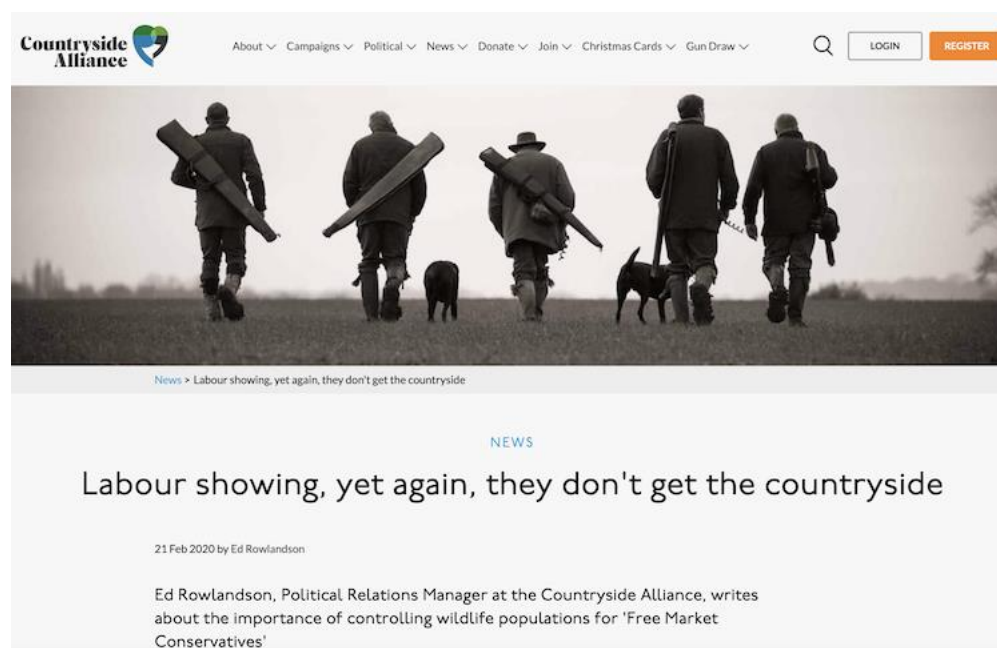


Rural Politics, Badgers And Campaigning

(paper supporting the blog TB, Badgers and Cattle in The UK: A Campaign Ripe For A Re-boot, at <http://threeworlds.campaignstrategy.org>)

Chris Rose chris@campaignstrategy.co.uk @campaignstrat December 2020

Badger Culture



Defending the private right to be at war with nature

It may seem extraordinary but in England, the issue of badgers, cattle and TB has become a civil war. This is because while on the surface, the cull or vaccinate debate is a pragmatic question of finding an optimal policy informed by science, much of the politics, especially as it becomes more polarised, taps directly into cultural and values divides. To mix metaphors, badger culling has become a dog-whistle issue for groups like the NFU and the Countryside Alliance, and a proxy battlefield in the war over 'who runs the countryside'.

One vet said to me:

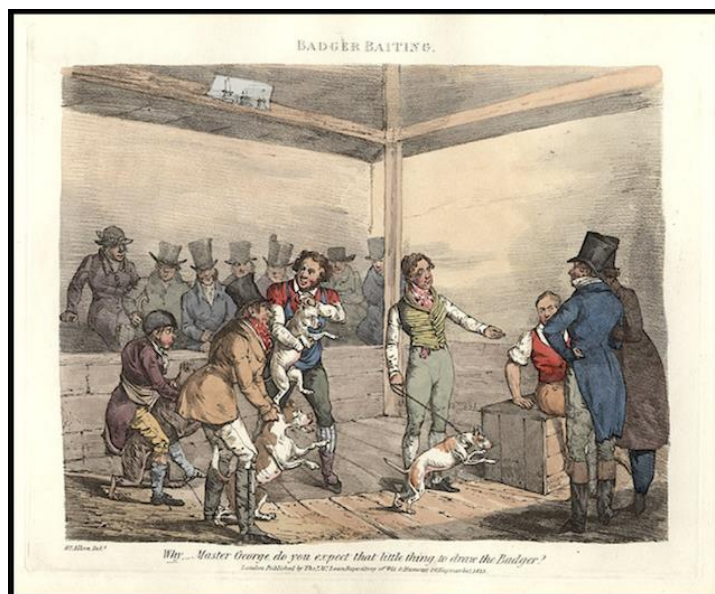
'Landowners really hate the thought that anyone other than them should have a say in how 'pests' or 'vermin' are defined and controlled. Especially they dislike people from towns telling them how to behave. That continues the narrative that farmers and landowners are the ones that look after the countryside and know how best to do this and townies are just emotional tree huggers'.

As opinion can polarise over whether public goods or property rights should have primacy, the same divide can sort and split attitudes to the micro-case of TB and badger culling and the macro-case of sustainable agriculture policy.

Deep Roots

British attitudes to badgers have deep roots. The English in particular have been arguing over badgers as 'good' or 'bad' since at least 1877, probably much longer.

Angela Cassidy from Exeter University in the West of England [points out](#) that framing the badger as a 'brave and fearsome' animal 'that lives in that lives in a hill, fighting and defending his family against digging invaders' goes back at least to an Anglo Saxon riddle-poem of the Tenth Century. Around the same time a Badger Sett (underground home) was mentioned in the Domesday Book, the national stocktake organised by England's most recent invaders.



