

Any betrayal of our fishermen will have serious electoral consequences

Fishing for Leave's John Ashworth explains why electoral considerations mean that British fishermen will not be sold out to the EU once again.

British fishermen have not had much reason for happiness since we joined the EEC. The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) has been an ecological disaster and has run our industry into the ground. But last week's Conservative Party Conference at last gave some glimmers of hope for the future.

The Attorney General, Geoffrey Cox, gave us a much-needed reminder of just what is at stake with Brexit – nothing less than our very ability to govern ourselves:

‘At 11pm on 29 March 2019 we will leave the European Union.

‘And soon thereafter, in an extraordinary moment in our history, the EU institutions will no longer have the right to make laws for our country. That power will belong exclusively to the sovereign Parliament of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

‘That is a precious prize.’

It is indeed. It means that every single individual MP will become fully responsible for the governance of our nation, something which for 46 years has been missing.

And so how will we use this new-found sovereignty for the benefit of our agriculture and fisheries? The Prime Minister made the goal quite clear in her party conference speech:

‘Our proposal would be good for our rural communities,

getting us out of the Common Agricultural Policy.

‘It would be good for our coastal communities. We would be out of the Common Fisheries Policy, an independent coastal state once again.

‘And with the UK’s biggest fishing fleets based in Scotland, let me say this to Nicola Sturgeon. You claim to stand up for Scotland, but you want to lock Scottish fishermen into the CFP forever. That’s not ‘Stronger for Scotland’, it’s a betrayal of Scotland.’

It is high time that someone from another political party took Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP to task on this subject. But it also nails Mrs May’s colours to the mast. If the Conservative government lets our fishermen down, then the SNP will be able to make the same accusation with a vengeance.

And were it not for all those newly gained Scottish Westminster parliamentary seats, Mrs May would not be prime minister now – all down to the fishing issue.

We can be certain of the following. If the EU believes there is going to be a ‘no deal’, it will raise the issue of EU access to British waters. The ball will be in their court: they will have to ask the UK.

If there is silence from the EU on fishing rights, then we can expect a deal – however bodged – so that both parties can move into the transitional period. And the EU will continue to benefit from access to UK waters via its present fisheries policy until 1 January 2021.

Remainers are fond of saying that the fishing issue is too small to bother with, and will be bartered away. I disagree. Like the Northern Ireland border, it will be a key issue, just as it was on accession. This time, British fishermen will not be so easy to sell down the river.