

Radical Options for Scotland & Europe



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EU DEAL CENTRALISES ECONOMIC CONTROL but can be challenged

This was the verdict of Rose's Joint Secretary Vince Mills at the first ROSE meeting of 2021.

The *Trade and Services Agreement* with the EU and the *UK Internal Market Act* were both ratified in the Commons at the end of December. Taken together they concentrate economic controls at Westminster and deprive devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales of their pre-existing powers of economic intervention.

Between them the two pieces of legislation also lock in many of the EU's neo-liberal prohibitions against any form of democratic control of the economy either by parliaments or local or regional councils.

However, Mr Mills stressed, opportunities do exist for change. The Trade and Services Agreement is open for review in five years and in some aspects sooner via discussions in the new joint Partnership Council. Much will depend on legal interpretation and such judgements will no longer depend on the neo-liberal and pro-business EU Court of Justice but on WTO-style arbitration.

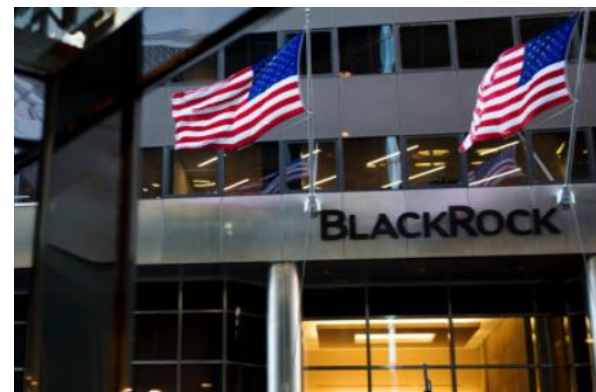
State Aid rights denied to Scottish and Welsh Parliaments

The Agreement does indeed secure the right to give state aid. But this is only if endorsed by Act of Parliament – and then specifically denies this right to devolved parliaments. The UK Internal Market Act can also, in large parts, be amended by Westminster.

Hence, particularly with regard to powers of state aid and the rescue of ailing firms, Mr Mills said it was very important for the trade union and labour movement in Scotland to form its own independent assessment and to campaign jointly with colleagues in Wales to retrieve the powers for economic intervention assigned in the devolution settlement of 1998.

'Regaining these powers', he said, 'will be important both for our own Scottish economy but also, by extension, for the regions of England. Many areas of the North have experienced de-industrialisation on an even bigger scale than Scotland and Wales. The basis exists for a political alliance that could, in the wake of the devastation caused by the government's mishandling of Covid, retrieve these critical powers of democratic control and development.'

This edition of the Bulletin provides separate sections outlining the key aspects of the December legislation: the economic powers of parliament in terms of public ownership, controls over procurement, workers rights and the rights of establishment (of firms), fishing, services and finance.



EU Commission hands BlackRock contract to advise on climate change investment policy

The EU Commission is maintaining its decision to contract BlackRock, the world biggest investment company, to advise EU on climate change investment policy.

It rejected comments by the EU parliamentary ombudsman in November 2020 that the selection was inappropriate given the investment company's heavy holdings in fossil fuels.

Assets of \$7.8 Trillion

The Commission claimed that EU contract rules had been 'applied fully and fairly'. BlackRock handles assets of \$7.8 trillion (the EU's annual budget for 2021 is less than \$0.2 trillion). BlackRock is reported to have trebled its EU lobbying budget since 2014 and to have met Commissioners on thirty-one occasions. Its report advising on future EU policy is due in March 2021.

p. 6 Andrew Ferguson on fishing

We say

Speaking at the ROSE conference in November Beth Winters MP was right to raise the alarm about national and regional democracy. The final texts of Johnson's Internal Market Act and of the Trade and Services Agreement with the EU bear out her worst fears. Her call for closer coordination between colleagues in Holyrood, the Welsh Senaid and the English regions was more than timely.

The Internal Market Act has snatched back the powers conferred in 1998 on all devolved parliaments and assemblies. Under the 1998 legislation large areas of economic and industrial policy had remained 'unreserved' and hence within the legitimate scope of the new devolved institutions of Scotland and Wales. In legal form at least, these powers continued till the present - even though EU regulations did subsequently limit what could be done through state aid, public ownership and local procurement.

