

Devon Maritime Forum, June 30th Plymouth

Jim Portus (Chief Executive – South Western Fish Producers Organisation)

"The evident discontent with the democratic process of the EU Referendum would suggest that we, as a nation, are in for a rough ride over the years of negotiating the divorce settlement.

It is at such times in a relationship between partners breaking up because of their incompatibility that one might wish for "Relate" to assist. That's probably what Dave and Angela needed in February!

However, we are where we are and the people chose divorce last Thursday, not reconciliation.

In the sector I strive to represent, albeit at a local level, the fishing industry was an early opponent of the UK's relationship with the Common Market, now EU. If fishermen had had their way in 1971, we would never have got "married".

The Common Fisheries Policy that we all think about and hear of is actually only temporary and renewable ten-yearly. It is used as a clumsy tool to regulate access and quotas, markets and structural policies, grants and 3rd country agreements.

These myriad regulations all fall by the wayside at Brexit in 2 years. So too does the Treaty obligation of the real Common Fisheries Policy, that of equal access to a common resource without discrimination.

That would be the equivalent of a decree absolute.

But, as with all divorces, there is now time for lawyers to get involved and make a settlement. This can be amicably, with both parties seeking honour to be satisfied, or it can be with bitterness and acrimony.

I have the impression that negotiators will say "for the sake of the children" we should seek an amicable split.

That's what worries me!

My fear from that approach is that our living marine resources might still be carved up as shared assets to be distributed.

For the fishing industry this would be a similar sell-out as in 1971. To my mind, the only acceptable divorce settlement is to invoke the UNCLOS Treaty, like a pre-nuptial agreement.

This would allow full sovereignty within the 12 miles limit for UK vessels only. We would have sovereign rights within the 200 miles / median line limits, with access granted to share the surplus of the resources that could not be taken by UK fleets up to the sustainable limits.

Articles 61 and 62 of UNCLOS deal with the details.

I look forward to our Fisheries Minister, George Eustice starting from that solid and internationally agreed basis for this newly designated independent sovereign coastal state, the United Kingdom. "