

Flying the Canadian flag

The pro-Canada zest that recently swept through UK and Irish fishermen should not hide the fact of interdependence in fisheries

It was nationalism at its farcical peak. A feverish zest for Canada swept through British and Irish fishing communities, as the European Union's Fisheries Minister slogged it out with Canada over quota allocations on Newfoundland's Grand Banks. While the formal EU position condemned Canada for piracy on the high seas, the British press rejoiced in the defeat of the 'Spanish armada'.

Canada fervour reached dizzy heights when a Cornish fishing boat from Newlyn—the *Stereden Va Browas*—mistakenly arrested by French customs. It was flying the Canadian flag, and the local authorities assumed it was Canadian and landing fish in France illegally!

Overnight Canadian flags became a craze all over the UK. The first reported sightings of the distinctive red and white maple leaf insignia came from Newlyn in Cornwall. By Easter, Canadian flags were flying from masts in many British and Irish fishing ports. For several days, the Canadian High Commissioner was kept busy traversing the country, handing out Canadian flags and drumming up support for his country's cause. Britain, especially Cornwall, rapidly became the most favoured tourist spot for Canadians.

As the negotiations grew more heated and intractable, Spain demanded that sanctions be applied to Canada. The British Prime Minister, John Major, risked a diplomatic breach with Spain and a clash with the European Commission by speaking out forcefully in support of Canada. He strongly opposed trade sanctions on Canada, and asserted that long-standing Commonwealth ties were more important than obligations to another EU country. Cynics said that it was more an issue of concern over marginal

Tory seats and local elections which caused Major to be so outspoken.

Superficial analyses proclaimed a racist element, and that disenchantment with the EU was leading people to be nostalgic about Commonwealth ties. Spain charged Canada with organizing a smear campaign against it, and said it had been made a scapegoat for Canada's fisheries problems.

Whatever the reasons and circumstances which led to the strong support for Canada's cause in the UK, there is a long and bitter history to Hispano-Britannic fish disputes—most recently in the so-called tuna war in August 1994 (SAMUDRA No: 10 & 11, December 1994). UK fishermen have little faith in the enforcement of fishery regulations in Spanish ports, where, they claim, undersized fish and those beyond quota limits are landed with impunity.

They also feel that British fishing interests are being traded against other concessions, for example, in agriculture. They think that if the UK unilaterally declares a 200-mile exclusive fishing zone, nearly 80 per cent of the EU's fish stocks would belong to the UK. The 'Save British Fish Campaign' wants the UK to leave the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) and thereby gain exclusive access to these fish stocks.

Similar situation

In many ways, Spain faces almost the same situation that the UK fishing industry faced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. When Spain joined the EU in 1986, it was subject to a restrictive list system of vessels which were allowed limited fishing opportunities in EU waters. These restrictions are to be reviewed prior to Spain's full integration in January 1996.

With Spain's entry into the EU in 1986, the European fishing capacity is said to have swelled by 75 per cent. Spain's fishing fleet is Europe's largest—17,000 vessels and 92,000 persons sailing them. It is often said that, due to its powerful fishing interests, Spain is the tail that wags European fishing policy.

UK fishermen are sore that the size of Spain's fishing fleet forces other European states to cut theirs to match the resources available. They feel Spain should have been asked to reduce its own fleet size before it was allowed to enter the CFP.

Although its access to EU waters is severely restricted, Spain has the capacity to catch four times its current allocated quotas. British fishermen feel threatened by this, especially since Spain is losing access to many of its traditional distant-water grounds.

As one of the world's largest consumers of fish—1.9 million tonnes annually, over thrice the rest of the EU—the Spanish also have a reputation for eating small, immature fish. This is something that particularly worries UK and Irish fishermen.

Rightly or wrongly, many British and Irish fishermen harbour a deep suspicion of Spanish fishing companies, regarding

them as disrespectful of the law. They also strongly identify with the Canadian charges against the Spanish vessel, *Estai*, this was particularly strong among the fishermen of Ireland, where, by end 1994, 24 of the 39 fishing boats detained in Irish waters were Spanish or UK-registered ('flags of convenience') Spanish boats.


In December 1994, all 12 ministers of the EU met in Brussels to discuss, among other things, the terms of accession of Spain and a review of the restrictions applied on that country.

The council of fisheries ministers agreed to lift some of these and allow the Spanish limited entry to the waters of the so-called 'Irish Box' an area of protected (limited access) waters around Ireland. This caused an uproar in the UK and Ireland.

Fuelling concern

UK fishermen are also concerned that, over the next eight years, Spain will build a track record of fishing stocks to which they are denied access, thus allowing them to claim 'traditional rights' thereafter. Fuelling this concern is a recent deal between France and Spain in which the Spanish have traded 9,000 tonnes of anchovy quotas for cod, haddock, saithe, monk fish and hake. These are nominal amounts.

However, it now means that Spain can catch all these species in areas formerly




denied to it. It is claimed that Spain has been given an enhanced fishing opportunity 'through the back door.

With feelings running high and many Cornish and Irish boats now preparing for high-seas tuna fishing, a repeat of last year's violence seems inevitable.

Somehow, common ground must be found for fishermen from Spain and other EU nations to sit down and talk with one another. In the UK and Ireland, Spanish fishermen may appear villains, but without Spanish markets, many British fishing operations would simply not be viable.

Annual British fish exports to Spain are estimated at 137 million pounds sterling. Most of the tuna caught by Cornish fishermen is also sold in Spain.

There seems to be an important issue of interdependence: British fishermen need Spanish markets, and Spanish fishermen want access to 'British' fishing grounds. Surely the time has come to sit down together and negotiate. 

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