



Fishermen warn against carve-up of UK waters in Brexit deal

Industry members urge MPs to take back control and rectify ‘travesty’ of 1973 EEC deal

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Fishermen from across the UK have visited Westminster to warn against a repeat of the “travesty” of 1973 when they claim British waters were carved up to the advantage of foreign fishing interests upon joining the European Economic Community.

Barrie Deas, the chief executive of the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations, said the fishing industry might be small but it was “emblematic” of Brexit because leaving the EU represented an opportunity to right 45 years of wrongs.

“It’s important that parliament understands what’s at stake in the withdrawal negotiations,” Deas told MPs at an industry gathering in the House of Commons. “Our priorities are above all to manage and control access to our waters and rebalance what we call an asymmetric and exploitative deal that dates back to 1973.”

Under the original carve-up, all European Community fishing boats were given equal access to the bloc’s waters, but a quota system resulted in a country-by-country share of fishing stock.

It means French boats have an 84% share of the cod in the English Channel while the UK, where cod is popular, has a 9% share.

Steve Baker, a minister at the Department for Exiting the EU, told the fishermen that the government was determined to take back control. “Fishing is an issue of totemic importance to the UK,” he said, promising to fight for a good deal.

But Deas said: “A repeat of 1973 has got to be our fear. Politically we are very significant and it would be hard for politicians to come back and say ‘you are a small industry and we haven’t got everything you want’ because of the sense of betrayal, but that has got to be our fear.”

The industry was one of the biggest supporters of Brexit but the sector fears that control of British waters could be turned into a political pawn tacked on to wider free trade negotiations.

Deas said the EU had indicated that if the UK wants a free trade agreement (FTA) it would have to allow access to British waters and the continuation of quotas. “But there is no example anywhere in the world of an FTA that gives free access to a natural resource,” he told MPs.

Paul Trebilcock, a fisherman in Cornwall, said towns such as Newlyn were desperate for a rebalancing. “I’ve been to places like Lowestoft and the fishing industry died because of the 1973 deal. Coming from a fishing family it makes me sad to go places like there. I don’t want Cornwall towns to become like Lowestoft,” he said.

He explained that the harbour town of Newlyn supported 200 boats fishing for everything from line-caught bass to monkfish and sole. But the 1973 deal had left them at a competitive disadvantage because French and Belgian rivals had a larger quota inside their six- to 12-mile zone.

A typical 10-metre boat from Newlyn with a “couple of hundred horsepower is shipping alongside a 25-metre French trawler which has 1,000 horsepower because they have 66% share of haddock and our share is just 10% so we can’t scale up and compete,” said Trebilcock.

Alan Campbell, the Labour MP for Tynemouth, Tyne & Wear, voiced concern that customs checks and food checks that may become mandatory after Brexit could destroy businesses like that run by Ned Clarke, a fisherman in North Shields whose only stock is prawns and langoustines, which unlike cod are not top sellers with British diners.

“It has a five-day shelf-life and with 95% of shellfish sent to Europe on lorries, we can’t have it stopped in Dover or get caught up in any tariff regime,” Campbell said.

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