Only Westminster

Now these powers are gone. Last month's Internal Market Act explicitly withdraws them. Nor is this just a temporary measure to do with the withdrawal process. The 30 December Trade and Services Agreement with the EU makes it clear that it is intended to be permanent. The Agreement does indeed reserve to right to give state aid and economic assistance to firms if it is ratified by Act of Parliament - but then explicitly states such Acts are solely the prerogative of the Westminster Parliament. Not Holyrood. Not Cardiff.

Johnson's agenda would appear to be both 'neo-liberal', in terms of minimising the regulation of capital, and interventionist. These interventions will be planned and financed centrally. They will mirror Johnson's use of giant private sector contractors to contain Covid. We can already see part of the plan in his legislation for deregulated 'free ports' enabling private firms to operate within regional hubs outwith local regulation.

Big centrally-driven infrastructure projects

Post-Brexit Johnson will indeed claim to be 'levelling up'. Big infrastructure projects will be unveiled - very lucrative for the contractors and, temporarily at least, probably winning votes.

But in actual effect these interventions will be as disastrous as Johnson's Covid programme. Post-Covid our regional and national economies will be blitzed. Social spending will be cut, town centres still more derelict, key areas of the economy - airports, cultural services, retail - reduced and much of what remains of manufacturing on life support.

What is needed is detailed local, democratic intervention. Local sourcing and procurement as in the 'Preston Model' sustained long-term by significant elements of public ownership that is locally responsible, planned, cumulative and mutually supporting.

This is what might have been possible after Brexit. It would have been so under the programme issued, for instance, by the Labour Party for the 2019 election. Johnson's EU deal bans it.

This is why there must be joint cooperation between national parliaments in Scotland and Wales and also England's regions. Some elements of Johnson's deal can in fact be unscrambled relatively quickly.

The 'Act of Parliament' clause in Agreement could be modified by the Westminster Parliament itself. Significant elements of the EU Agreement remain under review. The whole document is open for modification in five years and meantime the 'Partnership Council' has powers to modify. The campaign for national and regional democracy needs to start now.



The Internal Market Act and its Impact on Wales

Beth Winter

Labour MP Cynon Valley

I want to focus on the threat to Wales and the other regions and nations of Britain by the Conservative governments Internal Market Act now before Parliament.

Wales has a long radical tradition - from the first raising of the Red Flag in Merthyr in the Chartist Days to the movement for the NHS led by Nye Bevan in the 1940s. Today that tradition is being maintained by the Welsh Parliament, recently renamed 'Senedd'.

It has had a Labour led government ever since its formation twenty-one years ago. During the Blair years it was Rhodri Morgan who called for 'clear red water' to be maintained between Wales and Westminster and that position has been maintained to the present. What we need now is clear red action.

Protection from privatisation

The existence of a devolved Welsh legislature has enabled the protection of the NHS from the privatisation seen in England and maintained free prescriptions.

Wales was the first to pass a Climate Emergency declaration. It has the best rates for domestic recycling and has used its powers to stop the building of the M4 relief road in Newport. Wales has enfranchised young 16-17 year olds and sought to drive forward a 'foundational economy' - with public sector investment, a defence of workers' rights, locally based procurement.

The Trade Unions (Wales) Act 2017 was another step in the direction of partnership working in the public sector as it disapplied sections of the Trade Union Act 2016. . Wales now also has a Development Bank to help small businesses grow.

Damaged by austerity

Nonetheless Wales has been seriously damaged by the brutal austerity enforced from Westminster over the past ten years. Something like £1.6 billion has been lost and during the Covid epidemic another £0.5 billion of extra expenditure has not been covered by Barnett consequentials. Wales continues to experience high levels of poverty and inequality.

Beth Winter continued

Now our past gains are at serious risk from the Tory centralisation agenda as represented by the Internal Market Act. This threatens to completely undermine progress and what has been won through devolution to date. Welsh Labour MPs have registered the strongest objections. The Act endangers public services. It will undermine the higher standards we have achieved in agriculture and the environment and threatens a race to the bottom across Britain. The Act gives UK Government the power to overrule the devolved nations.