Badger baiting from [Wikipedia](#)

Badger baiting: Farm worker Damien Sweeney jailed

18 November



Damien Sweeney was sentenced to 20 weeks and banned from keeping dogs for eight years

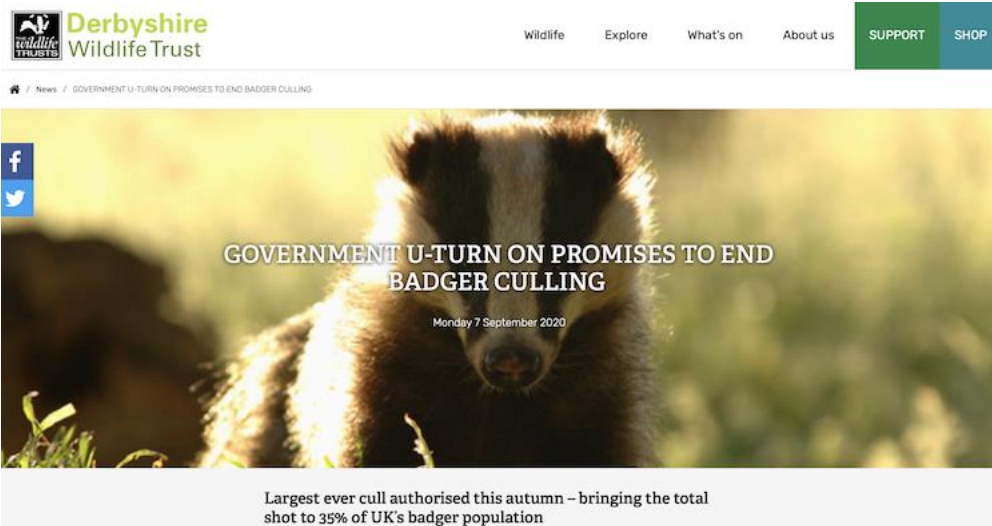
A farm worker has been jailed for causing "gratuitous suffering" to animals by badger baiting.

Damien Sweeney, 34, from Treuddyn, near Mold, Flintshire, was arrested when graphic video footage of his dogs attacking and killing badgers was found on his phone.

Badger baiting [from the BBC](#) on 18 November 2020

Badger baiting (as in 'bear baiting', a captured animal was set upon by dogs for entertainment) was outlawed in 1835 but as Cassidy notes, 'badger digging' by men and dogs was still a 'popular and traditional' sport into the Twentieth Century (and still goes on illegally). Naturalists, and farmers and landowners were at odds over whether badgers were noxious vermin (badgers eat anything from chickens and rabbits to fruit and wasps nests) or wildlife to be valued, before and after WW1. Plus while some countrymen killed them for sport, others kept them as pets (even a young Owen Patterson, as Dominic Dyer records in his book). In truth, a simple rural-urban divide was always a bit of a myth.

The last 100 years have mostly seen national sentiment shifting to pro-badger: strong and fierce (with the extinction of bears, lynx and wolves it's the UK's biggest predator) but on balance desirable. It's the national symbol of [The Wildlife Trusts](#) and features heavily in popular literature, mostly in a good way: Brock (an old name for badgers) appears in J K Rowling's Hufflepuff heraldic shield, and features in Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows* with its deep mythic take on nature, and poems by John Clare and Edward Thomas.



[Derbyshire Wildlife Trust](#) is one of the minority of Wildlife Trusts actively campaigning on badgers, and runs a vaccination programme

Badgers however have always been regarded as a ‘common’ animal in the UK and pro-badger activism has centred as much on animal welfare and local nature conservation as on ‘think globally, act locally’ environmentalism. When they gained legal protection in 1973, strengthened in the 1990s, it was organisations like the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and ‘badger groups’ opposed to cruel killing of individual badgers, as much as ‘ecosystem’ warriors who were their main advocates. (Dyer titled a chapter of his book, ‘The Green Movement Fails The Badger’). [The Badger Trust](#) set up in 2005, is now the UK’s leading supporter of the badger, evolved from the National Federation of Badger Groups established in 1986.

Bung Me A Badger

So the trench warfare that has developed over badgers and tb is partly because it taps into a pre-existing schism in English society. It’s a real, substantive dispute in its own terms but it’s also actively cultivated by some in the agriculture-landowning-bloodsport community for whom it’s important symbolic of a wider fight about the future of farming and the countryside.

