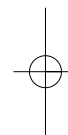
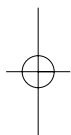
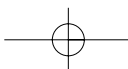


Saving our fish



Charles Cann



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

From 1991 to 1996, Charles Cann was in charge of the countryside, marine environment and fisheries directorate at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Previously he was head of MAFF's fisheries department. In both capacities, he was closely involved in the development of UK and EU policy, regularly attending the Council of Fisheries Ministers.



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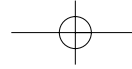
The European Union's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) has been widely pilloried within Britain, particularly in the last two or three years, and cited as another example of Brussels' ineptitude and its prejudice against British interests. The controversy over the future of the fishing industry has re-opened a number of painful old scars, and many people have refused to recognise the extent to which the conservation of the fisheries around our shores must depend on successful international co-operation – and on uncomfortable decisions to reduce, British, as well as other European, fishing.

One inescapable factor in British perceptions of the CFP is that, without this policy, UK fisherman would almost certainly be able to take a larger share of the fish around our shores than they are now permitted. This is particularly true off the south west coast of England. When the UK joined the European Economic Community in 1973, the six original members were determined to assert Community jurisdiction over fisheries within member-states' fishery limits. The UK acquiesced. Subsequently, after protracted and often bitter negotiations, the UK accepted the 1983 CFP settlement which, amongst other things, established national fishing quotas. Given the starting point of these negotiations,

the deal was a reasonable success in the UK. Nevertheless, there are some stocks, particularly off the south west coast, where the settlement gave the UK shares of the available fish which now look inadequate and where other member-states gained shares which look generous. For example, there are several stocks where the French fleet land less than the quotas available to them. And the restrictions on other member-states' access to waters within 12 miles of our coast were and still are, only temporary.

The incursions of so-called quota-hoppers have been a further grievance. These vessels fish as UK vessels, exploiting UK quotas, but are effectively foreign vessels operation for the most part out of Spanish or Dutch ports and generally carrying mainly foreign crews. Many of these vessels entered the UK fleet as a result of their foreign owners buying UK fishing licenses at good prices from willing UK sellers. The presence of such foreign buyers has kept up the price of licenses to the benefit of any UK fisherman wishing to trade his in. However, according to other parts of the fishing industry, the gains to those selling the licenses have been out weighed by the fact that UK fishing communities receive no or only negligible economic benefits from the quota-hoppers' operations. The resulting loss in earning and employment in the UK has not been small.

Quota-hoppers now account for some ten per cent of UK-registered vessels' landings of white fish, notably hake and plaice; and their vessels tonnage is estimated to represented 20-25 per cent of the UK offshore fleet (ie vessels of over 10m in length). Understandably, the exploration of UK quotas in this way has been seen as a negating the aims of the 1983 quota share-out which included safe-guarding the livelihoods of the fishing communities in the countries receiving the quotas. A series of European Court judgements prevented the UK Government from taking any effective action to make quota-hoppers operate in a way which brought some of the intended economic benefits to our fishing communities. It remains to be seen whether the Government's exchange of letters with the Commission in the



margins of the recent Amsterdam summit will really enable effective action to be taken.

It is only natural that this history and these developments have left a strong sense of grievance amongst many UK fishermen. This has been exacerbated in recent years by the growing pressure to reduce UK and other fishing in order to conserve stocks. British fishing interests can see that without the CFP or with a different CFP, the pressure on them to reduce their activity might be less, with more of the necessary cutbacks falling on foreign fishing.

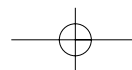
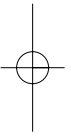
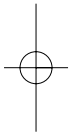
It is not surprising then, that the positive aspects of the CFP have been widely overlooked. The fact is that most of the fish stocks exploited within UK waters are also exploited in other countries' waters. Their successful conservation must depend on some form of international co-operation.

Unfortunately, the CFP has not lived up to its objective which was "to provide for rational and responsible exploitation on a sustainable basis" (EEC Regulation 3760/92). Most of the stocks in the member-states' waters are judged by international scientists to be over-exploited, in many cases seriously so. About half the stocks in EU waters have been estimated to be at a size where they face risk of collapse.