While it is important, as the UK leaves the EU, for us to have a system to harmonise standards across the 4 countries, any internal market legislation should have looked done the least possible on a centralised basis and as much as possible on a decentralised basis. And, anyway, as in the view of the Senedd, there already exists a successful regime in the form of the Common Framework to form the basis of all future arrangements.

No dialogue

UK government did not see fit to enter into discussions with the Welsh Government on this issue. We have really grave concerns about the forthcoming spending review and the impact of any deal with the EU negotiated by Johnson. Small business and agriculture are at risk and the Welsh ports are likely to suffer severely. Government should always be as close to the people as possible – yet the Tory neo-liberals look to create a recentralised British state. This is why the Welsh Senedd has withheld consent from the Internal Market Act and why WG has now stated its intent to take legal action against the UK government with regards to the Act.

Mick Antoniw, Chair of the Senedd Constitution, Justice and Legislative Committee, commented: “it is quite clear from this Bill that the aim of this Tory government is to cement their neoliberal economic and social agenda into a framework of a centralised British nationalist state. This Act shows their contempt for devolution, the constitution and the rule of law.”

“Red action”

I am very happy to be working with colleagues and comrades in ROSE. Constitutional reform is not a side issue. We need a system in which the four nations are treated as equals, not a top-down arrangement as at present. . All parts of the UK should be properly and fairly funded We should be seeking more devolution not less – and this should also include the regions of England. Liverpool, Cardiff, Newcastle and Edinburgh must start to work together to campaign against the damaging policies of this regressive Tory Government. We all need ‘red action’ for a different future: one that is fairer, greener, socialist.

AFFILIATE TO ROSE

Individual membership is £5; local organisation £10; Scottish level organisation £50

Name _____

Address _____

Fee

Cheques payable to SCAEF: Jim McDaid, 41 Craufurd Ave, West Kilbride KA23 9PD

Current affiliates include Scottish Unite, Unison and RMT and Trades Union Councils for Glasgow, Dundee, West Lothian, Mid Lothian, Fife, North Ayrshire, Dumfries, Clydebank and Kilmarnock & Loudon. Vice Presidents include Elaine Smith MSP, former Labour MEP Alex Smith and former deputy leader of the SNP Jim Sillars.

THE WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT

A ROSE summary



This assessment is based on the 1246 page document released by the British government on 26 December and which supersedes the 33 page summary issued on 24 December. It is an assessment of key areas – not a summary of the full document which can be found on the British government website.

Independent dispute resolution

The agreement ratifies more or less all existing EU regulations but independently under British law and jurisdiction and with procedures for arbitration that, in case of disagreement, will be independent of both Britain or the EU under World Trade Organisation dispute resolution procedures. Trade in goods and almost all services will be maintained as at present on a tariff free basis. The EU Court of Justice will no longer have jurisdiction over trade with Britain or over any aspect of policy in Britain. A Partnership Council is established (PC) consisting of the two parties (Part One, Title III, Article INST1). This body has power to amend the TCA itself, with most amendments taking effect through ministerial regulations and without direct parliamentary scrutiny.

Future regulation

It frees Britain from any automatic acceptance of changes under future EU regulation but, subject to WTO dispute resolution, gives either side the right to trigger retaliatory tariffs if the other is considered to have secured unfair advantage through market distortion through future changes.

Rights of citizens and workers

The mutual rights of citizens to health services in the EU and Britain are maintained. So is freedom of travel without visa for up to 90 days. British participation in most research programmes is maintained as are rights to some existing exchanges within higher education (though not Erasmus). This is equally so for security and law enforcement provisions. It commits to the maintenance under British jurisdiction of existing EU regulations on health, labour standards and working time in employment (page 200).

It would appear that some aspects of the right of establishment, on a mutual basis and subject to Britain’s new immigration regulations, is maintained under Part 2, Heading 1, Title IV on freedom of capital movement. There appears to be no stipulation on wages and conditions [apart from those within Britain’s new voucher system for immigrant labour – which includes limited permissions for temporary labour being allowed at a minimum wage of £20,000 as against the standard £30,000].

