

Control of the UK Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

Having recently written to the Rt.Hon.David Davis MP (Secretary of State for exiting the EU), with copies to my MP and the MP for Lowestoft, asking that UK fishing rights be recovered and retained after separation of the UK from the EU, my mind was drawn to the discussion paper 'Protection of the UK's EEZ and Territorial Seas' by Cdr. Graham Edmonds RN.

Like Cdr.Edmonds I have long been aware that the UK's policing of her EEZ has been patchy to say the least. As a merchant seaman involved in the offshore oil and gas industry, I worked almost exclusively in the North Sea throughout the 1980s and into the 2nd half of the 1990s. Visits from the RN's fishery protection Island Class patrol boats and other government units were few and far between (there were then, seven Island and two Castle Class Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs)). In fact they were such infrequent visitors that it was obvious to all of us merchant types, and became a standing joke among us, that they did not know their patch!

A coastguard, operating numerous and relatively cheap (by Naval standards) but robust offshore cutters and with powers of arrest, would to my mind, be the obvious way to police what I hope will again become the UK's exclusive fishing grounds. This should also be the form of policing in areas such as the Falkland Islands where presently any confrontation with Argentine units would be a military operation and as such an emotive affair for some. If HMS Clyde (the standing Falkland's OPV) were painted orange with a diagonal stripe on her hull and the word 'Coastguard' in large letters on her side, it could be portrayed as a civilian policing matter and diplomatically handled in a different way. The RN of course could still be in the background to act as back-up.

The three River Class OPVs which patrol the UK's EEZ (when one of them is not being sent to the Caribbean or even further afield) are soon to be supplemented by three new (phase 2 River Class) OPVs. These new boats are being built at enormous cost, in order to keep the Govan building teams together. To my eyes, as a seaman who has spent 15 winters in the Northern North Sea and West of Shetland, their design appears to be more suited to the tropics than cold and rough northern climes; in essence they remind me of the Tribal class frigates of the sixties and seventies that were optimised for Middle East operations. Babcock Marine's Appledore yard in North Devon is presently building very capable Corvette type OPVs for the Irish Government; of a similar size to the Phase 2 OPVs but at a third of the cost of the Govan built vessels. If they can do that for the Irish, they can do it for us and because we could substitute a couple of cheap commercially available Drones (UAVs) for the 75 mm automatic cannon and other military hardware, with a multi ship order, there is no reason why we could not buy them at an even cheaper price. When we could have bought nine ships for the price we are paying for three, one has to ask why?!

With Brexit, the recovery of our fishing grounds offers the chance for our fishing fleets, which have largely disappeared since our entry into the EEC and the EU, to regenerate with massive benefit for our marine industries. The UK may become an exporter of fish products instead of the massive importer that she is now. Boat and ship building and refit yards could see a revival along with the engineering and manufacturing required to supply them with parts. A new generation of seamen would be trained and many of those would train further for service in other parts of the marine industry. In order to sustain this industry however, our fishing areas will have to be effectively policed, so that poachers stand a high chance of being arrested, brought into a UK port and heavily fined or possibly even have their boat and gear confiscated. Such a robust message will require patrol boats and lots of them.

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