

Common sense prevails in Iceland

Last week, Iceland formally withdrew its EU membership application. Given the importance of fishing to Iceland's economy it is hardly surprising that the EU's Common Fisheries Policy has proved a major stumbling block. As with Norway, it has long been a principal factor in Icelandic lukewarmness to the EU, and when the country did start formal accession talks following the collapse of its banking sector, an agreement on the CFP was always going to be a challenge. Discussions never got beyond an EU demand for Iceland to reduce its mackerel catch and to abide by EU quotas. As one report put it, the EU gave Iceland an ultimatum: It's us or the fish. Iceland chose the fish.

With the a centre-right anti-EU government in power since elections in 2013, these developments have come as no surprise. Accession talks ceased two years ago, although there has been some opposition recently to the process being terminated without a referendum. However, those supporters of membership who took to the streets of Reykjavik must surely recognise that they represent a shrinking minority. Opinion polls indicate that the sceptical Icelanders are becoming even more opposed to their country joining the EU.

Many of Iceland's senior politicians strongly support their country's independence. Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, Iceland's Foreign Minister, said that "Iceland's interests are better served outside the European Union." Iceland has an advantage over Switzerland and Norway in this area. In these countries, well-organised anti-EU movements have more or less ensured that any referendum on joining the EU would be defeated, but it would be over and against the wishes of quite a few senior politicians who would like their country to join. David Cameron is fond of quoting Norwegian politicians who moan

about their country's relationship with the EU, even though Richard North and Peter Troy were easily able to find Norwegian MPs who were far happier to be outside the EU when they produced their DVD *The Norway Option*.

There is a lesson for the UK here. If tiny Iceland, with its population of barely one third of a million people (less than the population of Gloucestershire, in other words), has the confidence that it can survive outside the EU, those politicians in the UK who paint such a bleak picture of our country's prospects outside the EU must be challenged. Such negativity flies in the face of the reality of our northern neighbour's self-confidence. If Iceland can prosper as a sovereign independent country, so can we.

Photo by JasonParis 