The Level Playing Field and State Aid

Pages 179 and following appear to maintain all existing provisions for the prevention of government subsidy – subject to enforcement under domestic law and with appeal to dispute resolution under an independent body for subsidy control within WTO terms. It gives a right to both the EU and Britain respectively and meantime to introduce protective measures in terms of tariffs on affected items in retaliation for perceived breaches (p.189). State subsidy of more than approx. £2.5m a year (for three years) and for anything other than small and medium enterprises is banned. The rescue and restructuring of insolvent firms (other than banks) is prohibited and monies advanced for banks is to be recovered subsequently (p. 186). Subsidies contingent on the use of local content are prohibited (p.186). State subsidy to firms is however permitted when ratified by an Act of the Westminster parliament but, explicitly, not by any Act of the parliaments of Scotland and Wales. Each party is committed to establishing its own system of tribunals to establish whether a subsidy secures a public interest objective that outweighs any negative effects (Part Two, Heading One, Title XI, Art. 3.4).

Public Procurement

p. 148. Existing provisions are maintained for full competitive tendering of all public services but now under respectively British and EU regulations and with dispute resolution under independent and ultimately WTO procedures. Mention is also made of the continuation of the ability to include specific provisions on environment, social and labour considerations provided these are compatible with the general provisions set out in Chapters 1 and 2 of the agreement. The 24 December Summary Document also made mention (Article 6) of an extension of public procurement competitive tendering by mutual agreement of both Britain and EU to new areas: the full operation of the WTO's Government Procurement Agreement for public services, opening them to full competition, and agrees to extend such regulations mutually, both in Britain and the EU, to gas and heat distribution, private utilities, telecoms, education and 'other business sectors'.

A PROVISIONAL ASSESSMENT

Neo-liberal principles maintained in full

The neo-liberal principles in the EU's Constitutional Treaty will be fully transferred into British law and be operated by British courts though with appeal to WTO arbitration procedures and not EU courts. It therefore subordinates our economy to the imperatives of big business and disallows any democratic public sector intervention that would interfere with these. There is no more scope than there was before for state aid to prevent the loss of key industries, for national or regional intervention requiring public subsidies for measures of economic regeneration that involve direct intervention in production. Nor would there be for state shareholdings in companies if this could be construed as providing state aid. Nor equally for full public ownership of an industry that would remove competition or be seen to subsidise the service.

Centralisation at British level

The UK Single Market Act would appear to be the necessary adjunct of this agreement. The British government will maintain all significant powers over economic policy and withdraw those granted under the 1998 acts of devolution for Scotland and Wales. The British government's promised 'levelling up' under the new legislation will be through infrastructure provision undertaken by multinational contracting firms holding tenders under WTO terms and providing the most 'competitive' bids.

Protection of labour

As any trade unionist knows EU regulations – in force in Britain for the past fifty years – do not give much or any protection in terms of the right to strike, union recognitions, collective bargaining and, to some extent, loss of employment. They provide minimum conditions in terms of hours and health and safety. Employment under the right of establishment of employees from the EU appears to be maintained, within the new immigration regulations, with wages pegged at the national minimum wage and not at any collectively bargained rates for that industry.



THE TRADE AND SERVICES AGREEMENT ON BANKING AND FINANCIAL SERVICES

The agreement ratified on 30 December contains only one small section on financial services. Negotiations on this front were postponed till the new year with a deadline of March 2021.

'Article SERVIN.5.42: Financial services new to the territory of a Party I. Each Party shall permit a financial service supplier of the other Party established in its territory to supply any new financial service that it would permit its own financial service suppliers to supply in accordance with its law in like situations, provided that the introduction of the new financial service does not require the adoption of a new law or the amendment of an existing law. This does not apply to branches of the other Party established in the territory of a Party.' This clause is on page 110 of the full Agreement document. Earlier clauses appear to indicate that the existing provision of financial services – from banks and brokers to investment companies – will continue as before.

It remains difficult to assess the objectives of either the UK government or the EU. Dissatisfaction has been expressed by Sadiq Khan as mayor of London (Financial Times 18 January 2021) and some banks are reported to have moved up to £6b of share trading operations to Frankfurt and Paris. Yet it is also clear that dissatisfaction with the EU's 2014 banking and investment regulations provided a significant part of the pressure for leaving the EU.

