

Fish Heads

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If you've never heard the 1978 Barnes and Barnes song, 'Fish Heads', I'd suggest you give it a go by watching the surrealistic video available on [YouTube](#). Don't try to make sense of the lyrics. All you need to know is that by and large, fish heads are pretty useless and, it's commonly believed, are the first part of the whole fish to rot.

Fish are much in the news due to the importance being attached to the them concerned with negotiation of a free trade deal after the end of the transition period on 31st December this year. The totemic status of fish neatly summarises a process that's been years in the making by those who've always mistrusted Europe.

Since joining the EEC (European Economic Community) in January 1973, there's long been a belief that the UK was effectively stitched on the matter of fishing. Allowing access to British territorial waters by fishing vessels from other member countries was always unpopular. This was due to what's known as the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP); an integral part of joining the EEC.

The CFP was agreed by then Prime Minister Edward Heath who believed that, despite protestations from those engaged in the industry, it would severely undermine British fishing. The CFP created lingering resentment amongst those who saw livelihoods eroded and a future in which opportunity for new entrants was decreasing.

As representatives pointed out with regularity, the notion of reciprocity was flawed due to the fact that the British Isles are surrounded by water whereas other members were not, some being entirely landlocked. Website [British Sea Fishing](#) makes precisely this point in 'Brexit and Britain's Fisheries': "In 2015, EU vessels caught 683,000 tonnes (raising £484 in million revenue) in UK waters, but UK vessels caught only 111,000 tonnes (£114 million revenue) in EU Member States' waters".

Moreover, this website presents a number of salient and, it has to be said, persuasive statistics to reinforce its arguments that fishing should paramount to the ongoing negotiations of any free trade agreement:

- 40% of Denmark's "entire fishing take" is achieved in Britain's territorial waters
- In the Celtic Sea, France achieves "nearly three times the British allocation of Dover sole, roughly four times more cod and five times more haddock"
- Cod, regarded as a quintessentially British fish, creates particular ire because France possesses 84% of the quota for it in the English Channel compared to Britain which has only 9%
- "A single Dutch trawler the Cornelis Vrolijk, had the right to catch 23% of England's entire fishing quota. In comparison the entire small inshore fishing fleet for the whole England is given 4% of the quota"
- "European fishermen take 173 times more herring, 45 times more whiting, 16 times more mackerel and 14 times more haddock and cod out of UK waters than British fishermen do."

There's no argument that the British fishing industry feels hard done by. The challenge for those attempting to negotiate a free trade deal is how in being sympathetic to British fishing? British fishing, in totality, currently employs 24,000 people in catching and processing (0.1% of the workforce) and contributes £1.4bn to the UK economy (0.12%). Achieving an overall free trade deal protecting jobs in other more significant and crucial industries is the likely to require compromise.

[Brexiters argue things can't get much worse for British fishing](#). Those who claim there's nothing to fear from 'no-deal', vociferously contend that revival of this sector through absolute control over waters will increase employment and consumption of British fish.

Emotions aside, and there's no doubting the attachment people have to those engaged in a sector that is millennia old, reality is far more complex and nuanced than headlines indicate. Last December, the BBC's business/economy editor for Scotland, Douglas Fraser, in an online article, ['Reality bites for the fishing industry'](#), presents an objective view of what 'no-deal' would mean for the British fishing industry.

Fraser is cognisant of the fact that fishing is far more significant in Scotland than England. As the [Marine Management Organisation](#) (MMO), which publishes annual statistics on the UK fishing industry for 2018, point out, “Scottish vessels accounted for 64% of the quantity of landings by the UK fleet while English vessels accounted for 27%”.

Fraser usefully identifies the fact that, though quotas are critical to the success of negotiations, and politics plays its part, it’s frequently forgotten that the industry is beset by existential matters of “over-fishing” of vulnerable fish. Accordingly, as he acknowledged last year, “As reality bites, this is going to be one of the most difficult issues to be faced in the year ahead.”

There is no argument on that view.

What we’re discovering, though, it seems, not government ministers who still appear besotted by the myopic notion that ‘no-deal’ is virtuous, facile and simplistic arguments based on emotion and nationalistic fervour are all very well in winning contentious referendum campaigns and, of course, general elections, but not in highly elaborate and multi-issue trade negotiations.

Which brings me back to fish heads.

It’s important to be aware that the belief that fish rot from the head is contested. Nevertheless, the Turkish proverb that, “the fish stinks first at the head”, taken to mean that if the servant is disorderly, it is because the master is so, is apposite. When an organisation goes bad, it’s usually the consequence of inadequate and/or poor leadership.

