

Panel Discussion centred on “Achieving Sustainable Fisheries”: Chaired by Huw Irranca-Davies MP, UK Minister for Marine and Natural Environment

Introductory Remarks

Thank you for inviting me; I am very happy to be here. I am very encouraged by what I have heard today. There has been a genuine engagement with innovative thinking on the way forward. Just to pick up on what Barrie Deas was saying about radical change, we must remember that today’s radicals and visionaries are tomorrow’s mainstream thinkers.

It is quite amazing to be here with such a wide range of interests from across the EU and beyond. This is what was envisaged when the 2002 reform proposed Regional Advisory Councils to increase stakeholder participation in fisheries and specifically to advise the European Commission and Member States. Therefore I am genuinely delighted to support this event together with Richard Lochhead. As the UK fisheries minister I am here to listen to all of your views, to receive all your advice. It is important that we work together to build on some of the successes of the last reform and improve the effectiveness of the CFP for the future. This event is part of that opportunity.

We are rapidly approaching a time when we will all need to submit a response to the Commission’s Green Paper. Our responses will jointly contribute to the options that the Commission will be assessing as a basis for future proposals. Let us not limit ourselves to problems and constraints that we experience now but try to learn from them so that we can think more clearly about what is needed to build a sustainable and profitable fishing industry and a productive and healthy marine environment – not only for our generation but for future generations to enjoy and profit from.

We may say to ourselves that there will be another opportunity to reform in ten years time and that we should make steady incremental change. But we should ask ourselves – can we really afford to wait another ten years, until 2022, for further reform or should we seize the opportunity now?

I for one am willing to consider all the options if that means finding a way to bring about improvements to EU fisheries: to the state of the stocks and the environment on which they depend; to the profitability of the industry; to better integrate fisheries management with other marine uses. By achieving these improvements, the wider benefits to our coastal communities and the general public will be delivered. That is what I mean by achieving sustainable fisheries.

But I want to discuss with you the means by which we can achieve sustainable fisheries.

The case for change is undeniable. The European Commission are critical of the Common Fisheries Policy in their Green Paper. I do not think we need a stronger signal than that to tell us that we must consider fundamental changes to the current policy. The Green Paper outlines the structural failings and I would say that, in short, the basic terms of the CFP are too rigid, too short term and over-centralised.

The rigidity of the policy manifests itself through a backwards looking quota system that does not allow fishermen to match their fishing opportunities to catches on the ground. This issue must be tackled not just for the benefit of today’s fishermen but also for the next generation

of fishermen. It is a waste of a biological and economic resource, benefitting no one and contributing to longer term problems and public mistrust. So I ask you if a more flexible approach to managing fishing opportunities is a vital element of reform. And we must consider whether a less rigid system can be achieved with relative stability or without it. Many of you here know the daily problems encountered on your fishing grounds. Your views are therefore critical.

The Common Fisheries Policy creates a short term decision making framework. Most businesses look to develop plans that set the strategic direction for their organisation for at least three years. However, EU fisheries do not adhere to this policy and fishermen cannot be certain about the strategic direction set for the following year let alone three years. This framework is created by the decision to meet annually and set fishing opportunities, effort restrictions and technical measures. The industry has only a matter of weeks to adapt, creating short-termism which creates too many uncertainties.

And since fishermen operate in a dynamic natural system, the impacts of climate change and global economic situation are beyond our control so let us not create more uncertainty needlessly.

The over-centralised approach of the policy can create ill-fitting regulation that is far too prescriptive. I was struck by a presentation by the European Commission that included details of a regulation for the Baltic that laid out the statutory process to be followed by fishermen to repair a square mesh panel. I am pretty sure that the Council of Ministers is the wrong place to debate such detail. I'll certainly not commission a formal request for RAC advice on that point!

Together we must reverse those shortcomings. A reformed Common Fisheries Policy should facilitate effective planning beyond the annual cycle: in fact we should ask ourselves 'do we need an annual cycle?' A reformed policy should have the flexibility to adapt to local circumstances and to the realities faced on the fishing grounds.

This conference focuses on decision making. There has been much discussion on the regionalisation of the Common Fisheries Policy over the year. The Green Paper itself is clear that very little can be achieved if the catching sector is not motivated and does not support change. On the one hand there are likely to be more effective decisions taken if they are taken closer to the fisheries. On the other hand it is important that those decisions contribute to our overarching goals. It is important that we develop a system where fishermen, together with scientists and other experts have a genuine stake in the development of the rules of their fishery. And that Ministers, the European Commission and Parliament have had their say on whether those rules fulfil the criteria to deliver.