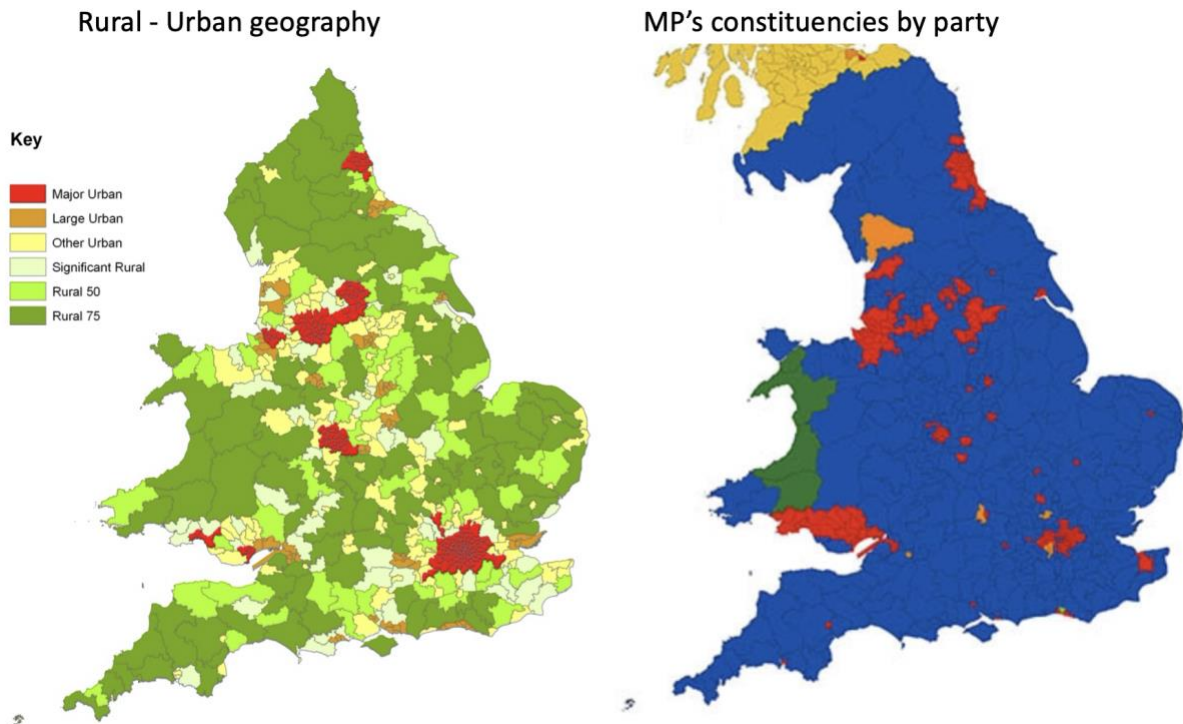
Appeasing this powerful lobby, which is particularly influential in part of the Conservative Party, seems the most obvious reason why the government flipped back to badger culling in September 2020 – a badger-bung to the NFU - only a few months after announcing its plan to phase out culling with a ‘transition’ to badger vaccination.

Rural Political Representation

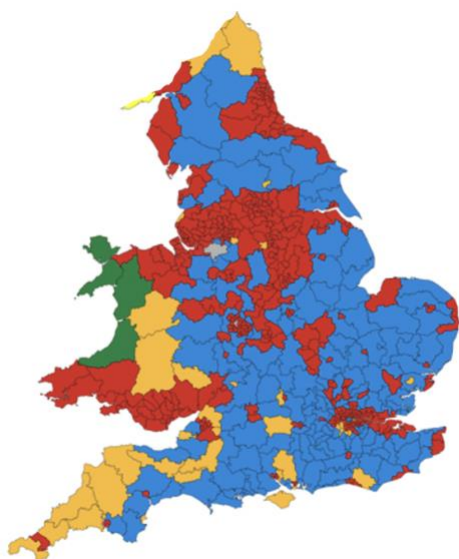
For almost all of the history of the badger TB issue, the English countryside has been overwhelmingly represented by the Conservative Party. In 2007 Westminster Parliamentary Constituencies in England and Wales were [classified](#) as rural and urban across six sub-classes ([updated in 2011](#)) – below left. 83% of [England’s population](#) lives in urban

areas and 17% in rural areas. Following the 2019 General election, the Countryside Alliance which supports blood-sports and badger culling, [wrote](#):

'the rout of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs in rural constituencies which was begun in 2005' was now 'completed ... in England the countryside is now completely blue'.



At the 2019 General Election the Conservative Party dominated the English countryside – below right (blue = Conservative, red = Labour, orange = Liberal Democrat, dark green = Plaid Cymru [Wales only], yellow = Scottish National Party, almost invisible light green dot = one Green MP in Brighton). This is not a new bias, although the 2019 result was a Conservative landslide. Political map from [Geographical](#)



Above: the 1997 general election political result (Wikipedia) – Labours’ best in recent history, under Tony Blair. Much of the central ‘red wall’ went Conservative in 2019. The orange Liberal Democrat seats across dairying areas of the south-west accounted for their pro-badger culling position in 2010, at the time they went into a coalition with the Conservatives, after which, (for unrelated reasons) they lost most of their seats to the Tories. Even at this stage the Conservatives were dominant across most of the English countryside.

This means the Conservative Party is heavily dependent on the countryside, and is even more sensitive to ‘rural’ lobbying, when other parties do well. In 2019 Elinor Goodman wrote in [Prospect](#) magazine ‘at the 2017 election the Tories lost their majority nationwide, but crushed Labour by 54 per cent to 31 per cent in rural England’.

Like many others Goodman linked rural archetypes to a yearning for the past as a contributor to the Brexit vote (slightly stronger overall [at 55.3%](#) in rural than urban areas):

‘Money alone is not necessarily what they want. For many rural Leavers, their vote was as much about culture and identity. Looking back to the battle over fox hunting, we can see the first stirrings of the embattled rural identity that has since found expression in the 2016 vote to leave the European Union. It comes with a way of thinking that might be called nostalgic, and which can often be out of step with England’s urban/suburban majority.