Some of those instrumental in the campaign to leave the EU were featured in a BBC One *Panorama* programme, ‘Banking Secrets of the Rich and Powerful’ shown on Monday evening. Following analysis of the ‘Panama Papers’, leaked private documents concerning personal and business dealing of wealthy individuals, certain individuals have particular relevance to the current retinue of politicians in government.

One, Christopher Charles Sherriff Harborne, listed as an “intermediary” in five companies, and who possesses a double identity, donated over £10m to the Brexit Party led by Nigel Farage.

Curiously for a political organisation that has no MPs nor, it was assumed after the election won so decisively last December based on the promise to “Get Brexit Done”, the Brexit Party received £1.95 million in donations in first quarter of this year.

Additionally, *Panorama* alleged that Lubov Chernukhin, who has donated £1.7m to the Conservatives, allowing her access to the last three prime ministers, is married to, and funded by, a Russian oligarch closely associated to Russian president Vladimir Putin.

There are continuing allegations as to the nature of the connection between [Boris Johnson and wealthy Russians](#). Most especially Johnson has regularly met with and, significantly, ennobled Evgeny Lebedev, son of former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev.

In an [OpenDemocracy online article](#), ‘Revealed: Boris Johnson under fire over ‘personal’ meeting with Russian oligarch during COVID-19 pandemic’, investigative journalist Peter Geoghegan outlines the influence the Lebedev family have right to the highest level of power in the UK. Geoghegan refers to Johnson’s chief political advisor, Dominic Cummings, who, before becoming part of the political system, most notably the campaign to leave the EU, after leaving Oxford, worked in Russia between 1994 and 1997 and was involved in an unsuccessful airline venture.

What seems clear is that the leadership of a party that, in the past, proudly proclaims its belief in the sanctity of law and order is one in which connections can be made to the Russian president Vladimir Putin, a man whose reputation is besmirched by allegations of bribery, corruption and murder as well as attempted murder on British streets of political enemies.

This is not to forget that Boris Johnson’s government are entirely comfortable about breaking international law by unilaterally changing part of the Withdrawal Agreement that was the “oven-ready” deal he campaigned for before last December’s General election and passed

by MPs with indecent haste and without the scrutiny claimed necessary that caused Johnson to, illegally, prorogue Parliament.

If you've not seen excerpts of the diaries of tell-all wife of former minister, Hugo Swire, Sasha, I'd advise you to do so. Swire sheds light on the machinations of the Cameron government noting their entitled lives in which Brexit plays a part.

Ms Swire's revelations don't contain anything that would be likely to end the career of a politician. What they do, however, is tell us that a good many of those she rubbed shoulders with in the upper echelons of the Conservative Party, were/are egotistical and hugely self-obsessed. Those Swire describes as not motivated by money and entitlement, and having become politicians to be selfless and serve the greater good, citizens, are portrayed as peculiar; not part of the 'in' crowd.

Interestingly Swire makes reference to Cummings, Michael Gove and, of course, Johnson who was effectively banished under Cameron but, for reasons that were not always clear, rehabilitated under Theresa May and who was disliked because of her distaste for the 'Chumocracy'. Cummings is seen as dangerous. Gove less so but still possessing overweening ambition. Johnson is given more sympathetic treatment and appears troubled by the responsibilities of a position he cherished so assiduously for so long.

When inevitable diaries are eventually written by an insider within the Johnson government, it can be imagined the sort of revelations to emerge. It has to be said, so much is already within the public realm as to potentially anything will seem passé.

Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed that whoever writes such an account, frequently, like Sasha Swire, with an 'axe to grind', will describe a dysfunctional coterie led by an individual displaying clear narcissistic tendencies.

If there is a deficit of exemplary leadership at the centre of power, it is hardly surprising this is affecting the body politic. Stresses are apparent within the Conservative Party, especially MPs who feel increasingly marginalised. There is confusion among the public who

perceive messages from the PM to be inconsistent in dealing with Covid-19.

Allegations of donations of money from Russia should make many, particularly those who put their faith in politicians to improve their future prospects – those engaged in fishing being a case in point – wonder in whose interest those claiming to care about them operate?

Perhaps, like many of us, they may start to believe the party currently in government, like a fish, really does stink from the head!

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807), contributor to *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644), *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824), *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Paul Hindley and Paul Hishman (published by Social Liberal Forum), *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by John Mair (forthcoming to be published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power*, jointly edited with Beverley Nielsen (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099).