The vital need now is to try and make the CFP more successful at providing for sustainable fishing, rather than wasting time and effort seeking to re-open past agreements, however much they are regretted. Less unstable, more rationally exploited fish stocks will provide the basis both here and throughout the EU for more efficient fishing industries and for more secure fishing communities.

Ineffective control

There are two main reasons for the CFP's failure to live up to its objectives. First, for most of the period since 1983, the CFP has tried to manage fishing relying mainly on instruments which have



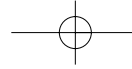
proven increasingly inadequate. Second, the Council of Fisheries Ministers has not been prepared to take the hard decisions necessary to sustain the policy.

Since 1983, the CFP has largely relied on two instruments of control: limits on the quantities of fish which EU vessels may land; and regulations about how, when and where fishing may take place.

In order to limit the quantity of fish which may be landed, the Council of Fisheries Ministers sets annually what are known as Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for each of several dozen stocks. For most stocks these TAC are divided into national quotas for each of the member-states with a right to participate in that fishery. For each stock subdivided in this way, each member-state has a percentage entitlement, usually set as part of the 1983 settlement, in some cases adjusted when Spain and Portugal joined the Community.

The TAC are set by the Council following proposals from the Commission. Typically, the Commission's proposals closely reflect advice from the EU's scientific experts and from the scientists at the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). ICES co-ordinates an elaborate programme of research to assess the state of many fish stocks within the north east Atlantic and provides annual reports recommending action needed to restore and conserve them. In the course of the annual EU negotiations about the Commission's TAC proposals, the Council normally persuades the Commission that many of its original TAC recommendations should be increased. Consequently, the Council commonly sets some TAC at levels above those which international scientific assessments together with a reasonable sense of restraint within the Council and the Commission, this tendency is not the main weakness in the TAC/quota system.

The chief problems are discards and undeclared landings. TAC and quotas explicitly apply to the quantities of fish which may be

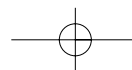
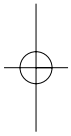


landed. Fish which are discarded at sea do not count against them. In some fisheries, including, for example, the North Sea haddock and cod fisheries, large quantities of undersize fish are being caught and then discarded, almost all of them dead or dying. The quantities discarded can be comparable to the quantities recorded as landed. Scientists try to allow for such discards in their TAC recommendations. However, particularly when there is a large intake of young fish to stock, discards can seriously undermine the effectiveness of TAC/quota controls, as well as being a massive waste.

Undeclared landings are also a serious problem. Hard evidence about the size of such landings is naturally not available but, in countries such as the UK, France and Spain, with long coastlines, hundreds of different landing places and thousands of shipping vessels, the evasion of landing controls is not too difficult. When TAC/quotas are reduced and/or market prices for fish are strong, the incentives for evasion are all too obvious. Since the scientific assessment of the state of the stocks depends to a significant extent on information about the numbers and age of fish being caught, sizeable levels of undeclared landings and discards make reliable stock assessments even more difficult to formulate.

Where the fishing vessels exploiting the stocks are much too numerous and too powerful in terms of their trawling capacity, as in most EU fisheries, significant levels of discards and undeclared landings make it virtually impossible to protect stocks by the use of TAC/quotas alone. Holding down or reducing TAC/quotas tend to drive up the levels of discards and/or undeclared landings, unless accompanying action is taken to reduce fleets or their activity and thus to limit catches of fish, as opposed to recorded landings.

The regulations on how, when and where fishing takes place – generally known as technical conservation measures – are also of limited effectiveness. Part of the problem is again the difficulty of enforcement, which usually depends on detecting the offence by

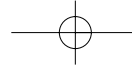


carrying out an inspection at sea and finding incorrect gear actually in use. Miscreants usually know well in advance that a fishery protection vessel is nearby and have time to make things look in order.