The explanation appears to be that the City and the British government do indeed intend to make changes in existing regulations in the immediate future. On 27 December Sunak said that Britain was 'embarking on the journey' of 'how we make the City of London the most attractive place to list new companies anywhere in the world' and would be reconsidering the appropriate legal structures over the coming year. Indeed, for those in the City of London, both US bankers and British, this seems to have been one of the main, if not the main, point of Brexit.

“\$8.5 trillion fund management industry”

On 21 December Jes Staley, Chair of Barclays, told the Financial Times, London will succeed if it uses the new regulatory freedom it has outside the EU. ‘The real threat is not Paris or Berlin but New York, Singapore and Hong Kong’. The key strength of the City is ‘its \$8.5 trillion fund management industry. The users of capital will always find the providers of capital’.

The former Governor of the Bank of England Lord King’s comment was: ‘If we are to pursue regulatory equivalence with anyone, it should be with the US. Being out of the EU is an important step forward’. The current Deputy Governor of the Bank, Sam Woods, agreed: ‘Brexit means the UK is no longer shackled in lock step with the EU’ and suggested a ‘more British style of regulation’ matching the ‘rough and tumble of the financial sector’.

Two major US banks, the key players in the City, backed this position. The international president of the Bank of America, Sam Mensa, argued that ‘divergence from EU rules both seen as an opportunity for the UK and a threat in Brussels’. The head of Goldman Sachs, one of the biggest players in the City, Richard Gnodde, said removing the EU 2014 regulations would put Britain back on ‘the same footing as every other financial centre’. Paul Marshall, head of Marshall Wace, one of the biggest (\$50 billion) hedge funds, said that London had to be able to tap Chinese and American wealth: corporation tax should also be lowered to the Dublin rate’.

“Competition between financial centres in Europe”

Another very revealing interview (FT 2 December) was with Axel Weber, previous Chair of the Bundesbank and now head of the Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS). ‘The division of Europe is a massive benefit to the City of London because if Europe were united the impact of Brexit would be much more ... it’s all about competition between financial centres in Europe, Frankfurt against Paris. ... the Europe that exists with 27 lines drawn across the paper will not attract many’. The UBS, he said, will not be moving any of its 5,700 staff currently in London.

These interviews would seem to shed some light on the Brexit process. The EU regulations of 2014, designed to limit the City of London, seem to have been a major factor behind at least covert support among key City figures, both in the BoE and from the US banks, for leaving the EU. But while EU policy-makers want to reduce the grip of London-based banks on financial markets (between them they control, for instance, over 80 per cent of all EU mergers and acquisitions), they have not yet succeeded in doing so and see themselves losing rather than winning. In the Withdrawal negotiations the EU itself seems to have been bedevilled by the division between France and Germany over the control of banking services.

ROSE PETITION TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

The Rose petition calling for the Scottish government to campaign for its right to provide State Aid to industry was referred by the Petitions in November to the Minister for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

His response will be considered by the Petitions Committee at its meeting in February. The petition was backed by Unite, RMT, the STUC and a number of other unions and trades union councils.



Britain after Brexit: footloose and fancy free for capricious capitalism

Vince Mills assesses the Brexit deal and warns of imminent dangers

After what seemed like interminable debate and disagreement, on 30 December 2020, MPs voted 521:73 for the EU (Future Relationship) Bill based on the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

There is a fairly simple, but accurate way of describing the agreement: the Tories have taken the neo-liberal framework constructed by the EU and replaced it with one made in Britain. We should not really be surprised at this. The Tory faction Boris Johnson represents believes in a footloose, global capitalism, unencumbered as much as possible by regulation, advancing the interests of the London based finance sector in, but crucially beyond, the EU.

“Market over democracy”

For its part, the EU since its inception has been fundamentally committed to the market over democracy. Created by capitalists representing the interests of large corporations with a view to implementing common strategies to defeat resistance by organised workers without reference to national democratic structures, it has been on a steady journey towards its own model of neo-liberalism.

While they differ on how capitalism in its neo-liberal phase is best advanced – nation state or supranational institutions- their common espousal of market supremacy suffuses the TCA. We are invited to applaud the deal because of the benefits from ‘the liberalised market access arrangements’ or ‘investment liberalisation’ or ‘some of the most liberalising and modern digital trade provisions in the world’.