That was seen in 2017 when the Tories’ promise to review the hunting ban was blamed for alienating many young voters, and Jeremy Corbyn’s vow to defend it likely helped him pile on votes in the big cities. But the rural identity is not something which a Tory party pushed back into its heartlands could safely ignore—even if it wanted to. Indeed, the regional skew of the Conservative membership points to relative over-representation of the rural and provincial places, -compared to the big cities. Seeing as this membership is the selectorate that is set to pick our next prime minister, the restive identity of rural England could before long determine the next occupant of No 10’.

This idea, that issues like foxhunting (and by association support for killing badgers) swing many rural votes, is unsupported by data but popular in the media, which likes to tell stories using the most polarised archetypes available. However, Goodman was right about the ‘selectorate’. By this she meant the small number of people (Conservative Party members) who pick the leaders.

This is one route by which the Conservatives are very sensitive to the views of farmers and landowners, who though small in numbers, are still over-represented in the Tory Party membership, among Prospective Parliamentary Candidates, and in local Conservative Parties. In *Badgered to Death*, Dominic Dyer details how Conservative leader David Cameron (representing a rural Oxfordshire constituency) swung one way then the other on badger culling, as he tried to win optimal public support.

Dyer also points to another, and probably a more important factor day-to-day when the Conservative Party is in government, is that while farmers themselves are relatively few in

number, the associated food, drink and agricultural supply industries are large. These represent a lot of voters and a significant part of 'business'. This gives farming-related lobbies like the NFU, the CA (Countryside Alliance) and the CLA (Country Land and Business Association, formerly Country Landowners Association), a lot of soft political leverage (all three support badger culling although the CLA is less aggressive).

A further reason may be that as the CA says: "[Most conservative voters identify as rural](#)". Whether it fits the official categories of rural or not is another matter but CA's polling found 24% of Conservative voters self-identified as 'rural' and 35% as 'semi-rural' (a total of 59%) as opposed to 56% of Labour voters identifying as 'urban'. In other words, perhaps many Conservative voters actively want to identify with 'rural points of view'.

A final factor is that issues such as fox hunting and badger culling have not become divisive and used by the media (and thus by many politicians) as handles and indicators of rural/urban difference, of their own accord. Groups like the Countryside Alliance have deployed them to drive opinion into rural v urban splits, in the hope of making them 'wedge issues' with which to shift political outcomes.

Conjuring Trick

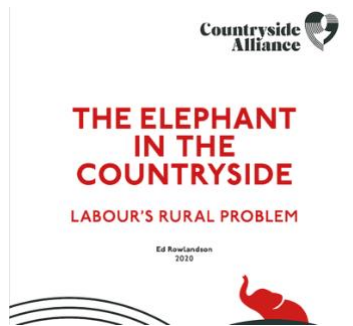
Although with significant differences, the strategy of both the CA and the NFU relies on 'rural matters' being a political special case in which 'urban' opinion has no legitimate role, and 'non-rural' people have no standing because they do not understand the 'realities' of rural life or rural culture. Ipso facto, any matter to do with farming, landowning or related activities, from fox hunting to badger culling (or possibly even badger-baiting), pesticides or intensive dairy practices, needs to be left to those in 'rural areas' to decide. Who better to indicate their preferences than the CA and the NFU?

Without this conjuring trick, the NFU, CA and their allies would not quite be out of business but would be exposed to the sort of scrutiny that they routinely avoid. Maintaining this illusion of simple rural-urban difference relies on finding and re-iterating rural-urban differences, preferably binary ones. So they are most successful when citing evidence which is *only* available in a rural context.

As of course all conventional farms are, by definition, in rural areas, so all, or very nearly all the farmers in England live in rural areas. So if farmer-opinion is 90% for X and that's all rural, it's only a short psychological mis-step of the all As are B's therefore all Bs are As variety, to read it as rural opinion is 90% for X (a self-validating proposition).

Similarly most 'rural' voters may not be particularly interested in or favourable to activities such as fox hunting nor sympathetic to badger digging or culling but those who are, may almost all live (or have property or farming interests and second homes) in rural areas, and there are few opportunities to conduct Boxing Day hunt meets, cock-shoots or badger-culls in urban areas. So these can be rolled out as emblems of a 'different way of life', which by implication is supported by and engaged in by all rural folk.

'Labours Rural Failure'



In September 2020 the [Countryside Alliance](#) published an interesting article ['The Elephant in the Countryside: Labour's rural problem'](#), based on a report [The Elephant in the Countryside](#) written by its Political Relations Manager, by Ed Rowlandson. It was, perhaps by coincidence, published a day before the government announced its new badger cull, and seven days before Keir Starmer took over as Labour Leader. The report was obviously addressed to those planning the post-Corbyn Labour strategy, although it was more an exercise in waving a political stick than an olive-branch. Introducing the report, Baroness Mallalieu QC (a pro-hunting Labour member of the House of Lords), President of the Countryside Alliance wrote:

'Labour's rejection by rural communities cannot continue to be the elephant in the countryside. No party can afford to ignore the rural vote if it is serious about forming a government'.

The Elephant in the Countryside rested heavily on an opinion poll commissioned by the CA from ORB (['Unpacking the Environment'](#)) and its own reading of a 2015 report by Labour politician Maria Eagle, Labour MP for Garston and Halewood, *Labour's Rural Problem*. It also quoted extensively from other Labour studies such as those of the Fabian Society, examining the party's own undoubted failures in rural areas.