Moreover, the regulations themselves are often compromises, forged to cater for the many different types of fishing which go on in any one area of water. For example, minimum mesh sizes are meant to reduce catches of immature fish. However, the ideal minimum mesh for a large species like cod would make commercial fishing for smaller species like haddock and whiting impossible. As the three species tend to be caught in the same areas, a minimum mesh size is set which protects immature haddock but does little for immature cod. Such problems account for the difficulty the Commission has in getting the Council to agree to any sustainable minimum mesh size increases. While the EU's technical conservation measures can no doubt be further refined to encourage more selective gear to protect areas where there are particular concentrations of immature fish, such measure cannot be expected to make more than a small contribution to the much needed major overall reduction in EU fishing.

It has become increasingly clear that other instruments are needed in order to safeguard the stocks. Over recent years, ICES has called with increasing insistence for direct action to reduce fishing activity. Instead of relying on TAC/quotas to control landings, limits would be set on the amount of time which individual vessels or fleets could spend fishing. This should not only reduce a boat's landings, but also its catch, including discards.

The EU's response to the shift in ICES' advice has so far not been impressive, although the Commission has tried to develop policies on fishing fleet structure so as to achieve reductions in fishing effort. These policies are embodied in so-called Multi-Annual Guidance Programmes (MAGP), which lay down three to five-year plans for reducing the size of each member-state's fleet. Each country is required to draw up its own national programme for

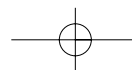
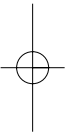
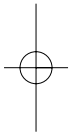


achieving the necessary cuts. Most member-states rely mainly on providing so-called decommissioning grants to encourage fishermen to scrap their vessels. These grants are partly EU-funded and partly nationally funded.

The MAGP have become progressively more detailed and ambitious in the scale of fleet reductions called for. The third MAGP (which ran to the end of 1996) envisaged cuts of up to twenty per cent in certain segments of the EU fleets, on top of the fulfilment of any outstanding reductions called for in previous programmes. These fleet reductions were, however, significantly less than the Commission had originally proposed, on the basis of its scientific evidence. The Commission ran into similar problems with the Council over their proposals for the latest programme. The Commission's original proposals were for cuts of up to forty per cent in parts of the EU fleets. In April the Council finally adopted a decision calling for cuts mainly in the range of twenty to thirty per cent over the period up to the end of 2001. Bearing in mind that improvements in fishing technology are estimated to increase vessels' ability to catch fish by about two per cent per annum, such cuts are unlikely to do much to reduce over-exploitation.

The failure of the EU to tackle over-fishing effectively is largely attributable to the sheer difficulty and thanklessness of the task. Faced with continuing improvements in fishing technology, fisheries conservation requires in EU waters a more or less parallel and sustained reduction in the size and activity of EU fishing fleets. A temporary cutback in fishing activity would achieve only a short-term improvement in stocks: as soon as fishing activity was allowed to return to its former level the stock would rapidly become depleted once again.

For the individual fishermen, such constraints are obviously a deeply unwelcome impediment to his aspirations. And, given the nature of his activity, the individual fisherman has huge opportunities to evade the constraints. Made up of thousands of different

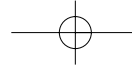


units usually operating well out to sea and with their activities not at all easily monitored, fishing is an industry singularly difficult to regulate. It is not in the interests of individual fisherman to exercise restraint so as to help conserve stocks when he can have no confidence that he will enjoy any benefit from his restraint, given the likely activities of other fishermen.

EU or national attempts to regulate fishing for the purposes of conservation are met all too often by industry opposition and evasion. And even where, as in most EU states, sea fishing is a small industry, it can be an issue of disproportionate political sensitivity, often because it is concentrated in areas with limited alternative economic opportunities. Moreover, while decision on fisheries management are normally under-pinned by scientific advice, this advice will usually contain substantial margins of error and is aimed at promoting the longer-term benefits of conservation. These are benefits which weigh less heavily with politically accountable fisheries managers, and the fishermen themselves, than the immediate hardship and controversy which tough conservation measures bring.

Some of these problems, which challenge the effective management of fisheries the world over, are exacerbated by the nature of the European Union and its institutions. As the CFP is presently organised, there is a very large geographical and psychological gulf between the fishermen who are subject to CFP regulations and CFP makers. Fishermen do not feel adequately involved in a process which they experience as the imposition of a series of ever more severe restrictions on their livelihoods. Increasingly they challenge the rules' legitimacy and feel justified in evading them. In parts of the UK this attitude has been further encouraged by a feeling that EU rules allow other member-states to exploit "UK fish" to an unwarranted degree, although this feeling is at least partly rooted in an equally unwarranted unilateral rejection of the original CFP settlement.

