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A word to Whitehall: the hidden scandal of rural crime is killing our countryside

Jamie Blackett

If you thought you heard a distant rumble this week, it might have been the nation's farmers cheering the news that Dyfed-Powys police had used bovine DNA for the first time to solve a case of cattle rustling. When the forces of law and order secure an all-too-rare conviction in the countryside, it is cause for celebration.

Livestock worth £3 million was robbed from UK farms last year by gangs, typically using stolen sheepdogs to round up stock, often for the backstreet halal market. Insurers reported a 26 per cent rise in claims for stolen tractors and quad bikes, to £7.4 million last year.

Only 9 per cent of stolen farm machinery is ever recovered.

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Rural crime should be high on the to-do list of the new crop of MPs, especially for the bright young metropolitans parachuted into unfamiliar rustic constituencies, who only intend to visit to conduct surgeries. There won't be a farmer anywhere who hasn't been a victim of fly-tipping, particularly when council tips have enforced restrictions. Petty vandalism, sheep-worrying by dogs, arson and stock let out on to roads, often deliberately, are all regular vicissitudes. And in many areas the baleful consequences of the hunting bans manifest themselves in balaclava-clad gangs roaming the fields.

By night these are illegal hare coursers. We all said at the time that a ban on coursing would be terrible for the hare population and it is.

It's 15 years since the last Waterloo Cup, the climax of an annual programme of organised and highly regulated coursing events that followed the principles of natural selection, culled a few of the weaker hares and provided the incentive for hare conservation.

Poachers rubbed shoulders with landed gentry in a bibulous festival of One Nation Toryism. Since then, the gentry have departed like Chesterton's last sad squires, leaving the field to gangs of thugs who kill many more hares indiscriminately and terrorise farmers.

By day the sabs take over. Children on ponies are intimidated by hunt saboteurs masquerading as "monitors". These "activists" often have close links to Momentum and Extinction Rebellion. A few years ago, a friend in Yorkshire confronted them on his land and had his skull fractured in front of his 10-year-old daughter. His assailants were never charged.

Recently, Twitter showed a video of a 67-year-old judge, Mark Davies, and his wife being thrown to the ground by saboteurs – Davies alone ended up being prosecuted by Derbyshire Constabulary (though he was later acquitted).

In fairness to the police, they are stretched to the limit. In Devon last year it was reported that two PCs and a single sergeant were left to cover an area the size of Greater London one Friday night. Their inspector warned that it is now at the stage where they “dare not arrest anybody” as there will be no one left to patrol the streets. North of the border, the newly centralised Police Scotland has prioritised wildlife crime, but is more likely to investigate RSPB allegations of a missing hen harrier than help a harassed farmer calling in to report poaching gangs, which are often dismissed as a civil matter.

Farming charities report a mental illness epidemic. One farmer a week commits suicide in the UK. Crime in the countryside feeds a feeling of helplessness. Trolling by vegan activists on social media has added further stress. It is all against a backdrop of constant financial anxiety, partly caused by the grand larceny being committed against farmers by big business at both ends of the supply chain. In the beef sector, the farmer share of the retail price has fallen from a historic norm of 55 per cent to 46 per cent since May. The effect of that is to wipe out any profits and deprive the rural economy of £7 million a week in beef sales. Boris Johnson talked up exports and quoted Adam Smith on free trade this week. He needs first to follow Smith’s advice about monopolists in the domestic market.

Red Wall notwithstanding, it was the countryside that won the election. The electoral map is now completely blue outside our towns and cities, with the exception of Tim Farron’s Westmorland constituency and nationalists like Pete Wishart in Perth. But the Tories would be very foolish to take rural votes for granted. They could start by solving perhaps the biggest crime of all: the democratic deficit in the countryside. As a result of the failure to enact boundary reform, it takes many more votes to return a rural MP than an urban one. More rural voices in Westminster might make Whitehall start listening to the countryside’s concerns.

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