

THE OVERFISHING PROBLEM.

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As most of those present at this Congress will recall, an International Conference met in London at the invitation of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the 25th March, 1946 and succeeding days in order to examine the question of overfishing in the North Sea and other areas adjacent to the British Isles with a view to drawing up some form of regulatory agreement among the nations concerned.

It is common knowledge that the outcome of that conference was the 1946 Convention which was signed by all the accredited representatives of the nations attending the conference.

The measures of regulation set out in the Convention were in the nature of a compromise owing to the widely different views of the delegates as to the most effective and practical means of securing adequate protection for the fish stocks.

The main provisions of the Convention were confined to increasing the mesh sizes from 70 mm as provided in the 1937 Convention to 80 mm and increases in the sizes of immature fish which could be landed and sold on the markets. I am, for the purpose of this discussion, ignoring the provisions in respect of fishing in areas adjacent to Iceland.

There was one other important provision in the 1946 Convention, and that was the decision to set up a Permanent Commission consisting of Members appointed by the Contracting Governments and whose duties included primarily the obligation to meet regularly and to consider whether the provisions of the Convention should be extended or altered.

I was present during the whole of the time that the conference was in session and listened with great interest to the various and often conflicting opinions of the different delegations.

However, once agreement had been reached on the final terms of the Convention, it seemed to me that the ratifica-

tion of the Convention by the Governments represented at the conference was merely a matter of form and would follow automatically.

It has been a matter of considerable surprise and regret to me that even now, five years after the Convention had been drawn up, certain Governments have still to honour the signatories of their representatives.

To those of us engaged on the commercial side of fishing, the decline in yield of the average catch per vessel per annum since 1946, is a matter of considerable concern and of the utmost gravity.

I do not intend to weary you with statistics, as I imagine many of those present at this Congress will know from practical experience how serious is the present financial position of all engaged in fishing the North Sea grounds. One does not need to study charts and tables in order to arrive at the truth of the situation; one's bank balance is sufficient evidence of the decline in our fortunes.

It might reasonably be asked what steps, if any, have been taken to rectify the failure of Governments to ratify the Convention by those whose interests are so vitally affected.

To any such query, I would reply that great efforts have been made by European commercial fishing interests during the past two and half years to secure the implementation of the provisions of the 1946 Convention and, in addition, considerable time and thought has been given to the study of proposals for further measures of protection.

It is not my intention to enlarge upon the means by which such consideration of our common problem has been achieved, for Mr Kiewiet de Jonge has already addressed the Congress on this aspect of our efforts. My main purpose is to call your attention to the seriousness of the position of the North Sea grounds, the difficulties of obtaining agreement on the protective measures to be instituted and to place before you a possible solution of the problem.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

I have already stated that I do not intend to weary you with a mass of statistics as these convey little or no real indication of the economics of the position.

The fact is that, to the commercial mind, it is very much a question of the amount of fish which is actually caught each trip and the prices at which it can be sold, balanced against the costs involved of catching fish.

For some time before the war broke out in 1939, we were faced with this problem of overfishing in the North Sea, and the 1937 Convention was the outcome of the consideration which was given to it at that time.

If we were to examine the statistics which guided those who sat on this problem in 1937 and were to compare them with the present day figures, we should find that the average catch per 100 hours fishing in 1950 is rapidly approaching the level of 1937.

At that time and right up to the outbreak of war, all the fishing fleets of whatever nationality fishing the North Sea grounds were operating under considerable financial difficulties.

In many countries there had been a constant decline from about 1932 in the number of vessels actively engaged in fishing operations and, as a consequence, a serious growth of unemployment amongst fishermen.

So serious had the position become in Great Britain, that in 1939, a scheme was under consideration by the British Trawlers' Federation for the withdrawal of 200 North Sea trawlers from fishing in order to secure the economic working of the remainder.

I have drawn attention to the rapid decline since 1946 in the average catch of trawlers engaged in fishing the North Sea grounds and have suggested that the position so far as actual catch is concerned, will soon reach the low level of 1937. I must point out that if and when such a condition is reached, the effect will be far more serious than it was just prior to the outbreak of war.

Today owners of fishing vessels are faced with much higher costs of gear, stores and wages than in 1939, so it is necessary that if these increased costs of production are to be met either much higher prices proportionately must be obtained today or heavier catches will have to be obtained.

