The Protest Against Fox Hunting - A Report from London

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Over 400,000 people marched through London yesterday in the largest protest ever seen in the English capital. They were not here to say no to the war with Iraq, they were not here to protest the crisis in the National Health Services. Believe it or not they were here to say no to the Blair government on plans to ban fox hunting.

In fact it was a bit more than fox hunting at stake. The protestors were organized by the Country Life Movement which claims that the “traditional way of life” in the English countryside is at risk. Fox hunting became a major part of the rallying cry, and in fact some of the ordinary people among the protestors felt the movement had been high-jacked by the fox hunt crowd.

Some believe that the size of the crowd and the attention given to the movement is a result of the focus on fox hunting and without this issue the movement would have fizzled. Harrow and Eton gave their boys a day off to participate in a rare brush with democracy, and the lines at Starbucks were reported as longer than those setting up for the march.

Be that as it may it is of some interest to me that the hunt is under siege here, and that people are so passionate about it. Are there really so many people devoted to the hunt? It is clear that many are and that heavily represented among these are the upper crust of British society. There were even reports today that Prince Charles had weighed in with Tony Blair against the foxes.

One marcher today suggested that if George Bush favored fox hunting the movement would have no difficulty at all with Mr. Blair. Indeed one can only wonder how the Prime Minister and his government can risk the political fallout that might result from taking on the landed aristocracy on this issue. The animal rights people might be powerful and fanatical, but the fox-hunters are rich and powerful and still carry more than a little clout in this society.

The protest today demonstrated that power in a multitude of ways. Thirty-one trains and 2,500 buses were chartered to bring the protestors into London from all across the country. Some came from the continent and there were even a
smattering of farmers from Zimbabwe. The exclusive clubs in St. James’ Park let it be known that they would be open to serve brunch to the protestors. Indeed the normal men’s only rules would be suspended for the day and women and children would be allowed into the sacred halls of these exclusive male bastions. Such power to suspend rules in the clubs has seldom if ever been seen. The great unwashed were nowhere to be found.

Fox hunting is apparently a major issue.

This was not only the largest protest in the history of London, one suspects it was the best dressed as well. One television news commentator remarked on the sea of Anglo-Saxon faces that marched through Whitehall. They were in their designer clothes and in the more traditional plus-fours looking quite proper, upscale, or both. If someone arrived in the midst of this mass of well-healed humanity and they had not seen a demonstration since the Sixties they might have suspected they had landed in the middle of a street party for the late Queen Mum.

In addition to the “toffs” as they are called here, there were some actual farmers marching, not to mention game-keepers and kennel-keepers, whose livelihood depends on the continuation of the hunt. Nonetheless the major coverage of the protest focused on those who ride to the hounds.

Sport, even blood sport, still has the capacity to move people to action. The hunt does indeed symbolize a way of life in rural England and if Tony Blair didn’t grasp that reality before today he certainly must grasp it now. The British people may tolerate his playing caddy for George Bush on Iraq but they will not tolerate any attempt to touch this or any other sport.

Some fear that the attempt to ban the hunt is but a beginning and that angling will be next. Some men spoke passionately about their desire to teach their sons to hunt and fish as an integral part of their Englishness. I can’t even begin to imagine what a noise a fishing ban would produce among those mystics within the church of fly-fishing.

It is easy to make light of all this but once again at another level we see demonstrated yet again the power of sport, its connections to culture, and the passion that it
generates among all sorts of people. It was not just dogs chasing foxes or men on horseback shooting foxes that was being defended today. It was a way of life intimately connected with a sport intertwined with the traditions of the English countryside.

One protester asked what would happen if someone tried to ban football. After watching English football fans in action over the past month, I don’t want to think about what mayhem that might produce even though it would create but a ripple among the toffs.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don’t need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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