Furthermore, within the Council of Fisheries Ministers, there is a very little sense of sharing responsibility for a Community

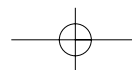
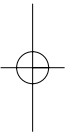
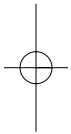


resource. Much of each minister's effort goes into maximising the short-term opportunities for his national fleet with little apparent regard for longer-term or wider conservation considerations. At the same time there is a reluctance to risk re-opening the 1983 settlement which was the result of long and acrimonious negotiations. Amongst those countries which took part in those negotiations, there is a particular concern to avoid doing so in any way which could offer the large Spanish fleet new opportunities. Spain joined the EU after the 1983 settlement had been negotiated and accepted some tight restrictions on its fishing as part of the conditions for entering the EU. The Council's approach is also affected by the fact that member-states are responsible for enforcing CFP rules. There is much suspicion about the different member-states' varying standards of enforcement. This tends to discourage even conservation-minded ministers from backing tough measures if they foresee that these measures will not be enforced on other fleets as effectively as on their own.

The way forward

The fundamental requirement is to reduce dramatically the level of EU fishing effort. Without this, the stocks within the waters of the EU member-states will continue to be over-exploited and unstable. Eventually there seems bound to be stock collapses even more serious and long lasting than the North Sea herring collapse in the 1970s. The decisions taken so far by the Council of Fisheries Ministers, including their decisions on the 1997-2001 MAGP, have gone nowhere near far enough. The cut required in EU fishing effort is probably at least twice as large as that envisaged in the latest MAGP.

But the cut cannot be achieved simply by buying out fishermen through grants to compensate for decommissioning vessels, for two reasons. First, fishing effort is broadly speaking the product of two elements: the size of fishing fleets – their capacity – and the amount of fishing which the vessels in the fleet undertake – their activity. If the member-states reduce the capacity of their fleets



but do nothing to control the level of fishing activity, there is the risk of those remaining vessels merely increasing their activity and thus defeating the object of the exercise. Second and more importantly, seeking to buy out fishermen on the scale required will be prohibitively expensive if there are no accompanying measures to reduce effort.

Despite all the CFP regulations, it seems that fishing continues to be an attractive and profitable activity for many, and this is no doubt partly due to the relative ease with which most of the CFP's rules can be evaded. Investment in expensive new vessels and equipment continues. Within the UK, the previous government's invitation to fishermen to apply for decommissioning grants attracted only modest interest, with no more than about eight per cent of the fleet being decommissioned at a public cost of £36 million over four years. The Dutch fishing industry has also shown a marked lack of interest in decommissioning aid. The UK and Dutch experience suggests that the offer of decommissioning grants is not sufficient and that it will have to be accompanied by other measures.

The most obvious and sensible move is to supplement an enhanced decommissioning drive with measures to control directly EU fishing vessels' level of activity. Such controls would have to apply to all EU vessels, although the restrictiveness of the controls could vary according to the requirements of the fisheries in which different vessels are engaged and include exemptions for the smallest and least damaging types of vessel. It would be for the ministers' political and financial judgement to decide proportion of the required cut in fishing effort should be achieved by reducing vessels' permitted levels of activity, and what proportion by buying out capacity through the decommissioning of boats.

The cost of reducing levels of activity would fall upon the fishermen, whilst taxpayers would finance reductions in capacity through assisted decommissioning. The balance would be set at an EU level, minimising the risk of fishermen in some member-

states receiving unequal treatment because their governments chose to rely heavily on activity controls in order to avoid paying for decommissioning. Alternatively, in line with the scope for national discretion in the MAGP, the balance could be determined at member-state level. A possible compromise would be for the EU to lay down limits within which member-states' regimes could vary.

