



By: *Harvey Morris*

# As go fish and chips, so goes Britain



The time is long overdue for the mixed fortunes of Britain's iconic fish and chips to be adopted as an official indicator of the state of the nation.

Over its more than a century and a half history, the status of the country's favourite takeaway has invariably reflected the geopolitical and economic challenges that Britain has been obliged to confront.

In the latest scare, the public awoke to traumatic headlines that Russia had launched a fish war by banning British trawlers from its Arctic waters.

"Mad Vlad targets Brits' fish and chips as he attacks our cod and haddock supplies," **declared** the Daily Star over a report that President Vladimir Putin's government planned to tear up a decades-old pact allowing UK vessels to operate in the Barents Sea.

The UK's National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations stepped in to calm fears of impending conflict. Chief executive Mike Cohen said he was not aware of any UK vessels currently operating in the Russian sector. "I am not clear that it will have any practical impact," **he told** Reuters.

Trawlers had already been deterred from plying Russian waters by the UK government's imposition last year of a 35 per cent tariff on white fish sourced from Russia as punishment for its invasion of Ukraine.

## The link between fish and chips and geopolitics

At this point I must declare a personal interest, having been raised at a south London family chippy in the Golden Era of the post-war years.

Fish and chips had just played a central role in holding off Hitler's hordes by providing unrationed supplies of sustenance to the home front throughout the darkest days of the Second World War. Wartime leader Winston

Churchill feared that rationing the British staple might incite domestic rebellion.

In those days, wooden crates of uncut fish were dumped on the step at dawn, fresh from the trawler docks at Grimsby or Fleetwood, while potatoes arrived in hundredweight hessian sacks with which the mid-19th century pioneers of the trade would have been familiar.

The ingredients were prepared in bubbling vats heated by coke fires, no doubt a factor in local municipalities designating fish and chips as a noxious trade.

The end product was served with an outer wrapping of newspaper, a practice which, had it not been finally abandoned on health grounds, would have eventually lapsed with the decline of print and the rise of electronic media.

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I was first introduced to the link between fish and chips and geopolitics by the 1956 Suez Crisis, when the eponymous canal was closed in the wake of an Anglo-French invasion that followed Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser's nationalisation of the waterway.

The intervention was not just a humiliation for Britain, exposing the fragility of its late-imperial pretensions. It also severed the fish and chip trade from supplies of Egyptian cotton seed oil that had kept the home pans frying throughout two world wars.

Smug north of England suppliers saw the crisis as further justification for the use of beef fat as their favoured cooking medium. (As well as reflecting international politics, fish and chips have also served to reinforce the invisible north-south divide.)

Within barely more than a year, Britain was embroiled in the first of a series of sporadic Cod Wars with Iceland that stemmed from the

North Atlantic state's decision unilaterally to extend its territorial waters into areas in which the English had been fishing since the 14th century.

The conflict, which was to endure on and off until 1976, saw British warships and trawlers periodically tangle with Icelandic gunboats but mercifully ended with only one confirmed death.

A settlement, which was to have a profound effect on the future of Britain's fish and chips, was finally secured after Reykjavik cut diplomatic ties with London and threatened to leave NATO.

A deal that broadly secured Iceland's war aims saw UK trawlers excluded from former prime fishing grounds, which in turn hit the economies of traditional UK fishing ports, throwing thousands out of work.

## As fish and chips goes, so goes the nation

That was later to translate into local support for Brexit, as survivors of the sector's decline were encouraged to blame their troubles on rules imposed by the European Union.

In the week before the 2016 referendum vote, the Brexit Party founder Nigel Farage led a **flotilla of trawlers** along the River Thames to promote the idea that quitting the EU would somehow free global Britain to fish the world.

He neglected to underline that the bulk of EU fishing quotas doled out by the government at Westminster were going to giant consortia headquartered in continental Europe.

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Coupled with geopolitical disruption, the sector has also had to confront the economic challenges of globalisation, the imposition of value added tax, the growth of fast food rivals, rising commodity costs and shortage of supplies, in part linked to climate change.

What was once daily fodder for the proletariat is now an occasional treat for the bourgeoisie after the standard price of a modest takeaway portion breached the £10 mark. Had 1950s prices followed the general pace of inflation, a decent serving of cod and chips would now cost only around £2.

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Despite the challenges, around a quarter of a billion portions are still sold annually in England alone, while more than 10,000 fish and chip shops, mostly independently owned, continue to operate.

Russian fish supplies aside, the Ukraine crisis has imposed additional burdens in terms of higher prices for everything from energy and oil for cooking, to potatoes for the chips and flour for battering the fish.

Warning of potential widescale shop closures, Andrew Cook of the National Federation of Fish Friers, told an interviewer last year: "Fish and chip shops are so deeply entrenched in

our culture and history, the thought of them disappearing is unimaginable.”

He might have added that, as fish and chips goes, so goes the nation. And not always in the right direction.