It began:

'There is an elephant loose in the countryside, but the Labour Party does not seem to want to talk about it. Labour currently holds just 17 of the 199 rural seats in England and Wales. It is, therefore, a matter of simple electoral mathematics to say that if Labour are to have any chance of forming a government it must win over the rural electorate'.

The report cited a number of studies suggesting that Labour cannot hope to win power unless it does much better in rural areas in England (and /or in Scotland where it has crashed to the SNP). In this it is probably correct. It cited Maria Eagle who

'argued that because the countryside is perceived as inherently Conservative the Labour Party pays it no attention: 'For too many rurality is synonymous with Conservatism, and engaging with these communities is at best an afterthought, and at worst a complete waste of time' (Eagle 2015: 2). However, the result in 2015 shows that those seats were not a complete waste of time. The Conservative Party only managed to form a majority government because of its strength in rural seats.

As such, the significance of the rural problem cannot be overstated. Rural seats in England and Wales are Labour's key to No.10, and why the Conservative Party remains there. Maria Eagle reached this conclusion in 2015: 'We cannot win again without a concerted effort to become at least competitive in these areas'

Rowlandson's *Elephant* report quotes Eagle quoting a Labour rural (?) activist:

"They are not all hunting and fishing far from it. Indeed, it is the idea that somehow rural areas are only interested in these issues that does us harm" (quoted in Eagle 2015: 20).

It goes on:

The misunderstanding that rural voters were only interested in field sports and farming, and not their broadband or other pressing community issues, further exacerbated the dichotomy with which the Labour Party approached the countryside. One was either in favour of field sports and farming, and thus voted Conservative, or against, and voted Labour. This approach immediately alienates a significant proportion of the rural electorate that would rather it focused on issues relevant to their everyday lives, such as hospitals, transport and housing ... Furthermore, it signified to Conservative rural voters that it had given up trying to persuade them, as they had already been deemed as unpersuadable.

This may well be true but it may also be somewhat disingenuous. The real purpose of the CA report seems to be to act as cattle crush, pinning Labour into a position where it has to support the agenda of the NFU and CA on the pragmatic grounds that it can't win power without rural seats. That agenda includes support for shooting, hunting, conventional (ie intensive) farming, and badger culling.

To try and 'prove' its case in Labour terms, the Alliance has even ended up describing its own iconic *cause célèbre* – bloodsports – as a 'niche issue'. A CA news blog [reported](#):

Tim Bonner Chief Executive of the Countryside Alliance said the ORB research "research finds that when you actually unpack voters' concerns on environmental issues, they are clearly much more worried about the planet, than they are about niche animal rights issues like hunting and badger culling".

The *Elephant* report focuses criticism on Labour's policy commitments to 'animal welfare'. It cites the 2015 general election Labour publication *Protecting Animals*, 'a flagship rural document', which it says was criticised by Eagle as a mistake as it 'only appealed to urban Labour voters, reflecting how Labour pursued rural issues from the perspective of the urban electorate', and 'the 50-point *Animal Welfare Manifesto*' [AWM] at the 2019 General election which 'confused animal welfare with animal rights'.

Rowlandson wrote:

'The AWM missed the mark. Aimed predominantly to change the behaviour and practices of those who live and work in the countryside it represented a crude perception of rural communities. The Manifesto directly attacked rural pursuits including hunting and shooting. It wanted to ban hunting again and consult on a ban on grouse shooting. Shooting plays a

crucial role in wildlife management and in local rural economies, especially in the winter months when other sources of income from tourism are low. The AWM suggested to rural voters yet again that Labour was out of touch with rural communities’.

‘For Labour to re-engage with the countryside and rural voters it must engage with rural organisations that campaign on the very issues that matter to rural communities.

‘The Party ... needs help to identify the issues that matter to the rural electorate and take advantage of organisations with significant rural networks’ [it mentions the NFU and CA].

Here perhaps is the kicker:

‘However, for Labour to be able to do that it must recognise that its current rural agenda, and especially its focus on animal rights, does not align with what the rural electorate understand as priorities. It is clear that if it wants to form a government in the future, Labour must be willing to change its approach and focus on the issues that matter to the rural electorate’.

Rowlandson uses the ORB study to underpin his arguments and imply that there is a gulf between urban and rural priorities. He states:

‘Polling from ORB International in 2019, on behalf of the Countryside Alliance, found that less than one in six UK adults viewed animal welfare as an important rural issue. When asked which three issues are the most important for political parties to address, hospitals and healthcare topped the poll at 49 per cent, followed by local transport links, 37 per cent, and affordable housing at 35 per cent (ORB 2019). It was therefore no surprise that the 2019 general election nearly saw Labour wiped out in the countryside as it doubled down on its urban focused election rhetoric’.

But is this what the poll really shows ?