In addition to the inevitable complaints from fishermen about the imposition of new restrictions on their industry, they would claim that mandatory activity limits would make fishing inefficient, if not non-viable, by requiring extremely expensive assets like fishing vessels to be permanently under-utilised. In order to tackle this problem and to harness market forces in a way which is seldom achieved by other fisheries management measures, it would be important to make vessels' permitted level of activity tradable. As long as EU fishing opportunities are divided nationally, such trading will need to take place only within national fleets. Such trading would, however, enable more enterprising fishermen to build up the permitted levels of activity of their vessels by buying rights from other fishermen. Such trading would complement the assisted decommissioning financed by the taxpayer and would contribute to the rationalisation of national fleet structures. In addition it could help to prevent publicly assisted decommissioning becoming a permanent feature of CFP: after a suitable proportion of the EU fleets had been decommissioned, it would be possible to rely on appropriately restrictive activity controls and trading between fishermen to achieve the continuing rationalisation of the fleets which the advance of technology will require.

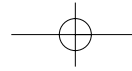
Inevitably, a reduction in fishing effort on the scale required would have serious adverse effects on many EU fishing ports and communities. There would be a permanent and substantial cut in jobs on vessels and in the industries supplying and servicing boats. There would also probably be, at least for a few years, a reduction in fish landings although, as stocks recovered, landings would also recover and might become larger than they are now.

This adjustment would also affect on-shore jobs, although fish imports may mitigate some of this effect. There would be a need for an extensive programme of government intervention to try and encourage alternative economic activities, at least in the most adversely affected areas, and to provide re-training for displaced fishermen.

A programme of further decommissioning aid plus social and economic assistance to affected fishing ports would carry considerable short-term costs, although a little could be saved if the Commission abandoned its irrational and perverse policy of subsidising the construction and modernisation of fishing vessels whilst encouraging fleet reductions. The prospect of strict limits on activity and reduced employment will not endear this strategy to communities which are often isolated with few alternative sources of income. Nor will policy-makers be eager to implement it, given the potency in national political debate of a traditional way of life under threat. But if fisheries are to be put on a secure long-term footing and to escape the present atmosphere of constant crisis management, there must be a concerted attack on over-fishing.

Current policies involve considerable EU and national expenditure, but fail to prevent a continuing deterioration in the state of EU fish stocks. They will almost certainly lead, in the not too distant future, to major stock collapses which will force the EU and member-states to intervene with massive public spending over a period of several years, much as Canada had to intervene when its east coast cod fishery collapsed in the early 1990s.

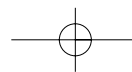
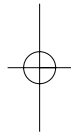
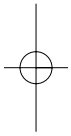
Moreover, in considering the comparative costs and benefits of these operations, it is essential to take into account potential damage to other parts of the marine eco-system caused by major stock collapses. The cost of intervening to achieve better conservation of stocks should certainly not be compared only with the value of the commercial landings, but should take into account the value of protecting the wider marine environment.



In the longer-term, the European Union should consider whether fishermen should be charged for the right to fish within EU waters. The cost of fisheries protection, enforcement, administration and research, plus that of decommissioning grants is over £50 million a year in the UK alone. While there is a case for treating some of this cost as incurred for wider environmental reasons, it is also undeniable that much of it arises only because fishermen would otherwise cause serious and possibly irretrievable damage to the marine environment. There is a "polluter pays" argument for charging at least some of these costs to the fishermen. If the EU's fishing industries are effectively restructured and stocks recover, the remaining operators may well find that, within a few years, fishing becomes an even more profitable activity.

Charging would not only oblige the fishing industry to bear some of the costs which are presently met by the taxpayer, but, if pitched at a level appropriate to these costs, would also encourage rationalisation of the fleet by persuading the more marginal operators to join a decommissioning scheme. It seems unlikely that individual member-states would be prepared to impose such charges on their fishermen unless other member-states did likewise. Any unilateral action of this sort, even if it did not run into obstacles under EU law, would impose formidable domestic political problems. A co-ordinated approach or even a central EU charging scheme would seem the best way forward.