It follows that since all other foods are in keen competition with fish, the obvious policy to follow must be that

of protecting the stocks of fish, so that the average catch per vessel will be increased to the economic level.

The actual weight of fish caught is, unfortunately, not the whole of the story, as in overfishing, reduction in the quantity caught per annum is always accompanied by a diminution in the average size marketed. This is twofold tragedy in that as a general rule small fish have less commercial value than the larger sizes and, worse still, the stocks of fish are exhausted to a point where the propagation of the species is seriously affected.

It was to help remedy this aspect of the overfishing problem that the 1946 Convention included the provision for an increase in mesh sizes to 80 mm.

It will be seen from this examination of the problem that it is imperative as a first step the provisions of the 1946 Convention must be applied forthwith, as unless this is done, the stocks will be reduced to a point where recovery will only be possible by a severe pruning of fishing operations.

Our private international contacts have made it abundantly clear that all the West European nations are anxious that the 1946 Convention should be implemented, and already representations have been made to the Governments concerned that concerted action in this direction should be taken at once. Yet no progress is apparent, and one gets a little discouraged that the delay continues in spite of the desires of such a large and important section of European fishery interests.

I am bound to state that, to my mind, the lapse of time which has occurred in this matter is a tragedy of serious dimensions. Had speedy ratification been forthcoming after the signing of the 1946 Convention, there is every reason to believe the North Sea fishing grounds would not have deteriorated to their present state.

In 1946 stocks of fish were still at a level which afforded satisfactory results both financially and from the point of view of quality. The new mesh regulations and the increases in the sizes of fish which could be landed and sold would have been in force long enough to have settled the question of whether additional measures were required to achieve the main purpose of the Convention.

The fact is that no one can state authoritatively at the

present time whether they will be sufficient in themselves or not.

It is my view that we cannot now afford to await the result of the application of the Convention which, taking the most optimistic view, is unlikely to be applied before the end of 1951.

Meanwhile, overfishing continues unabated and the future prospect for all engaged in fishing these grounds is indeed bleak and terrifying.

At the meetings which have been taking place during the last two years or so and at which France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Great Britain and latterly West Germany have been represented, overfishing has been the chief subject under consideration. Much time and thought has been expended on it, but in spite of all attempts to obtain agreement on protective measures additional to those provided in the 1946 Convention, such has not been possible.

The stumbling block has been the non-ratification by certain Governments of the 1946 Convention, and it is apparent that no further progress can be made until the Convention is applied.

I can only express the hope that by the time your Congress is in session, the British Government will have secured the consent of such Governments as have ratified the Convention to the application of its provisions in accordance with the second part of Article 14 of the Convention.

DIFFICULTIES OF OBTAINING AGREEMENT ON FURTHER MEASURES OF PROTECTION

I have referred to the fact that there is a considerable body of opinion who consider that the provisions of the 1946 Convention are insufficient to obtain the degree of protection which the fish stocks require.

It must be realised that the longer the delay in applying the provisions of the 1946 Convention, the more serious the state of the fish stocks becomes. It follows from this that considerable time must elapse before the effects of the 1946 Convention can become of any commercial value and it may well be that the serious delay in applying the Convention has already made its terms of little consequence.

Having this in mind, I came to the conclusion that if

recovery was to be achieved in the shortest possible time, there was only one effective way in which this could be accomplished. That was by quantitative regulation of the weight of fish which could be taken from the grounds per annum without endangering the recovery of the stocks.

It seemed to me that this suggestion had all the necessary factors to enable our purpose to be achieved. Science can now indicate the tonnage which could be taken each year without hurt to the fishing grounds and, in this respect, a global figure could be arrived at. A constant check on the fish stock position would be kept by means of a statistical service which would be an indispensable part of any scheme based on quantitative regulation.

The British fishing interests were prepared to accept the proposal without any attempt to relate each country's share of the global quantity to a percentage interest.

This proposal was rejected at the Gothenburg conference mainly on account of administrative difficulties and also by reason of the wide differences in the types of fishing vessels and commercial set-up between one country and another. I sought to deal with such difficulties by proposing a reduction in sea days in respect of each vessel operating in the North Sea, but discussion on the practicability of the suggestion was not proceeded with owing to resentment in certain quarters over the non-ratification of the 1946 Convention.