Page 8

Environment Survey

ONLINE Fieldwork: 17th-23rd June 2019

Absolutes/col percents

Table 8

Q.4 When it comes to environmental issues, which of these three would you say are the most important for political parties to address? Please select up to three answers

Base: All respondents

	What is the highest educational level that you have achieved to date?					Which of the following best describes where you live?							Q.1 Describe yourself as more rural or more urban?			
	Total	No formal education	Primary	Secondary	University degree	Higher university degree	Still in full time education	NET: Urban	Urban - Pop. over 10k	Town and Fringe	NET: Rural	Village	Hamlet & Isolated Dwelling	Urban	Semi-rural	Rural
Unweighted base	4323	37	21	1983	1574	587	78	3298	1818	1480	1025	877	148	1966	1341	867
Weighted base	4323	40	22	2059	1525	553	79	3303	1818	1485	1020	876	144	1964	1329	859
Climate change	2520	18	9	1105	948	354	68	1970	1134	836	550	477	73	1231	759	441
	58%	46%	38%	54%	62%	64%	86%	60%	62%	56%	54%	54%	50%	63%	57%	51%
Use of unbiodegradable plastics	2398	14	11	1183	861	274	33	1797	915	883	600	511	89	1026	786	508
	55%	35%	48%	57%	56%	50%	42%	54%	50%	59%	59%	58%	62%	52%	59%	59%
Air pollution	1773	24	6	864	599	237	28	1405	802	602	369	322	47	877	514	303
	41%	61%	27%	42%	39%	43%	35%	43%	44%	41%	36%	37%	33%	45%	39%	35%
Waste disposal	1482	17	3	768	503	149	19	1133	611	522	348	303	45	661	452	292
	34%	44%	15%	37%	33%	27%	25%	34%	34%	35%	34%	35%	32%	34%	34%	34%
Deforestation	1242	9	9	583	457	151	23	939	528	410	304	262	42	520	420	270
	29%	23%	41%	28%	30%	27%	29%	28%	29%	28%	30%	30%	29%	26%	32%	31%
Decline in bee population	1049	5	6	537	353	130	9	768	418	351	281	231	49	424	350	241
	24%	12%	28%	26%	23%	23%	11%	23%	23%	24%	28%	26%	34%	22%	26%	28%
Use of fossil fuels	955	3	1	326	404	179	34	746	441	305	208	182	27	458	302	173
	22%	9%	6%	16%	26%	32%	43%	24%	24%	21%	20%	21%	18%	23%	23%	20%
Fox hunting	281	7	8	182	54	18	2	192	79	113	89	74	15	104	81	73
	6%	18%	35%	9%	4%	3%	3%	6%	4%	8%	9%	8%	11%	5%	6%	8%
Meat consumption	223	1	3	77	93	38	7	178	108	71	44	37	7	106	61	47
	5%	3%	12%	4%	6%	7%	9%	5%	6%	5%	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Oil spills	190	2	2	99	61	22	3	162	94	68	28	27	1	106	49	19
	4%	6%	8%	5%	4%	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%	3%	3%	1%	5%	4%	3%
Badger culling	143	1	3	94	26	17	1	96	46	50	47	36	11	53	43	43
	3%	3%	14%	5%	2%	3%	1%	3%	3%	3%	5%	4%	7%	3%	3%	5%
Soil erosion	101	-	-	48	37	14	1	86	29	36	29	29	7	33	28	38
	2%	-	-	2%	2%	3%	1%	2%	2%	2%	4%	3%	5%	2%	2%	4%
Other	42	-	-	18	17	7	-	26	17	9	16	15	1	19	13	9
	1%	-	-	1%	1%	1%	-	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%

Prepared by ORB




Table from the [ORB poll for the Countryside Alliance](#) showing 6% of national sample picked fox hunting and 3% badger culling as political priorities. In both cases more, not less 'rural' people picked these than 'urban' people.

What is remarkable about the CA report is that it relies on the ORB poll to make key points but the ORB study does not even support them. People from a national sample were asked to pick three 'environmental issues ... most important for political parties to address'.

Not surprisingly huge global problems like climate change, others which have a lot of day to day prominence like 'waste', and some which have had a huge amount of media coverage such as plastic or bee declines, were picked more than 'fox hunting' (6%) and 'badger culling' (3%). But in both cases more people in rural areas picked fox hunting and badger culling than those in urban areas.

This applied when rural/urban was self-categorized by location and identity (it seems the ORB sample survey was not geographically segmented using the official Defra rural-urban system which the *Elephant* report used).

Of course we do not know why they said this as this could be a mixture of pro and anti cullers and hunters referencing these issues but it doesn't fit the CA's narrative that the ban on fox hunting and opposition to badger culling is imposed by '*its urban focused election rhetoric*' over rural opinion, and that people in rural areas are unconcerned about 'animal welfare' compared to 'urban' people.

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Environment Survey
ONLINE Fieldwork: 17th-23rd June 2019

Table 11
Q.5 There are a number of issues people living in rural areas of the UK may face, which three would you say are the most important for political parties to address?
Please select up to three answers
Base: All respondents

