

Fishing for Freedom

Think tank **The Red Cell** recently published a collection of essays devoted to Fishing and Brexit entitled **Net Worth**. Over the next few weeks we will be publishing abridged versions of some of those essays, to give our readers a taster of the arguments and issues at stake. First up, former Labour MP **Austin Mitchell**, a long-time campaigner for British fisheries, recaps the problems with past policy to frame the solutions now needed.

Austin Mitchell reported for television on the Cod Wars with Iceland. As Labour MP for Grimsby, he became Chair of the All Party Fisheries Group, and led an enquiry into the industry by a sub-committee of the Environment Select Committee. In the course of his work for Grimsby and fishing he has visited most British fishing ports as well as ports in Denmark, Spain, New Zealand and Iceland. He was awarded the Icelandic Order of the Falcon for his work for fishing and fishermen. He retired from Parliament in 2015.

Fishing is a small industry creating an enormous problem. The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) which made fish a common resource was cobbled together as Britain and Norway began negotiations to enter the Common Market. The intention behind it was to get access to British and Norwegian waters. Norway rejected the proposal, but Ted Heath agreed to it in his desperation to get into the Market, assuming that British waters weren't important because most of our catch then came from Iceland.

Big mistake. Within four years we'd lost Iceland to find that we couldn't follow the rest of the world in taking our own 200 mile limits because the CFP made us part of a "European pool" to which we contributed around three quarters of the catch but

got the right to catch less than a third.

The inevitable result was overfishing. The Commission doled out paper fish to please everyone. European vessels caught more of our own fish than we were allowed – 683,000 tonnes compared to 111,000 in 2016. Policing to stop cheating and over-catching was inadequate but more importantly we couldn't rebuild our fishing industry within our own waters as other nations were doing because British waters weren't ours. So, both the industry and its processing side shrank, particularly in England because Scotland got a slightly better deal.

Coastal communities suffered. The family ties which had brought sons of fishermen into fishing were cut. The remaining fleet aged, the associated engineering, building and processing industries shrank. Investment largely stopped.

As Chair of the All-Party Fisheries Group I watched a succession of Fishing Ministers set off for the annual quota negotiations vowing to get a better deal, only to come back full of excuses after accepting cuts. These cuts then increased wasteful discards, because in mixed fisheries any reduction in quota allocations means vessels must throw back any by-catches they're not allowed to land. This meant vessels were throwing back almost as much as they landed. In the face of this folly the EU decided that all catches should be landed, but has been unable to enforce its own policy.

Folly turned into farce as the EU court's Factortame decision allowed foreigners to buy up British vessels and their quotas. **As a result, two-fifths of the English quota goes to foreign fishermen and one massive Dutch vessel the "Cornelius Vrilijk" catches a quarter of the English quota.** Foreign incursions, like the destruction of Yorkshire lobster pots by French fishermen, went unpunished because there was no effective EU inspection at their ports of landing. Indeed, when I spent a week on a fisheries protection vessel, I found it rigorous in inspecting British vessels, but foreigners simply escaped

beyond the median line.

Fishing struggled on, but 80% of the fish Britain needed now came from abroad, particularly Iceland and Norway, both of which had sensibly refused to go into the EU because of the CFP. As MP for Grimsby I had to watch the port's decline, the collapse of fishing's engineering, the shrinking of processing and the loss of Grimsby College's fishing courses as our fleet dwindled from 500 vessels to a score.

From that low point, only Brexit gives us any prospect of rebuilding our own fishing industry in our own waters.

The paradox is that a clean break on fishing is apparently simple but politically difficult. Once the UK is out of the CFP, only a fifth of the crucial stocks are left in the "common" pool. That's a critical problem for France, whose fishermen are prone to turn to violence, blockade ports, poach and generally make trouble for a French government already threatened by internal unrest. So, France pushes the EU to play hardball, even though most other members have no interest in fishing around Britain.

The EU's tactic is to insist that unless fishing access is agreed there can be no further FTA negotiations, and no access for our valuable financial services. Such bullying will hardly appeal to other EU members. It is in any case chronologically difficult since Britain leaves EU jurisdiction at the end of this transitional year and becomes an independent coastal state controlling its own waters under the UN law of the sea. The CFP then has no jurisdiction.

That will reduce the EU's claim to a simple demand for access. It will be pitched unacceptably high but is negotiable. Until the British fishing industry is rebuilt and reorganised there is fishing capacity to spare, as long as access is on a reducing scale and decided on an annual basis. We can regulate

fishing in the same way as they do in Norway which allows some EU access on the basis of an annual review of sustainable catch levels based on scientific advice.

British fishing could be run on the same basis with either swap arrangements or licence fees, a more substantial fishery protection effort to stop illegalities and cheating and a gradual phasing out of foreign fishing as the British industry builds up. That would create the certainty which investment requires, something the CFP has disastrously failed to do.