

# Danger – Handle with care

When the current Parliamentary session ends on July 20th, we will enter what has long been called “the Silly Season” when newspapers dredge up all sorts of far-fetched stories to try to keep readers’ interest.

It seems that some are already getting into practise, particularly those who specialise in “biff-bam” Brexit stories, many of which have a only very tenuous relationship with fact. Among the e-mails greeting me this morning were several communications from concerned leave supporters who had spotted seemingly worrying articles in the press over the weekend.

Two articles in particular were the focus of concern. The first concerns an ancient charter granted by Charles II in 1666 allowing 50 fishermen from Bruges “eternal rights” to fish in English waters as an act of gratitude for the hospitality given him by the city during the 1650s when he lived in exile. The headline is much more lurid, however:- **“Belgium says 1666 royal charter grants its fishermen “eternal rights” to English waters.”** Not quite the same as 50 fishing boats from one Belgian city! Let’s unpack things a little more.

Firstly, a discussion my colleague John Ashworth of Fishing for Leave revealed that we technically have similar fishing rights off the Newfoundland Coast going back even further – to the period shortly after its discovery by John Cabot in 1497. Have we sought to upset the Canadians by exercising them at any time in the last hundred years? Almost certainly not. Furthermore, in 1666, Belgium did not exist as a country, being part of the Spanish Netherlands. Then, what is meant by “English Waters”? In the 17th Century, by convention, this meant only the sea within three nautical miles of the shoreline. Things have changed significantly since then, with

territorial waters being expanded during the 20th century. Any attempts therefore by fishermen from Bruges to fish within three miles of the English coast after Brexit on the basis of this charter would open a legal Pandora's box.

But are there actually any vessels that would be entitled to do so? The charter mentions "Fifty herring boats." The historic town of Bruges, which in its heyday saw considerable maritime traffic along the canals linking it to the North Sea, is no longer a major port. The fishing industry in that part of Belgium is centred on nearby Zeebrugge (literally "Bruges-on-Sea") which is, in fact, the largest fishing port in the country, with a substantial fish market in the town. Yet in 2013, it only boasted 43 fishing boats in total. Given that Bruges lies on a canal 8 miles (or 12,87 kilometres) inland from Zeebrugge and its fish market, the likelihood of there being any fishing boats (let alone specialist herring boats) based in the part of the city which existed in 1666 is almost certainly zero.

In other words, when the Flemish prime minister Geert Bourgeois unrolled a copy of the charter on a Belgian television news show, it was a piece of grandstanding and nothing more. It does, however, indicate just how much grandstanding we are likely to face as the Brexit negotiations get under way. Belgium, along with other EU member states who fish in the North Sea, has been upset by the decision by Michael Gove to denounce the 1964 London Fisheries Convention. Even this, however, is a considerable over-reaction. The wording of this agreement is vessel-specific and therefore was unlikely ever to have been put to the test as none of the boats specified are likely to be in commercial use 53 years later. In other words, Mr Gove's action was merely a precautionary measure to avoid possible complications.

It's not only politicians on the other side of the channel who are grandstanding. I also received a couple of e-mails about an article claiming that Vince Cable reckons that Brexit will

never happen. Once again, let us examine the facts. The Lib Dems campaigned in the recent General Election to be the so-called "party of the 48%". They went up from 9 MPs to 12 only courtesy of the SNP slump in Scotland, so it can hardly be said that their campaign was a success, but hope springs eternal!

Cable is wrong because of the dynamics of the two main parties. The Tories did unexpectedly badly and are licking their wounds. The majority of Tory MPs campaigned for Remain but most Tory activists and a significant minority of MPs are solidly pro-Brexit, so to backpedal would be suicide, provoking the worst crisis in the Conservative Party since 1846. (See more on this here – principally the last three paragraphs.)

But Corbyn has been strengthened by the election result, even though he didn't win. As a consequence, he is revealing his true Brexiteer colours. He and his right hand man John McDonnell have never been keen on the EU but when he won the Labour leadership campaign, he initially faced immense opposition from the majority of Labour MPs, who didn't want him as their leader. He was thus unable to take an anti-EU stance publicly. This has now changed as Corbyn was quite smart in the election campaign, pitching to floating Brexit supporters who were either moving on from UKIP or who didn't like the Tories. Now his own position is strengthened, he is coming out increasingly strongly for Brexit. This in turn adds further pressure on the Tories not to backpedal.

None of this is to ignore the complexities of Brexit but the Lib Dems are now no more than little pygmies shouting from the sidelines. The media may feel obliged to report the words of the man likely to be the next leader of the UK's third party, but no one need take much notice of his wishful thinking. We are basically into a period of two-party politics. It may not last for long, but at the moment, neither Mrs May nor Jeremy Corbyn show any signs of trying to stop Brexit and no other

party leader's opinions matter very much.

I hope that this debunking of two articles will help reassure concerned readers. Politicians remain the least trusted profession in the UK, but journalists run them pretty close, being even less trusted than bankers, estate agents and trade union officials. There are some exceptions and we are thankful to those members of the media who do seek to maintain high standards and report facts accurately, especially when it comes to Brexit. Based on what I found in my e-mail in tray this morning, however, all too many journalists are guilty of sloppy reporting, poor research and sensationalism. Their offerings, especially lurid headlines in the forthcoming "Silly Season", need to be handled with extreme care.