Absolutes/col percents

	What is the highest educational level that you have achieved to date?						Which of the following best describes where you live?					Q.1 Describe yourself as more rural or more urban?		
	Total	No formal education	Primary	Secondary	University degree	Higher university degree	Still in full time education	NET: Urban	Urban - Pop. over 10k	Town and Fringe	NET: Rural	Village	Hamlet & isolated dwelling	Rural
Unweighted base	4323	37	21	1983	1574	587	78	3298	1818	1480	1025	877	148	867
Weighted base	4323	40	22	2059	1525	553	79	3303	1818	1485	1020	876	144	859
Hospitals and healthcare	2108	22	10	1040	727	247	41	1603	844	759	504	443	61	432
Local transport links	1601	7	7	711	621	225	21	1160	644	516	441	379	62	361
Affordable housing	1501	8	5	728	539	183	28	1148	626	522	353	306	47	296
Impact of Brexit	1165	4	5	500	440	182	22	904	529	375	261	223	37	198
Impact of climate change	1159	10	5	478	461	160	39	918	538	381	241	202	39	226
Crime	1000	17	4	548	310	97	9	776	373	403	224	204	20	176
Internet access/ mobile connectivity	867	5	4	385	349	107	12	624	367	257	243	179	63	186
Education	648	6	1	265	233	116	22	494	285	209	154	141	13	128
Immigration	639	16	3	414	138	51	6	490	230	260	150	137	12	126
Animal welfare	629	5	8	343	200	54	11	469	253	216	160	128	32	141
Farm subsidies	627	4	7	287	242	76	9	509	310	198	118	95	23	106
Air pollution	499	7	-	240	149	82	10	403	213	190	97	89	7	89
Other	40	-	-	16	13	11	-	26	16	10	14	11	3	13

Prepared by ORB



The CA's ORB poll also asks a direct question about 'animal welfare' (above). This question actually 'primes' the audience to think in 'rural' terms : "issues people living in rural areas may face". Even so it shows very similar levels of priority (again asking for three choices but from a different list) in urban and rural areas.

These 'urban' results are not mentioned in the *Elephant* report, which implies that it's only in *rural* areas that people give a relatively low priority to 'animal welfare' as well as to 'badger culling' and 'fox hunting'.

Across the population sample as a whole 'animal welfare' scored 15%, dwarfed by the priority given to hospitals, transport, housing etc. When split out into net rural and urban areas 14% of urban people picked 'animal welfare' against 16% of rural people. In other words slightly more not less rural people gave priority to animal welfare.

Slightly more of those self-describing as 'rural people' picked 'animal welfare', and although the relative rankings of topics are almost the same between people living in 'rural' and 'urban' people, animal welfare ranks 8th in rural areas and 11th in urban areas. This is the opposite to what the CA report implies.

Of course if you just took a poll of CA *supporters* (it's agenda is pro-fieldsports), you might find a very different 'rural' profile but if so, this would only demonstrate that the Countryside Alliance is very unrepresentative of the 'countryside'.

From this I would conclude that the Countryside Alliance '*Elephant*' report is right about the Labour Party's failure to win as many votes and elect as many MPs as it 'should' in rural

areas. Right also that the way it projected itself under Jeremy Corbyn in particular (with a high degree of [Pioneer PC values-bombing](#)) was a probably a factor in its electoral failure. But that's more a values-failure than an urban/rural one. I also suspect that it's true, as the Fabian Society author quoted in the report says, that there is 'urban snobbery' in the Labour Party and some think of rural people as a 'a bit stupid or thick', 'backward' or 'country bumpkins'. But many think that the slang term 'chav', generally associated with poor urban or suburban people, stands for C.H.A.V. – Council House And Violent. It's not just rural people who suffer such prejudice.

Likewise I'd agree that many Labour activists and candidates have failed to be effective on 'rural' issues but mostly for different reasons to those suggested by the CA. It's not because there is a large pool of rural people who have very different priorities to urban people: quite the reverse, their priorities are very similar, as the ORB report demonstrates (and to be truthful, their lifestyles in most respects are very similar). And it certainly isn't because 'animal welfare' is a lower priority in rural areas. If anything although the differences are small, rural ORB respondents were more concerned than urban ones.

The Agri-Business Elephant

In my view, it's also because Labour has failed, as all the main political parties have, to really engage on the subject of agri-business: that's the real rural 'elephant in the room'. All the political parties have tended to lack candidates who can seriously and confidently take on the likes of the NFU and the intensive farming lobby.

By this I mean both at the level of specifics such as mud washed from fields onto roads and causing accidents (one almost killed my partner), and local rivers polluted by slurry, through topics like badger culling and TB, factory farming and animal welfare, to verge and hedgerow management and pesticide and fertiliser pollution and their impact on nature, up to regional air pollution and ammonia, and global climate change emissions. The *Elephant* report is silent on such issues.

The Real Labour Problem

Partly this is a cultural problem: if the Labour Party wants to take the battle to agri-business it's going to need some politicians who are confident to talk critically and constructively about farming and rural areas: successors perhaps to Peter Melchett (farmer, conservationist, politician) who sadly died in 2018.

In my [conversation with him](#), Melchett said of politics and farming:

"It's interesting; farming has managed to be one of those areas which either sends one if its own into politics and government, so it's an NFU representative in government, or, to make itself into something which is, mysterious enough for non-farmers to feel they can't venture there".

NGO Failures

Much the same is true of the major conservation and environmental NGOs. Very few of them have staff who feel and are ready and able to take on issues such as pesticides and agri-business as a whole. My experience is that they are far more intimidated by challenging farming and landowners than they are by non-farming big businesses such as the oil industry, construction, finance or even organised crime in the waste industry.

Melchett put this down partly to recruiting people with the wrong expertise:

“the sort of people who work for NGO’s I think one of the problems is that if you area real expert and trained scientifically or academically you’re much more conscious of your level of ignorance, and that worries you much more, so farming is really pretty simple, not that complicated”.

