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Brexit: a tale of fish and chicken

No-Deal Brexit is just around the corner. Boris Johnson seems to prefer American chlorinated chicken to EU fishing quotas

Read this article in German.

British fish and American chlorinated chicken will soon dominate English cuisine, at least if Brexit continues along its current path. Brexiteer Number One, Boris Johnson, has shown himself to be stubborn in his negotiations with the EU, making a no-deal scenario more likely than ever. At the same time, he is accommodating the US and its demands for market access. Ultimately, local fish and American chicken could be on British plates, leaving no more space (and no money) for fresh European vegetables.

Almost half a year after the official exit from the EU, an agreement on the future EU-British relationship was supposed to have been a done deal already. After all, before the election, the voluble Prime Minister spoke of an 'oven-ready deal' he had in store. The timeline was fanciful from the start and the corona crisis was not yet factored in: an entire eleven months were planned to resolve issues such as goods, services, professional qualifications, and much more.

There's a one-year extension clause, but it must be used by the UK government by 15 June. Boris Johnson flatly rejected that option, passed a law to that effect through parliament and was not dissuaded by what the Bank of England called the worst economic crisis in 300 years. Nevertheless, progress is nowhere in sight. The EU negotiator Michel Barnier recently complained that there was no sign of any concession and that the schedule could hardly be kept.

No 'level playing field'?

The two sides are far apart from each other in key points and thus a fundamental conflict is emerging. While greater autonomy and sovereignty are the UK's negotiating objectives, the EU's position

remains that the integrity of the internal market must be protected. In other words, no special treatment for London. Below this rather philosophical level there are two concrete stumbling blocks: the regulatory framework and fisheries. Both serve to illustrate the rather abstract basic attitudes.

The 'level playing field' – the preferred term used for the desired regulatory framework – is intended to ensure that after Brexit, British companies will not be given any advantage over their European competitors by London lowering labour standards, thinning out environmental legislation or providing certain companies with government aid. For the EU, there is a clear link between access to the internal market and the obligation to abide by these rules. For the Brexiteers, however, the idea of having to adhere to European rules is anathema. As usual, Johnson pompously argues that Britain is already striving for much higher standards than the EU. Therefore there would be no cause for concern among the faint-hearted Europeans. Rules here, sovereignty there.

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As for fisheries, at first glance it seems unusual that this industry, which accounts for just 1.2 per cent of the British economy, carries the potential to undermine a deal with Europe. But its symbolic value is distinctly higher. It is no coincidence that one of the best photo ops for a prime minister to demonstrate British sea power is to stand in front of an English fishing boat with a large fish in hand. At the same time, the perceived injustice at the hands of the EU can be wonderfully exemplified by fishing.

More fish, less buyers

For years, the Common Fisheries Policy has set quotas that allow European fishermen to fish in British waters. And in some cases they are entitled to higher quotas than their English colleagues. As a striking example, critics always point to cod from the English(!) Channel, where France has a 84 per cent share and the United Kingdom only 9 per cent. The Brexiteers took advantage of this disparity early on. It is not by chance that the coastal towns, which have been in decline for years, have been vocal supporters of Brexit.

What passes without comment, however, is the fact that for several years the approximately 30 per cent of the fishing rights that the UK is entitled to have been granted by the government in London to a few large-scale

companies. This will not change after Brexit. Incidentally, what will remain the same is the need to gain access to the European market, since a large part of the fish caught in British waters is not consumed on the island itself. It is therefore quite possible that Great Britain will prevail with regard to fishing quotas, but afterwards find no buyers for their catch.

On the one hand, Boris Johnson is campaigning for more fish. He cleverly uses the image of the small English fishing trawler that can soon bring a larger catch back to the picturesque village under the chalk cliffs. On the other hand, in its negotiations with the United States, his government is signalling great openness to American agricultural products. The notorious chlorinated chicken, genetically modified beef and other comestibles that have so far not found their way into European supermarkets will soon be available to British consumers. At first, these will still be subject to higher tariffs, but the surcharges are to be done away with in ten years at the latest. Then buyers should be able to confidently decide which product to purchase. From a marketing point of view, it seems quite practical for the US to also insist on reducing all of the fine print on the packaging. Apparently, the British should not spoil their appetite with too much information.

Behind Johnson's strategy, there is actually little concern for the small fishing villages in Wales or Cornwall. Similarly, they do not want to impose higher labour standards or stricter environmental laws, which the EU prevents them from doing. Instead, they want to get rid of or at least permanently perforate the foundation that EU rules have created in many practical areas of life such as work, shopping and even clean air. The corona crisis was only a distraction for some of the ministerial cadres – and it was not for nothing that the government as a whole largely failed to fight the crisis. Instead, they are marching briskly into a future where they promise even less government interference, fewer regulations and a greater market and profit for a small minority. What ends up on the plate for ordinary people is of no concern to them.



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