



TRACY KIDD

# “THE SPORTING WORLD NEEDS TO WAKE UP”

Nick Herbert MP, the new Countryside Alliance Chairman, reveals his vision for the future, his passion for the countryside and how Alliance members are ‘the original greens’

**WORDS** MO METCALF-FISHER

**What vision do you have for the Countryside Alliance (CA) now you are Chairman?**

I think the Alliance has a great team and we’re lucky to have someone of Tim Bonner’s experience and communication skills to lead it. We need to step up campaigning, raise more money and build our membership. We also need to get our

own houses in order, so that we can defend and promote country sports based on science and standards. That applies to both hunting and shooting. I’ll be impatient of those who think we can just go on regardless of external concerns about how we conduct ourselves, and they must not be allowed to stand in the way of measures to ensure that we can withstand scrutiny.

That’s not the modern world we live in. I’m an optimist and think country sports have a great future if we adapt. We owe it to successive generations to make sure we do.

**How can we best educate those that have no understanding of the countryside?**

I worry about the enduring division



between town and country, and that was the main reason why we started the Countryside Movement and then the Alliance. We need to bridge the gap, not exacerbate the divide. It's up to us to tell our story, showing people the best of what we do, the true face of country life. I'd like to see more education, such as schoolchildren visiting farms. The Alliance has a key role to play in communicating about the countryside's concerns, and we have great spokespeople, but in reality we need more people in the rural world to be willing to engage and speak up. We can't just keep our heads down, and we mustn't be cowed into silence by extremists or hateful attack. Our gamekeepers, hunt staff, farriers, vets, farmers and so on can be the best advert we could possibly have when they speak about their love for the countryside, nature, animals and the rural way of life.

**What impact, if any, do you see Brexit having on the countryside?**

There are clearly big risks and challenges to some farming sectors as a result of Brexit, depending on what form it takes, but there will be opportunities from repatriating agricultural and environmental policy, too. Britain could shape some really innovative

conservation policies over the next few years. Our job is to make sure that they're sensible and not distorted by extreme agendas which could undermine the farming and traditional activities which are the foundation of countryside management.

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**What do you see as the main threat to country sports?**

I think we're facing the most serious threat to country sports for 20 years, and with Labour's manifesto an equal threat to both hunting and shooting for the first time. Trail hunting would become impossible under their plans, grouse shooting would go and other game shooting would be seriously curtailed. Frankly, the sporting world needs to wake up.

Environmental issues are soaring up the agenda and we have nothing to fear from that if we can successfully point to our conservation credentials. We are the original greens, investing millions of pounds into wildlife habitats and

managing the countryside. What we must call out is an extremist animal rights ideology which is actually at odds with conservation and animal welfare. Labour has made a big mistake in embracing it and we need to try and restore balance into the debate. Policy should be based on evidence and principle, not social spite.

**What are the highlights from your time at the British Field Sports Society (BFSS) and when, and how, did you first become involved with the CA?**

When I first arrived at the BFSS, as a bright-eyed young researcher, the former generals who ran it only read *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sporting Life*. When I suggested that we probably ought to take *The Guardian*, too, they were horrified. But they were great men and, unsurprisingly, were very steady under fire. We had to fight every day to see off anti-hunting and coursing bills.

My favourite memory is of sitting in the public gallery in a House of Commons Committee room with Anthony Hart, Simon's father, a wonderful man who was the Masters of Foxhounds Association Secretary. I learnt a lot from working with him and Ronnie Wallace. He once became increasingly exasperated by an awful, ill-informed speech by an

anti-hunting Labour MP, and finally exploded, exclaiming loudly “who is this ghastly s\*\*t?!” The whole Committee was startled and the Chairman had to call for order.

I was determined that we needed to modernise our campaigning, and I had the idea with my friend Bill Andrewes of setting up the Campaign for Hunting. Then I worked with the late, great Michael Sissons and others to set up the Countryside Movement, which laid the foundations for the Alliance. I also did a lot of broadcast media in my early 20s. It was often pretty tough and as a result tough questioning by journalists has never really phased me in later political life.

**What’s the highlight of your political career so far?**

There have been a series of peaks I guess. I was incredibly lucky to be selected for Arundel and South Downs, which frankly is the best constituency in England, three days before the election was called in 2005. I love the constituency, the South Downs and living in Arundel. When they asked me if I knew West Sussex I said not really - my grandfather had farmed in East Sussex, which I appreciated didn’t count; my great-grandfather had taken five wickets for seven runs at Arundel, but that was playing against Sussex; however, I did know Goodwood Racecourse intimately. I think that probably got me the job. Initially I didn’t

have much time to experience the backbenches because I was promoted to the Conservative frontbench within months and was there for seven years. I became Shadow Justice Secretary and then Shadow DEFRA Secretary. I really enjoyed the DEFRA brief and it would have been fun to have done it in government, but I was sentenced to be Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice instead. I didn’t enjoy it much and successfully secured my own release after two years. After that I’ve spent much time campaigning on global health and equality issues, but my constituency always comes first.

I’m a campaigner at heart and I’ve led a variety of national and international causes, including the ‘no’ campaign against joining the euro, the campaign for equal marriage and action to tackle tuberculosis, the world’s deadliest disease. Social media has changed politics and campaigning, not always for the better. It’s amplified anger, which can be especially problematic for us, and it fuels populism, but it also provides a way to communicate directly with individuals, so we have to find a way to harness it positively.

**What are your fondest memories from the field?**

I loved whipping in to the Essex Foxhounds in my youth. I hunted the Trinity Foot Beagles when I went up to Cambridge and after that I set up my own pack of beagles, the Newmarket, which I hunted for 14 seasons. In those days I could really run and reckon we’d do 20 miles or so on a Saturday afternoon, which was no mean feat in heavy plough.

I used to get up at 5am every day to walk the hounds out, and then fall asleep later at work. Some of my happiest memories are of long hound exercises in the summer evenings. I loved my hounds and I used to be able to sit them down and call them out one by one, although the distraction of burgers to greedy beagles at summer shows often interfered with my party piece. I had one hound who became expert at very sweetly and gently removing ice creams from the hands of children.

I fell in love with Northumberland when I first went up there with the Trinity Foot Beagles. We had some amazing days there in September with the Newmarket, too. Sometimes you could be hunting in shirtsleeves on a hot September day, and yet the hounds would still fly. I remember standing at the top of a valley in the Cheviots and listening to people having a quiet conversation on the far side. You soon learned to keep the high ground if you could to avoid climbing back up again. That’s probably a good motto for politics and life, too. ❤️

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Nick Herbert MP