With that as the underpinning philosophy is not surprising that it poses a number of fundamental problems for the left. State ownership and public services were a matter of some controversy on the left in terms of what was or was not permissible under EU rules. As the explaining summary puts it, this agreement: ‘commits both parties to additional disciplines on their state-owned enterprises, designated monopolies and enterprises granted special rights or privileges ...’.

“Behave like private enterprises”

The detail of what this means can be found in chapter 4 of the full agreement. It is apparent that state-owned enterprises will be allowed if they behave like private enterprises and are not allowed any kind of monopoly. And so, to that other area of controversy, state aid. While Britain has escaped the European Court of Justice jurisdiction, the agreement continues to ensure that state intervention is heavily policed. This may still give greater scope for state subsidy but given that Johnson's preferred mode of 'levelling up' is privately delivered infrastructure and new technology projects, the scope for any democratically controlled interventions by devolved government is severely constrained.

That is why the Internal Market Act is so important for the Johnson project – it takes back powers devolved to Scotland (and Wales) to provide financial aid to industry. Admittedly the Scottish Government rarely used them, largely because of EU state aid regulations but with Covid and dominance of economic short-termism, the need for a planned, local, democratically controlled intervention is overwhelming. This agreement makes that less likely.

Guarantee of workers' rights ?

There is a belief by many, even on the left, that the EU, largely because of the limited reforms offered in the Social Chapter, offers a strong guarantee of workers' rights. In fact, the EU offered no protection at all in key areas of class conflict like pay, the right of association and the right to strike.

That protection, however limited it may be, is nevertheless important at a time when the unions have very little reach into significant areas of the economy, especially in sections of the private sector where precarious contracts prevail. Whether that protection will survive this deal is open to question: 'The Agreement includes reciprocal commitments not to reduce the level of protection for workers or fail to enforce employment rights ... both Parties have the freedom and ability to make their own decisions on how they regulate – meaning that retained EU law will not have a special place on the UK's statute books.' This does not mean no regression. Rather, it means, as the government has pointed out, no dilution of standards 'in a manner that has an effect on trade or investment'.

Despite the nature of the deal, criticism based on its neo-liberal nature has been somewhat muted. The Scottish Labour Party opposed it in the Scottish Parliament on the basis that it was 'half baked' and lacked proper scrutiny. A letter, organised by Another Europe is Possible, which helped provoke a rebellion by 34 Labour MPs in Westminster, who abstained rather than support the deal, was better, arguing that the deal 'is designed to open the door to rampant economic deregulation – a loss of rights and protections for workers ...'. Perhaps the letter could have gotten more support if had explicitly respected the vote to leave and called for the kind of deal advocated by Jeremy Corbyn in his Coventry speech of 2018, where he argued for a 'bespoke' deal with the EU, based on a customs union that required opt-outs from the neo-liberal framework. Corbyn's position was undermined by the 'second vote' brigade led by none other current leader, Keir Starmer, hastening Labour's and Corbyn's defeat and his rise.

The SNP's opposition could hardly be based on a challenge the neo-liberalism embedded in the deal because it is supported by the EU which the SNP wants to join just as soon as it wins independence.

As former ASLEF president, Tosh McDonald, argued at a Labour Grassroots event, whatever we think of the deal, the working class now has only its own governments to deal with, governments no longer camouflaged by EU rules and regulations and structures. It will require a united and determined working class response to defeat neo-liberalism, but the Covid crisis has exposed the depth of inequality right across Britain. This is an opportunity the left must grasp.

How the deal affects Scotland's Fishing Industry

Andrew Ferguson



A bad deal for fishing? Or an opportunity to revitalise Scotland's traditional fishing communities? What are the implications of the Brexit deal with regard to fishing?

The agreement with the EU states that the value of the catch the UK can take in its own waters will increase incrementally up to an average of 25% over a five and a half year period, starting from January 2021.

No Limit ?

It has been estimated that this could be worth approximately £140 million per year to the UK fishing industry. Boris Johnson has claimed this as a victory, of course. He has also stated that the UK will be able to increase its share from approximately half to two thirds and that after 2026 there will be no theoretical limit 'on the quantity of our own fish that we can fish in our waters.'

