ Watch



Beautiful stats
Hans Rosling demonstrates graphs with a difference

▶ Watch

RECENT INTERVIEWS

- ▶ Spending review 'after election'
- ▶ UK 'has become a tabloid nation'
- ▶ Royal pressure 'not constitutional'

RECENT DISCUSSIONS

- ▶ Can love letters be sincere?

SKIP TO TOP

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

- E-mail news
- Mobiles
- Alerts
- News feeds
- Interactive TV
- Podcasts