Much of the trouble in negotiating an agreement on methods of conservation arises from differences in methods of fishing, the class of fish taken from the grounds and the commercial setup as practised by each separate country fishing these waters.

At the various international conferences which have been held over the past two years, each delegation has submitted plans for conservation which when examined were applicable particularly to the kind of fishing prosecuted by their fishermen.

I do not intend to relate in detail the extent and nature of the suggestions which have been put forward as they do not differ materially from those which were submitted and considered by the conference which sat in London in 1946, and which ultimately resulted in the 1946 North sea Convention, but append herewith the main proposals :—

Limitation of fleets.

(a)

- (b) Closing of spawning grounds at certain periods of the year.
- (c) Further increases in mesh sizes.
- (d) Quantitative regulation.
- (e) Control by means of limitation of sea days per vessel per annum.

THE SOLUTION

It is relatively simple to suggest how this problem can be solved. The first step is, unquestionably, the implementation of the 1946 Convention. Unless this is done at once, nothing else is of any avail. But the Convention is not, in my view, sufficient in itself.

Two wars have shown the beneficial effect on the fishing grounds which follows as a result of the severe curtailment of fishing operations. I do not suggest for a moment that it is either necessary or advisable to go to such lengths at the present time. I merely wish to point out that curtailment of fishing operations is undoubtedly, the most effective way of conservation.

If one examines the present position in respect of the average catch landed by fishing vessels from the North Sea, it is obvious that such average is precariously low and at an uneconomic level. The remedy which springs immediately to the mind is that of reducing the number of vessels and, in this way, increasing the average catch of those allowed to continue fishing.

It would appear logical that if the combined fishing effort of all those engaged in fishing the North Sea was cut by, say 20 %, there would be an increase in the average catch of each vessel of $33\frac{1}{2}$ %. This would mean that the same amount of fish would be taken with fewer vessels and at considerably less expense.

Such a solution is quite simply stated but far from easy to apply. Nevertheless, unless the problem is tackled realistically and with courage, it seems clear that matters will go from bad to worse until sheer economic necessity will enforce the laying up of fishing vessels all over Europe.

It is surely far wiser to have a co-ordinated scheme of control which will achieve our purpose methodically than to

allow the circumstances of individual concerns to be the deciding factor.

However, it has been demonstrated beyond all doubt that there is little likelihood of getting complete agreement on the proposal I have outlined above.

It would be a thousand pities if all efforts to find a solution to this problem were abandoned by reason of the slow progress which has been made hitherto. I feel we must continue to search for an agreed formula which, whilst not meeting the situation as boldly as is required, will, at least, provide us with a starting point and lead to greater progress in the course of time.

For this reason, I suggest that we should strive to get agreement that no more fishing vessels be built and added to existing fleets except by way of replacement of lost or scrapped vessels. Further, that the Governments concerned be urged to set up without delay a body such as the Permanent Commission envisaged in the 1946 Convention but that it be strengthened by the addition of representatives drawn from commercial fishery organisations.

So far as the latter suggestion is concerned, such a Commission would require the assistance of a Central Statistical Bureau whose functions would include the collection, collation and distribution of full information regarding the number of fishing vessels operating each year on the North Sea grounds and the weight of fish taken with particular reference to the average sizes of fish caught.

The scientists could provide the Commission with information as to the total quantity of fish which could be taken from the grounds without damage to the stocks, and it would be a relatively simple matter to compare the actual amount taken with the figure suggested by the scientists. In this way, a constant check on the stock position would be kept and it would soon become obvious as to what further measures, if any, were required to ensure adequate protection for the fishing grounds.

In conclusion, I would urge that the most serious consideration be given by this Congress to this most important and vital matter.

Whilst nations are arguing as to the steps which ought to be taken, the fish stocks which, after all, constitute an important part of our capital, are being vitiated. It is incom-

prehensible that astute business men can be content to see their investments and livelihood endangered in this manner.

It is my earnest hope that as a result of the ventilation of this problem at your Congress, the minds of all those engaged in the prosecution of fishing the North Sea grounds will be awakened to the tragedy which faces them; that goodwill and common sense will prevail and, as a result, these valuable fishing grounds saved from the destruction which threatens them.