For NGOs to become more effective they need campaigners who are inoculated against farming and landowning cultural bullshit, which is a lot easier if they’ve had some sort of first hand experience of working in the industry or living with it. NGOs have been trying to become more diverse in terms of sex and ethnicity but they also need to consider a different aspect of diversity and hire more people able to take on the likes of the NFU. Perhaps even using the old technique of building some campaigns, and seeing who turns up to help in the hour of need, not requiring them to have a string of academic qualifications.

It's also about calculation. The larger conservation groups involved in land management, have given little priority to issues like badgers and TB partly because just like the government they fear upsetting farmers. Even in The Wildlife Trusts which have been leading the way on badger vaccination projects, those outside the worst TB areas say little or nothing on the issue. But if they are going to seriously address the devastating impacts of industrial agriculture, that should change.

At the moment most of the most effective advocates for a serious change in farming and land management seem to come from those who are rich enough to have farmland they can change themselves – such rewilders as [Lord Somerleyton](#) and his friends in Suffolk, [Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell](#) in Sussex or [Ben Goldsmith](#) and his brother Zac, a Conservative politician and ally of Michael Gove. Or they are inspiring individuals such as [Jake Fiennes](#) who works with big estates in Norfolk, and the author and Lakeland farmer [James Rebanks](#). Much as I like rewilding and admire their efforts, it’s over-optimistic to imagine that they will amount to a serious force for systematic de-escalation of industrial farming anytime soon.

Nor in my view, although I am an advocate of organic food, can environmentalists, conservationists and friends of the badger wait for organic farming to provide the answer. Britain’s leading organic actor is Melchett’s old stamping ground, the Soil Association (SA). It does a good job but is a three-legged beast, part campaign, part certification business and part organic-farmer union. This makes it hard for the SA to develop a truly effective campaign focus.

Re-building Rural Awareness and Understanding

Finally, if NGOs (or indeed political parties) are to take on building effective campaigns against the damage being done by intensive farming, they will need to build greater understanding of its impacts in rural areas, even more than in urban and suburban areas. In essence this is because by a combination of factors, people have become estranged from nature and blind to it.

I've met many people working in agriculture or living in rural areas, who, contrary to the age-old media stereotype, can't identify wildflowers or tell the difference between a turtle dove and a collared dove. Consequently if a pasture or verge loses its diverse flora due to being soaked in nitrogen pollution, they don't notice: it still looks green.

The idea that green=nature because it's assumed nature=green, means that people seeing green out of their car or house window tend to assume they live in a more natural, more nature-filled environment than one in which there is more red and grey of bricks and concrete. Sadly this has not been true of intensively farmed areas, for generations. (See some of my blogs on nature-blindness [here](#) and [here](#)).



In the 1950s, a London schoolchild or commuter staring at platform posters might have seen Derrick Sayer's red admiral 'Butterflies' poster, perhaps explaining why it became our 'best known' butterfly, whereas a third of modern children cannot recognize it.

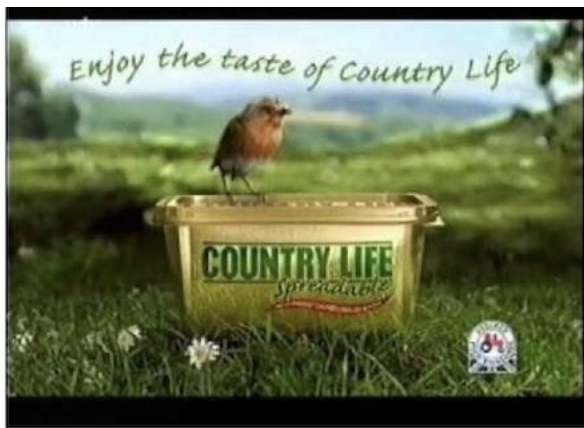
Transport posters used to show realistic images of nature to be found in the countryside. Today those flowers and insects are unfamiliar to many. From my post [Why Our Children Are Not Being Connected to Nature](#)

Similarly, only a few anglers may be sufficiently in touch with water quality and the plants and animals which indicate pure rivers or streams, to detect life-robbing changes caused by water pollution.

'Shifting baseline syndrome' also means that as nature thins out and life in the landscape is impoverished, or it becomes accepted that rivers are too polluted to safely swim in, our expectations are reduced.

Some organisations are working to re-build this 'ecological literacy' (such as the [Angling Trust](#), [Riverflies](#) and local rivers partnerships, and the [Field Studies Council](#)) but they are mostly small. It needs doing at scale and has been largely ignored or taken for granted by the larger NGOs, and even many National Parks.

This has political consequences, because people in rural 'green' looking areas tend to underestimate pollution and over-estimate environmental quality, due to their inability to read nature. The same is true of course of most 'urban' or 'suburban' visitors to rural areas but they don't have votes in rural constituencies. Maintaining this complacent acceptance of intensive farming as green therefore ok – such as mistaking flowering oil seed rape fields for a 'wildflower meadow' – is of course very convenient to agri-business.



Country Life: endorsed by the farmer's label 'Red Tractor' but just daisies in the grass. The robin looks stuffed but might have been real, or an animation.



Webshot from Arla: 'we care about nature'. Hard to tell if it's real but it's probably a set-up in a meticulously 'clean' (ie wildflower-free) intensive dairy field. Nothing much can live here except

Celebrating rye-grass as nature because it's green. From [Why Our Children Are Not Being Connected to Nature](#)