

Reclaiming our Fisheries – forewarned is forearmed!

Fishing for Leave's John Ashworth examines the tremendous hand the UK has to play on fisheries, provided the draft Withdrawal Agreement is abandoned. We should be reasonable, but not a pushover. It is absolutely essential that we assert our whole and sole control over our own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Just as vital is that all Brexiteers understand these issues NOW so that we are not deceived into losing control of our fisheries once again.

Every so often it happens that, as you are researching one subject, you come across an item that sets you off down a different pathway.

Reading a House of Commons debate of 31 October 1984 on Greenland's withdrawal from the then-EEC, I came across this oral question from one future Foreign Secretary to another.

MP for Livingston, Robin Cook (Foreign Secretary from 1997 until 2001) asked: *"Could the Minister explain what financial compensation the UK receives for having granted the Common Market access to British fisheries?"*

Reply from **Secretary of State Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Malcolm Rifkind**: *"That is a somewhat foolish question; we are dealing with the withdrawal of Greenland and the Community's entitlement – which it was anxious to maintain to fish in Greenland waters. If the Community wishes to fish in waters which are not part of the Community, it is right and proper that there should be some quid pro quo. The Hon. Gentleman may speculate about the implications of that for other territories that might wish to Withdraw from the Community, but such speculations are*

not relevant to the order."

There was nothing foolish about Robin Cook's question. When Greenland left the EEC there was no automatic entitlement for the Community to continue to fish in Greenland's waters. Greenland became entitled to exclude European fishing boats from its waters, or to charge them for the privilege of continuing to fish there under Greenland's own rules.

While Greenland is not clear cut as a direct comparison to the UK (being classed as an Overseas Territory of Denmark), Cook was rightly getting at an important point. If you are a member of the EEC/EU, you hand your established fishing zone over to become EU waters for all other EU member states to share equally the resource within – free of charge. Whereas if you are a non-member, you get paid annually for the resource one allows the EU to take, plus access to their market. As Cook's pointed 'question' hints at, Edward Heath gained absolutely nothing for Britain by surrendering our waters to European control and plunder.

This one question leads us further. The EU countries have a voracious appetite for fish and many marine species, and so the EU relies heavily on third country fishery agreements and other non-EU member agreements. Two important ones are Mauritania, which is due for renewal later this year, and Greenland next year.

Because of the pressure on the EU over Brexit, the EU risks finding itself short of marine resource. Will these two independent states up the stakes and demand a better deal for renewal? And more to the point, will the British government make use of the strong hand it holds on fisheries?

We should be prepared to be reasonable, but not a pushover. Fishermen in friendly EU countries such as Denmark have invested a great deal of money in the quite legitimate expectation of fishing in our waters whilst we were part of

the EU, which was expected to be indefinite.

As we could not immediately build and crew sufficient boats to harvest all our own resources, it is quite reasonable to allow them a short, decreasing transitional controlled access – under our terms, bearing in mind Denmark’s past unreasonable attitude towards Sandeel stocks – for a reasonable charge.

Equal value swaps would also be an immediate and simple solution, although great care must be taken as to what agreement is agreed, as we could end up being controlled by the EU, which appears from the wording of the present proposed Withdrawal Agreement to be their intention.

There is also another good reason – provision in UNCLOS (the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) that neighbouring states could demand rights to fish our waters if we were unable to make full use of them. Our present depleted fishing fleet could not do that at once on its own; although if the EU became difficult, the UK holds the right to lower the recommended TACs to a level at which we could. The UK has a tremendous hand to play concerning fisheries, which Mrs May surrendered in the (hopefully now dead) Withdrawal Agreement.

So there are two good reasons for not taking a fierce ‘dog in the manger’ attitude to our fishing waters. But it is absolutely essential that we assert our whole and sole control over our own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which extends 200 nautical miles from our shores (or to the midpoint if neighbouring countries are less than 400 nautical miles away), just as just as other non-EU nations have done. There is nothing nationalistic or selfish about this: it is the international norm for sovereign nations.

‘Territorial waters’, by contrast, is an expression which applies only to waters which are within 12 miles of our coast. It is vital to be aware of the difference between territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone – especially when

slippery politicians are speaking on the matter. Sometimes they use the term 'territorial waters' to deceive, and sometimes because they are ignorant of the difference.

Forewarned is forearmed! It is vital that all Brexiteers understand these issues NOW so that we are not deceived into losing control of our fisheries once again. Although there are many other issues to sort out, none are impossible as long as the UK is genuine about taking back control and leaving the EU's horrendous Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) well astern.