So, I can envisage a Common Fisheries Policy where I and my Ministerial colleagues from across Europe agree with the European Parliament on Commission proposals for the strategic objectives that govern the policy. These could include objectives on stock levels, exploitation rates, reducing discards and the incidental by-catch of other marine species, and meeting good environmental status. At the regional level fisheries plans are brought together, taking account of local variations. Those plans would explain how those objectives should be reached. In other words they operationalise the objectives of the policy.

And we should draw and build on experience from the last reform to develop a regionalised model. The RACs have been a success and have been very busy. I am sure there are some of you here today that could tell us how many pieces of advice have been submitted. I'd be interested to know.

But there is a finite resource across EU fisheries where many experts and fishermen wear different hats at different times. We must be conscious of the need to make available the necessary support to a regionalised framework, especially during the transition after 2012. An important part of making a regionalised management system successful is to make the system more open and transparent. I believe that is vital to its success. When plans are presented, for example from a regional sea area to the Commission, there must be a structured and open process for finalising these plans. There cannot be a system where refusal to accept a plan is not supported by a thorough analysis of the reasons and an indication of the areas of improvement so that the development of the plans can progress.

Regionalisation then could be an effective policy in moving forward reform to deliver better and more long-term management plans that take account of stock interactions and socio-economics, and drive out of the system the uncertainties brought about by ever changing rules.

But regionalisation alone cannot drive out the rigidity of the Common Fisheries Policy. Fishermen need greater flexibility to encourage their own enterprise, initiative and active engagement in the future of their industry. Long term management plans will help deliver this, along with increased flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Some of the existing rigidities in the system are that fishermen may never have quota for some stocks found on the fishing grounds, as they or their predecessors did not build up a track record 30 years ago. That leads to an inability for fishermen to benefit financially from stocks for which they have no quota, whether simply landing a valuable catch or being able to target better stocks to adapt to market demands. It also leads to the discarding of vast quantities of fish. Most fish will be dead, and by throwing it back into the sea, we are benefitting neither the marine environment nor the fishing industry itself. We must find a way around the root cause of the problem.

The problems apply whether there is a quota system or an effort system. Stocks in a mixed fishery are invariably at different levels that change over time and will never match the fishing opportunities available to fishermen throughout the year. That implies that fishing opportunities need to be able to change hands quickly and simply. We have a system that allows us to happen to a small extent. The process of swaps and leasing has developed despite the policy rather than because of it, driven by the necessities of managing a fishing business.

People ask, and the Green Paper asks, whether relative stability would have to be dismantled. Perhaps that is the wrong question. Should we not look first for the most effective way in which to exploit our resources? Having identified the best ways in which to allow fishermen to operate efficiently and reduce catches of unwanted by-catch, we can then consider how best to shape and apply relative stability. That is partly what I meant earlier by breaking the link between the constraints of today's system and promote innovative thinking about the future of fisheries management in the EU.

I agree with those who say that not all the problems of today require long discussions on future change. I am committed to tackling the tragedy of discarding. I know that everyone here is committed also. That is why we are working together in the UK and with our EU partners to do something now. In the UK, Richard Lochhead and I, are working together to identify new ways of tackling the dilemma of discards. We are working with Denmark and Germany to test a new initiative that if successful would contribute to the development of options for reform but also importantly may provide a way to do something about the problem of discarding sooner than 2012. I congratulate the Danes on developing the idea and I am pleased to be able to associate the UK with that project.

We must not just focus our attention on reducing discards of commercial species. We also have to strive to reduce the incidental catch of marine species, such as seabirds and cetaceans. That is why the UK is playing a leading role in finding ways to reduce by-catch and will continue to push for firm commitments on this in the EU and internationally.

I will end by saying that we are taking action in other ways. The UK Marine Bill will pass onto the statute books later this month. The Marine Bill will change the way we manage the marine environment in the UK. It is not a simple reorganisation of existing activities but provides for a more integrated approach to the management of the marine environment and, interestingly considering the nature of this conference, devolves powers to deliver that change and requires that all stakeholders should play a part in the development of marine plans. It demonstrates that the UK is serious about change – the right change, the changes you are talking about here today – and that we can see that there can no longer be policies that operate in isolation from others. Fisheries management should be an important and integral part and take a real leadership role in the integrated management of the marine environment. That can only have a positive impact on the fishing industry and the public perception of it.

I am keen that the UK actively supports ideas and initiatives intended to improve fisheries management. And so I look forward to discussing your views on the best way to improve the management of our fisheries.