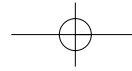
Another significant weakness is the current CFP is the lack of effective enforcement. Enforcing regulations is, for reasons indicated, inherently difficult, given the physical nature of fishing and the fishing industry. Moreover, member-states are responsible for policing the rules and there is considerable distrust between member-states about each other's level of enforcement. Even the creation of a single EU enforcement agency would not dispel this altogether. There would still be doubts that inspectors in different standards for local or other reasons; and there would certainly be differences in local practices and procedures which would make the work of a centralised EU agency extremely diffi-



cult. But it would over time at least help to reduce many of the current suspicions. However, given the reluctance in some member-states to see the powers of the EU widened in the area of law enforcement, a single agency is probably not a practical proposition for the foreseeable future.

At the very least there is clearly a pressing need for the Commission to be, and to be seen to be, much more effective in monitoring member-states' enforcement. It is supposed to submit annual reports on its monitoring efforts and these need to be given a high profile with real clarity and candour. Plans for using satellite surveillance to monitor the movement of fishing vessels also need to be pressed ahead with vigour: they could be particularly useful in keeping track of vessels' compliance with activity controls. Full and direct Commission access to the results of this satellite surveillance will also be essential in order to enable it to monitor member-states' compliance with the rules. The Commission's reported undertakings at the recent Amsterdam summit to try and improve enforcement are welcome, but there have been similar undertakings in the past without much in the way of visible results. A crucial requirement is for the Commission to have extra resources so that it can carry out properly its responsibilities for supervising national enforcement. This is essential so that it can help to build up, between member-states and between their fishing communities, the trust which will be vital for the successful rationalisation of EU fleets.

There are, of course, other aspects of the CFP which could be improved, for example. Tighter controls on fishing for species used for industrial purposes. New developments, like the tentative moves to bring together Commission officials, scientists, national administrators and fishermen to discuss particular fisheries, are to be welcomed and encouraged. There is a real need to try and improve the extent to which fishermen feel genuinely involved in the development and operation of the CFP. But developments in these areas must not be allowed to obscure the central and over-riding need to tackle the problem of excessive EU



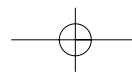
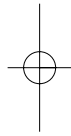
fishing effort and to institute a properly funded and effectively enforced programme to cut that effort dramatically.

The planned major review of the 1983 CFP settlement should be carried forward or modified after 2002 may also distract fisheries ministers from the real issue. If mishandled, this review could prove extremely damaging. The development of a proper plan to cut EU fishing effort would be virtually impossible if the EU gets bogged down in a renewed struggle about whether and how the fishing opportunities within EU waters should be allocated. Rather than getting into a new row about the share-out of the EU's shrinking fish stocks, the EU must concentrate on action to stop and reverse the shrinking. Indeed it would be helpful if the EU could quickly agree that certain sensitive aspects of the 1983 settlement are not going to be re-opened, notably member-states' percentage shares of the stocks which have been sub-divided into national quotas, and the restrictions on access to waters within six and twelve miles of coastal states' shores.

For member-states such as Spain, which may have hopes of using the 2002 review to improve its fishing opportunities, such decisions could be hard to swallow. However, at the Amsterdam summit, the Commission seems to have gone some way towards supporting such decisions. If the EU is going to get down to the crucial and controversial task of dramatically reducing EU fishing effort, it would help to disarm at least some fishing industry fears and suspicions, notably in the UK, where even the EU's so far modest attempts to reduce the size of EU fleets have been construed as paving the way for an assault on the 1983 settlement, with the aim of challenging the 1983 quota shares. In many member-states the task of persuading fishing interests if the need for radical restructuring will be made even harder is there is any suspicion that the changes are in some way also a cover for alterations in the balance of the package which was agreed in 1983.

Prospects for progress

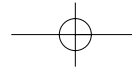
Unfortunately, at present there is little sign that the Council of



Fisheries Ministers is prepared to contemplate the sort of radical measures needed. Certainly, there is no realistic prospect of the Council re-opening the MAGP decisions, which they only reached in April this year. A few weeks earlier, however, fisheries and environment ministers from seven EU member-states and from Norway had met in Bergen to follow up the 1995 North Sea Conference and had agreed to an ambitious if generalised statement about the need to improve the management of North Sea fish stocks, including those fished for industrial purposes, to reduce the rate at which fish are being killed and to rebuild spawning stocks.

