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Our fishermen should land Brexit benefits

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"We should have access to greater waters after Brexit, then, fishing for more fish, but more sustainably," said Tory MP Neil Parish last Wednesday "This is one of the parts of Brexit that could actually be positive."

Parish was talking to the Commons' environment, food and rural affairs select committee - of which he is the chairman. A former member of the European parliament, he backed Remain ahead of the referendum.

Taking evidence from a panel of expert witnesses, though, including fishing and legal experts, as well as environmentalists, Parish was open and upbeat - as was the tone of much of Wednesday's three-hour hearing. The session attracted almost no media coverage, of course. But that doesn't mean it wasn't important.

The UK fishing industry is quite small. Just 6,000 vessels-strong, our commercial fishing fleet landed 708,000 tons of fish in 2015, worth around £775m. The industry directly employs around 30,000, in both fishing and processing - far less than in the past. The decline of fishing communities has generated much anti-EU sentiment in parts of the UK - and no wonder. Hours before we legally joined the European Economic Community in 1973, the six existing members passed a sneaky regulation granting themselves access to British fishing waters. Prime minister Edward Heath accepted it, so determined was he to be in the club. The EU's Common Fisheries Policy is a bloated, bureaucratic mess that incenses both the UK fishing industry and environmentalists concerned about over-fishing. It is also grossly unfair. Around 60pc of the fish caught in UK waters are claimed by non-British boats. Such vessels have caught eight times more fish in British waters over the last five years than UK boats have from other parts of the EU.

John Ashworth, a highly respected fisherman-turned-campaigner, observes that the once premier fishing port of Peterhead, near Aberdeen, now has "hardly any Scottish boats".

Peterhead is deepening its ports, but "only to accommodate Spanish and French vessels using it as a transit point". Over half the fish caught by non-EU boats in British waters are netted off Scotland.

After Brexit, the UK can regain control of territorial waters - provided we don't give this away during the Article 50 talks. Many EU nations - not least Spain, with one of the world's largest fishing fleets - want to retain access. Recent Spanish overtures towards the sovereignty of Gibraltar are a possible future bargaining chip to keep exploiting UK waters. We shall see. The UK exports around four fifths of the seafood we catch, with two thirds going to the rest of the EU - so we'll need to make some concessions on access to avoid high tariffs.

A post-Brexit Britain, though, will be able to create a British fisheries policy that grants UK boats far more fishing rights, while helping to sustain fish stocks - as Parish's committee discussed last week. While some UK fishermen want a simple "days at sea" system, Charles Clover of the Blue Marine Foundation thinks such methods are "too blunt". He favours "science-based harvest control strategies, as used on the West Coast of America, to stop the killing or discarding of over-fished species".

Prof Daniel Pauly, a marine biologist at the University of British Columbia, says Brexit gives the UK a "once-in-a-hundred-years opportunity" to replenish our seas. He wants Britain to pass a law similar to the

Magnuson-Stevens Act in the US, enshrining in statute the rebuilding of stocks within a fixed 10-year period. Britain should designate between 20pc and 30pc of its own waters as marine reserves, he says, with no fishing of any kind.

Brexit, then, can reinvigorate the UK fishing industry, while promoting sustainable fishing. One of the surest ways to help coastal villages and towns to recover is to adopt an approach that benefits small businesses, not least fishing. Beyond that, fishing ports can be revitalised, as small family-run fleets are once again able to thrive.

This, in turn, will boost local spending and encourage people to stay and raise families, thus rebuilding what were once economically and culturally vibrant local communities. In time, tourists will be attracted to such towns. Some of the UK's most deprived rural areas are adjacent to the coast, and they should benefit too.

Commercial fishing - a small, but hugely symbolic industry - is one area where Brexit can bring immediate and tangible benefits. There are many, many others. Being outside the EU gives the UK a much freer hand when it comes to regional and industrial policy, for instance. There will be more autonomy on tax, allowing enterprise zones and free ports. More broadly, small and medium-sized firms - which employ two thirds of all workers - can benefit hugely from being free of the hassle and expense of the EU's stringent regulation. The much-vaunted single market anyway barely exists in services - which form the backbone of the UK economy.

Being outside the customs union, meanwhile, means far lower tariffs on countless imported goods - particularly food, clothing and footwear, providing a major boost to low-income households. Beyond the EU, and its protectionist instincts, Britain can also cut free-trade agreements with the fast-growing markets of the East, home to the vast majority of future global growth.

The Prime Minister presents Brexit as a burden she must carry, a cross that she must bear. This is wrong. Yes, leaving the EU presents complexities that must be resolved, while facing down endless negativity and Brussels' intransigence. But Brexit should instead be presented, with energy, determination and leadership, as what it is - a major and unique opportunity.

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