

## **The Burns report – deficiencies and flaws on the question of animal welfare**

- On the central issue of Animal Welfare the report (Chapter 6, June 2000) of the Government's Committee of Inquiry into Hunting with Dogs, chaired by Lord Burns, has been very damaging to hunting.
- The seriously flawed conclusions of the Committee on animal welfare (see below) in particular, the main conclusion that hunting “seriously compromises the welfare of the four quarry species” has allowed opponents of hunting to deduce that the Committee concluded hunting to be cruel.
- On animal welfare the Inquiry listened almost exclusively to Professors Bateson and Broom – as indicated by:
  - a. Numerous references to their work in the chapter on Animal Welfare.
  - b. The Inquiry erroneously described animal welfare as a scientific discipline that has developed rapidly in recent years. It is no such thing. Animal welfare cannot be a fully objective scientific discipline since, except possibly in behavioural terms, suffering and welfare cannot be measured unambiguously given the present state of knowledge. Animal welfare therefore remains largely common sense and humanity based on experience and clinical observation, which the veterinary profession has been practising for centuries.
  - c. The Inquiry described the collective scientific work on hunted Red deer, as “substantial”. Professor Bateson himself now admits to it being only preliminary. And at least two of the physiological parameters (serum haemoglobin and serum creatinine kinase levels) measured in Bateson's 1997 work for the National Trust were technically flawed.
  - d. The Inquiry almost entirely ignored the collective evidence and professional opinion of some 300 (now over 540) M'sRCVS as submitted by ourselves. An authoritative opinion, which must be second to none in the hunting debate.

Neither Professors Bateson nor Broom have expertise in the relevant disciplines of animal pathology and exercise physiology. Neither is a veterinary surgeon. Neither has significant experience of hunting or wildlife management and both have compromised their scientific objectivity by declaring their opposition to hunting on moral and ethical grounds. It is therefore difficult to understand why the Committee gave such credence to their opinions.

### **Specific flaws and deficiencies in the Burns report are:**

1. The demonstrably ambiguous phrase “seriously compromises the welfare of...” was widely interpreted on both sides of the debate to suggest that hunting is cruel. There is no substantial evidence within the report for such a conclusion. And it required clarification some months later in the House of Lords by Lord Soulsby (March 2001), when he declared emphatically that the Committee had not found hunting to be cruel. The damage was done however and the Minister, Alun Michael, for example, conveniently ignored Lord Soulsby's clarification in the notes that he issued in April 2002, prior to his consultation exercise.
2. The report noted that most scientists would agree that deer suffer during the last 20 minutes of a hunt. This is a sweeping statement that derives largely from Professor Bateson's misinterpretation of his own data when he extrapolated final glycogen levels from one hunted deer to another in an attempt to construct a profile of glycogen levels during the course of a hunt. This is clearly scientific nonsense. Furthermore it is a statement wide open to misinterpretation: first by the use of the word “suffer”, which to the general public means unbearable pain and

distress and second from the implication that the “suffering” automatically switches on in the last 20 minutes of a hunt. As Professor Roger Harris explains in his conclusions to the Joint Universities study (1999) the process is a linear one rising to the point when the deer runs out of muscle glycogen and stands at bay.

3. The implication in the Report that shooting is potentially the most reliable and humane method of culling is naïve and irresponsible. Shooting **inevitably** gives rise to a proportion of animals that are wounded as exemplified by an extensive recent study of stalked deer carcasses and underlined by the Middle Way Group’s report on wounding rates in foxes. The Inquiry’s conclusion has however allowed anti hunting MPs to state with misguided authority that shooting is preferable to hunting.
4. The Inquiry fell into the anthropomorphic trap when it assumed that it is intrinsically undesirable to chase a wild animal. It assumed that the response of a wild animal to being chased would be the same as that of man or a domestic animal. On the contrary there is now a strong body of scientific evidence, which shows that wild animals almost certainly lack the complex brain and mental abilities necessary to perceive the human concepts of fear and death.
5. The Inquiry concentrated almost entirely on the welfare of the individual and ignored the welfare of the population as a whole. Thus, the vital search and dispatch role of hunting for maintaining the health and vigour of the population was entirely overlooked. This is perhaps the most serious omission in the report. The search and dispatch role of hunting, whereby the weak, the sick and the injured are caught up and humanely dispatched in direct relation to their debility is the most important justification for the retention of hunting in all parts of the country.

### **Conclusion**

The Burns Report may have been supportive of various aspects of rural life and conservation in relation to hunting but it has been damaging and misleading on the important question of animal welfare.

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