After this meeting, the Conservative government announced that, during the UK presidency of the EU in the first half of 1998, they would ask the relevant working groups to prepare reports for the European Council on progress in meeting the Bergen conclusions. In addition, the MAGP decision of April 1999 on the state of the stocks and the effects of the effort reduction programmes, and for the Council to decide whether to adjust the MAGP targets. Both commitments provide at least some opening for a renewed debate. Norway, which chaired the Bergen meeting and has generally taken a more conservationist approach than the EU to the North Sea stocks, will also be looking to the EU to live up to the Bergen conclusions. A joint initiative by the UK's fisheries and environment ministers to open up the issue with its European partners would certainly be consistent with the importance which the Labour government claims to attach to international environmental issues and to playing a constructive role within the EU.

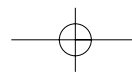
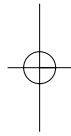
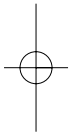
Any UK initiative of this sort will need thorough domestic preparation. Many UK environmental interests are already fully aware of the threat which EU, including UK, fishing poses to the marine environment. But the fishing industry and the general public tend to be more concerned with a recent perception that the CFO is unfair to the UK and that we should "reclaim our fish". The recent developments at and after the Amsterdam summit in respect of quota-hoppers may not have done much to improve



matters. The Government appear to have persuaded the Commission to take a more helpful view than in the past about the steps which member-states can take to try and secure for their fishing communities some economic benefit from their quotas. If, as a result, it is possible for the UK to require any UK-registered vessel either to land half its catch in the UK, or to have a proportion of UK residents as its crew, or to operate out of UK ports more often, that should be of some benefit to UK fishing communities. However, such requirements fall well short of what many in the UK fishing industry wanted and hoped for, however unrealistically; and, given the series of European Court judgements which have so far prevented effective action against quota-hoppers, there has to be some doubt whether, despite the understanding with the Commission, the imposition of these conditions will be safe from successful legal challenge.

Nevertheless, there must be an attempt to achieve a more realistic and less emotional debate about fisheries within the UK. Both "Euro-enthusiasm" and "Euro-scepticism" are out of place. It is simply "Euro-realism" to recognise that agreements have been reached about fisheries which were part of the wider package of EU business and which cannot and will not be undone unilaterally. Many may regret what those agreements have produced and can justifiably argue that the interests of the UK fishing industry have, to some extent, been sacrificed for other UK interests. However, the UK fishing industry still has a major stake in the fisheries in EU member-states' waters. The industry's survival depends on the successful conservation of those fisheries. Major stock collapses would bring greater hardship to the UK fishing communities dependent on the stocks as well as posing a danger to the wider marine environment. Instead of repining hopelessly against past agreements, the urgent need is for the UK to work with the Commission and the other member-states to secure the vigorous action necessary to avert such collapses.

The European Union only half deserves the opprobrium which the CFP has brought upon it. The British fishing fleet would probably





be better off without the CFP or with a different CFP. However, calls for UK withdrawal from the CFP, or for renegotiation which would substantially improve the UK fleet's share of the available fishing opportunities, are not realistic given the UK's wider interests in the EU and the positions of other member-states.

The long-term interests of the UK fishing industry depend on the conservation of the fish stock in EU states' waters; and that in turn depends on international co-operation. The CFP is a means for such co-operation, but in its present form is failing to achieve effective conservation. This is not due to some peculiar incompetence or unfairness on the part of the EU. It is extremely difficult to manage sea fisheries successfully; and politically accountable fisheries managers regularly face tremendous problems in developing and implementing the uncomfortable and unpopular measures which effective conservation requires.

There is, however, an increasingly pressing need for the EU to take decisive and radical action to reduce the EU fishing effort. The measures recently agreed by the Council of Fisheries Ministers do not go far enough. There are opportunities for the UK, particularly during our forthcoming Presidency, to engineer a renewed debate in both the Fisheries and Environment Councils. It will be a sad failure and reflection on the EU if, in the face of all the warning and advice about the state of the fish stocks within the EU member-states' water, they do not face up to the much-needed tighter controls on fishing activity, improved enforcement and the essential cuts in fleet size.

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