

I have been asked, this evening, to provide some essential context to this important question of foreign overfishing off Newfoundland waters. As a journalist who dedicated many of her working years to the fisheries question, as a French and Spanish speaker, and as a native of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon, I have a unique perspective into the issue. But let me say, at the outset, that I do not intend to diminish in any ways the seriousness of this matter: regardless of who fishes, it is a global environmental problem we are facing -- to which, of course, there are no simple solutions.

When trying to find a solution, though, it is crucial to understand the importance of the Grand Banks -- les Grands Bancs; los Bancos de Terra-Nova -- in the collective psyche of the French, Spanish and Portuguese. The Portuguese were the first of these peoples to arrive in Newfoundland; and when, in 1504, the first French fisherman from Normandy admitted to fishing in Newfoundland, and later when the Basques settled in Port-au-Choix or Port-aux-Basques, Canada was still a few hundred years from being born. Later, long after our country came to be, those foreign fleets grew; yet there was still very little presence of Canada on the high seas. Coastal fisheries all around the East coast proved sufficient for our general needs. Hence, most of the continental shelf on the maps have names of French origins: le platier, le trou à la Baleine, la passe du Flétan; and most European fishermen from these three nations have to this day a sense of ownership of this area of the Grand Banks. They discovered it, they reason, and for hundreds of years they were the only ones fishing there.

This sentiment should not be discounted when we attempt to deal intelligently with the problem at hand. Quite simply, it explains why Canada has had so much difficulty convincing European nations that it owns the vast majority of this area and intends to decide how and by whom it will be fished. It is very simplistic to say that the only motivation of foreign fleets was, and forever is, greed. History plays its part.

This being said, the 200-mile limit and subsequent bi-lateral fisheries agreements have

effectively removed some of the foreign fishing in and around our region. The French fleet has disappeared from inside the 200-mile limit where it had ancestral rights in the Gulf; and Saint-Pierre et Miquelon is left with but 10% of the 3Ps quota – 70% of which MUST be fished and landed in Saint-Pierre by Canadian vessels manned by Canadian crews. The area awarded France in the International arbitration case is one long corridor across the most barren grounds of the fishing area. One lone company from Saint-Malo, Brittany -- La Comapeche -- maintained some activities on the nose and tail of the Banks until the early 90s, but it has since moved to the Atlantic coast of South America and the Northern Sea. It was a commercial decision : fishing « à Terre-Neuve » was no longer viable.

Since then, new players have arrived on the scene -- some from the Baltic states, who now have membership in the EU. As well, some Nordic countries seem to be slowly increasing their presence in our waters, both outside the 200-mile limit, and inside, it seems, through joint ventures -- like Iceland. That is another issue.

And then, of course, there are the fleets that have been fishing here through thick and thin and are still here: the Portuguese and the Spanish who, together, fish 96% of the European Community catches in NAFO zones. They remain on the Banks, not because they find fish we could not, but because, since their accession to the Economic European Community in 1986, they get, as fishing nations, more than 53% of EU subsidies between them to do so. Very much like in Newfoundland and Labrador, both nations have whole regions that depend on the fishery for their survival: 47% of the Spanish fishing fleet is located in Galicia in Northwest Spain, 13% in the Basque Country. In Portugal there are more than 12,000 fishermen. As the people of Newfoundland and Labrador can readily understand, both nations will do anything possible to ensure the survival of villages, towns and jobs that depend on the fishing industry. Also, Spain and Portugal consume more fish than most European nations put together and that is a real concern that keeps their fleets active wherever they can.

So clearly Spain and Portugal are the two countries that are the most important players in the question of overfishing on the Grand Banks and if a permanent solution is to be found it will have to involve them, one way or the other. It is certainly not for me to advocate which way is best to ensure that the plundering stop and the stock be enabled to rebuild; but I would like to contribute a few observations:

As much as we, in Canada, like to think of ourselves as proud and responsible custodians of the marine resources, this is not necessarily how we are viewed by European nations. Many a fishing captain from France and from Spain have told me that Canada booted them out of Canadian waters in 1977, not for conservation reasons but to have all the resource for itself; as a case in point, they explained, no sooner had the foreign fleets left than more Canadians were encouraged to get into the fisheries business. True or not, perception is what is important here. Spain wanted time to ease out of the Grand Bank fisheries after the imposition of the 200 mile limit in 1977 and it feels it was denied that much needed time. Again, true or not, the rancor lingers on and it is not a good basis for cooperation and mutual understanding, especially when one is introducing new and yet undefined concepts such as « custodial management ».

Also, it has not escaped the European nations' attention that the fishery has been, since the 1980's, a highly charged political issue in Canada and it is their conviction that scientific research and findings have been and are still being manipulated for purely political gains. True or not, again, perception is everything here and such strongly held opinions are no basis for trust.

Within the European Community there are also issues that need to be taken into consideration. Out of the 6.1 million tons of fish caught each year by EU nations, only 42,000 tons come from the North Atlantic, so surely there are more pressing questions elsewhere. What is for our province and region an urgent problem clearly will not be

seen as acutely serious in Brussels, even though it is an environmental and global concern. Sardines off the coast of Spain and Africa, gill net issues in European waters, quotas for new nations and ensuring the relative stability of the fisheries within EU waters clearly take precedence.

We must remain aware, therefore, that the path chosen will be perceived differently on either side of the Atlantic.

Negotiating bi-lateral agreements with Spain and Portugal for a temporary removal of the fleets from the fishing zone -- in exchange for increased quotas when fish returns -- will be a difficult sell in Canada where both nations are perceived as ruthless plunderers. It will be met also by considerable skepticism by Spain and Portugal.

Going for direct intervention and/or custodial management of one sort or another will be seen here as a strong and positive move. Needless to say, though, European nations will be quick to see it as a continuation of the overbearing attitude of Canada. A furore of diplomatic and international law responses may ensue....

Must we wait, then, until there are no more fish? Certainly not, and it is clear that action is needed now whether it is popular or not, on this side of the Atlantic or on the other.