Dr Bryce Stewart of York University, however, says that the value of fish the UK takes is unlikely to increase beyond 60%. The deal carries an assumption that the increase in the UK catch share will not go beyond 25% and any change could be met with tariffs on fish imports and other goods, or even suspension of other parts of the trade and economic partnership.

Fall in white fish landed by Scottish fleet

Dr Stewart also points out that the increases in catch share are species related and area specific and will only help certain vessels. Indeed the Scottish government has produced figures which show that there will be a fall in the quantity of key white fish stocks landed by the Scottish fleet.

In fact, the deal as a whole doesn't do much to help the smaller vessels (under 10m), which make up 77% of the fishing fleet but hold less than 2% quota. The vast majority of increases will go to large offshore vessels, while stocks important to smaller boats have seen very few increases.

The deal also fails to secure an exclusive zone for UK boats within 12 miles of shore, as foreign vessels will continue to have access to the 6 to 12 mile area vital to smaller boats.

Tories must not be allowed to muddy the waters on Human Rights issues



Says Arthur West

It is not uncommon for the current Tory Government and some of its supporters to make misleading statements on Human Rights issues.

In December 2020 the Tories set up a review of the Human Rights Act. This review will be led by former Court of Appeal Judge Sir Peter Gross. It is important that the Tories do not try and use this review to abolish the Human Rights Act by associating it with Brexit.

The Human Rights Act is a piece of legislation which imbeds the European Convention on Human Rights into British law. The Convention is an international agreement drawn up by the Council of Europe which is a separate body from the European Union.

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 and has 47 members - and not all of them are members of the European Union. The stated purpose of the organisation is to uphold human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe.

The current U.K. Human Rights Act was passed in 1998 and puts all the rights contained in the European Convention of Human Rights into British law. The act provides important rights such as the right to freedom of association and the right to education. The act has also played an important role in helping people with disabilities challenge mistreatment and was of assistance to the victims of the Windrush scandal.

So it is important that the Tories are not allowed to attack the Human Rights Act under the cover of Brexit. The act is not connected to the European Union or Brexit and it must be defended from any backdoor Tory attacks.

Arthur West, Sec Kilmarnock & Loudoun Trades Union Council

STUC raises fears about workers' rights

Following reports that the UK Government has asked the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to work up a package of deregulatory measures following the UK's final departure from the European Union, STUC General Secretary Roz Foyer said: "We are alarmed, if unsurprised, by reports of early attempts to downgrade workers' rights through amending the commitment to the EU Working Time Directive. We will vigorously oppose any attempt to dilute existing rights and are pleased that the Scottish Government, in line with its commitment to Fair Work, supports us in this."

A joint statement has been issued with the Scottish government.

Fishing continued

These concerns have been echoed by former Labour minister Brian Wilson, who argues that the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy marginalised Scotland's traditional fishing communities leading to the decline of local, non-intensive fishing industries. This destroyed career prospects and contributed to out-migration by the young.

Wilson points out that local fishermen in the islands currently have no quota for the vast stocks of herring and mackerel west of the Hebrides. The same applies to most species of white fish. He argues that island communities have been reduced to 'spectators to the vast wealth taken from their own waters'.

Challenge the power of vested interests

Wilson believes that the spiral of decline could be reversed under the new deal which allows a new freedom to reapportion quotas. He sees this as an opportunity to challenge the power of vested interests and lead a revival of coastal communities, given the political will. The question is do our elected representatives have the will?

THE EU'S PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION ORGANISATION (PESCO) AND BRITAIN'S DEFENCE PLANNING



The EU's new military cooperation project established in 2017 will for the first time receive direct funding from the 2021 EU budget.

This enables EU member countries to bid for EU funded projects for defence systems – in which concepts and intellectual property rights will remain the property of the EU and which will help fund the development of an integrated EU military industrial complex which in turn will strengthen an independent NATO capacity in Europe.

Britain elected to remain outside (its main defence companies, Rolls Royce, BAE and Babcocks, are all integrated with US Department of Defence contracting). It does, however, seek to develop military links with Poland and the Baltic states which remain diplomatically closely aligned to the US. The large increase in Britain's military expenditure (by one third) for coming period would appear to be related the development of its own defence contracting partnerships possibly involving Poland and the Baltics. **House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 9058, 19 January 2021**