

Farewell to Fish.

Here we are in Ireland with a magnificent, self-renewing resource, on the edge of a seething continent crying out for its product. With all our wonderful technology, can we really do nothing but destroy it?

I asked this question in an article in the *Irish Skipper* in November 1991. Today, in 2005, it seems that even the Irish Government now has to admit that the sad answer has to be given; *yes, it is all but destroyed now*. Stocks of fish of marketable quality in the sea around our shores are something like 10% of what they were a mere twenty years ago. Many fishermen have gone out of business, and a run-down industry cannot even deliver the good prices that scarcity might have been expected to ensure.

Complacency reigned for years, while the landings increased bravely; we all surfed along on a tidal wave of technology, increased efficiency and fishing effort. But it masked the degradation of the resource that it all depended on. When the collapse came, even the clear-sighted were taken by surprise. It is a paradigm that I think will become sickeningly familiar in the years ahead; we badly need to learn from this archetypal example of the sea fisheries.

Looking out to sea from Loop Head or any other of the beautiful headlands of Ireland, it is hard to realise that one is looking at a scene of carnage and desolation, that only those with an intimate knowledge of that other world beneath the waves can perceive. Herring and mackerel stocks have been decimated, while huge bags of spawning herring, which supply the basic food of many bigger fish, are still killed and dumped because they do not exactly suit the market. Tons of immature fish have for many years been shovelled back dead into the sea from decks of trawlers and seiners. Thousands of kilometres of tangle nets are still being shot, far more than can be properly managed, resulting in discard rates of up to 80%. Fishing quotas are something that one has to get around in order to get by from day to day.

Destructive trips on proverbial runaway trains are notoriously hard to get off, even if one is led to the painful realisation that a way of life and a family business that has taken decades of toil to build up have become nothing else but that. Recognising this, our neighbouring states have operated decommissioning schemes for some years now, 75% financed by the EU, in an attempt to bring fishing tonnage in line with available quotas. In addition to money for tonnage and the scrapping of boats, these schemes generally offer early retirement for fishermen aged 55 years or over. Rather than adopt such a scheme here, the Irish Government cannily saved a few quid, and moved towards solving the headache of over-capacity in the pelagic sector, by forcing the Killybegs men to buy up whitefish tonnage.

Only now, when most of the whitefish boats have already been got rid of, are they going to introduce a proper decommissioning scheme here. The E.U. also makes provision for an early retirement scheme, for which they provide 75% finance, yet it seems unlikely that the Irish Government will avail of it. Former whitefish men such as myself, who had to sell out in the absence of an early retirement scheme, consider we have been dealt yet another injustice, which frankly comes at the end of a whole history of, putting it mildly, very shabby treatment.

At this stage in my life, touching sixty and with my house in Carrigaholt up for sale, I try to shun regret, anger and bitterness. They are no good to me. But I do think in justice and fairness, and indeed in the hope of a better tomorrow sometime in the dim future, there are questions to be asked, answers to be given, and hopefully even lessons to be learned. We all

know this is part of a global crisis, but after all there are places in the world, such as Iceland, where the fisheries are being managed quite successfully.

We fishermen did warn anyone who came within earshot, from Brian Lenihan when he was Minister of the Marine onwards, that the regime for managing the sea-fisheries was no good and was going to end in grief. Of course the road to Hell has been paved with good intentions. All along the Irish Government told us how they were committed to safeguarding the future of the marine resources and of the fishermen themselves. Only last year, they were bravely announcing '38 new vessels for whitefish fleet', with Minister Fahey waffling on about "this balanced package, involving an unprecedented level of funding will put the Irish whitefish industry on a safe, sustainable and secure footing for the foreseeable future." The decommissioning funds are liable to end up bailing out the bankers of any of these vessels that actually get built; in Scotland a two year-old vessel was recently decommissioned.

If our Government had in fact retained the power and responsibility to manage the fisheries, then even now, we would have a chance of democratic answerability ultimately doing its job, of lessons being learnt and new starts made. But who can make them admit, by way of a start, that out of a combination of ignorance and what they perceived as an eye for the main chance, they have perpetrated multiple betrayals, the most disastrous of all being of course the original sell-out of the Irish fisheries to continental interests?

The other day I was in Dingle, where several large Spanish ships were landing fish, directly into the back of huge lorries, while the fleet of small local boats lies very evidently in decay. This situation is copper-fastened by a regime under which the Irish fleets have a miniscule share of the quotas in their own waters, and even what we do have has been partly bought up by 'flag ships', mostly Spanish vessels that operate under the British or Irish flags. It is the direct result of our Governments' decisions, and yet it is a worse case of naked imperialism than anything witnessed in our fishing ports under the British.

Suffice to say here, for any new start to be made with regard to conservation of the resource, it has to begin with the recovery of a sense of ownership. The big question is, on what basis? There are attempts being made to develop cooperative management in those small coastal fisheries where the Irish Government retains authority, but no such opportunity exists at present with regard to the bulk of sea fisheries. There is no provision in the European scheme of things for a zone of 'pooled sovereignty', though it prove a disaster, to be returned to the nation state, quite apart from the little difficulty that it is very hard to be confident this would in fact be an improvement.

The kind of ownership that is coming down the tracks, once they have got rid of cantankerous individualists such as myself, is to be invested in a handful of big fishing companies that can be controlled and taxed more easily, and that will realise that their long-term interest demands proper management of the resource. They will be the landlord class of the new Empire. Meanwhile Irish fishermen know what it felt like to be evicted tenants.

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