

EU ultimatum: fishing waters are the price for a trade deal

*The EU has confirmed what we feared all along: any UK-EU trade deal will be dependent on the UK handing over access to our fishing waters. Boris Johnson told the Commons in July that surrendering fishing for a trade deal “would be a reprehensible thing to do”. It is now clear that our fishermen’s next big battle will be to prevent exactly that happening, as **Fishing for Leave** explains in this article.*

The EU has issued an ultimatum to the UK on fishing. As reported by the Irish state broadcaster RTE, “Brussels has raised the stakes: if the UK wants a free trade deal, it will be linked to what access EU vessels get to both UK waters and the fish that live in them.”

RTE’s account has been corroborated by the Telegraph, which reported, “Sources said the plan was to make EU access to British waters a condition for any trade deal and to make the demand public on, or as close as possible, to February 1, if Boris Johnson wins a majority in the general election.”

This ultimatum confirms the uncomfortable reality of the deal Britain is walking into with its eyes wide shut. Fishing for Leave has been desperately pointing out this reality, but has been met with heads in the sand – as it conflicts with the narrative that a bad deal is somehow palatable and can deliver a simple free trade agreement.

The Conservative Party manifesto may pledge to take back full control of our waters, but the reality is rather different. We would be obliged to remain in the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy

(CFP) for the transition period. And then, the EU has used the terms of the Political Declaration to box the UK into a corner on fishing.

There is absolutely no difference between May's deal and Johnson's deal as far as fishing is concerned. As RTE notes, "One year on, Mr Johnson has signed up to exactly what Theresa May did on fisheries. In the Political Declaration of October 2019, agreed by both sides, the four paragraphs on fisheries, including the link between fish and trade, is word for word the same as the Political Declaration of November 2018."

If the Withdrawal Agreement is ratified then then the UK may nominally be an 'independent coastal state'. But we will be obliged under the Political Declaration to have a fisheries agreement based on:

- 'non-discrimination' – the founding principle of equal access to a common resource.
- 'level playing field' – only achievable by binding the UK to regulatory alignment with CFP rules.
- to be bartered as 'part of the overall economic partnership'.

The EU has now made the implications of this crystal clear. Surrender fishing a second time – or no free trade agreement.

It is clear to even the most optimistic that trying to ratify a free trade agreement with the EU by summer 2020 is near impossible. It is equally clear that the Political Declaration is constructed to ratchet the UK into concession after concession as another 'cliff edge' approaches.

The crucial question is: what on Earth is Boris Johnson's and the Conservatives' response to the EU's ultimatum? If they cannot answer this, then alarm bells will ring around coastal communities and constituencies. It will show that a Conservative government would have no intention of telling the EU to get stuffed, but will capitulate to bully boy tactics of

being asked to surrender our nation's greatest natural resource for a trade deal.

That is something that no other nation or government in the world will have ever done. Not Iceland, not Norway, not even the little Faroe Islands. Yet all sell huge volumes of fish and other goods to the EU.

It shouldn't and needn't be like this. We can automatically take back complete sovereignty over all waters and resources under Article 50, which causes all current CFP access and resource shares to 'cease to apply' on exit day. Tariffs on seafood are so low (between two and four percent) that our fishermen would enjoy more or less free access to EU markets in any case.

Economically, this would repatriate a potentially £6-8 billion pound industry, injecting an adrenaline hit to maligned coastal communities which if husbanded can provide billions every year, year after year, for generations. Politically, it exorcises the ghost of Edward Heath surrendering Britain's fishing as "expendable", which still haunts the Conservative Party decades later.

It should be a huge totemic win for any government. Yet, the government and wider political establishment have allowed the EU to box us into a legal corner. Many in the political establishment say fishing – and by extension coastal communities – don't really matter. Well, then why is the EU pushing so hard to continue being able to pillage our waters?

The response from Johnson and the Conservatives is critical. They MUST scrap the Political Declaration on fishing or be blackmailed into surrendering fishing for a trade deal – something Johnson told the Commons in July, "would be a reprehensible thing to do".

The EU is testing them on a totemic issue. Their response will be telling – particularly to those in coastal constituencies.