



Martin Wilcox

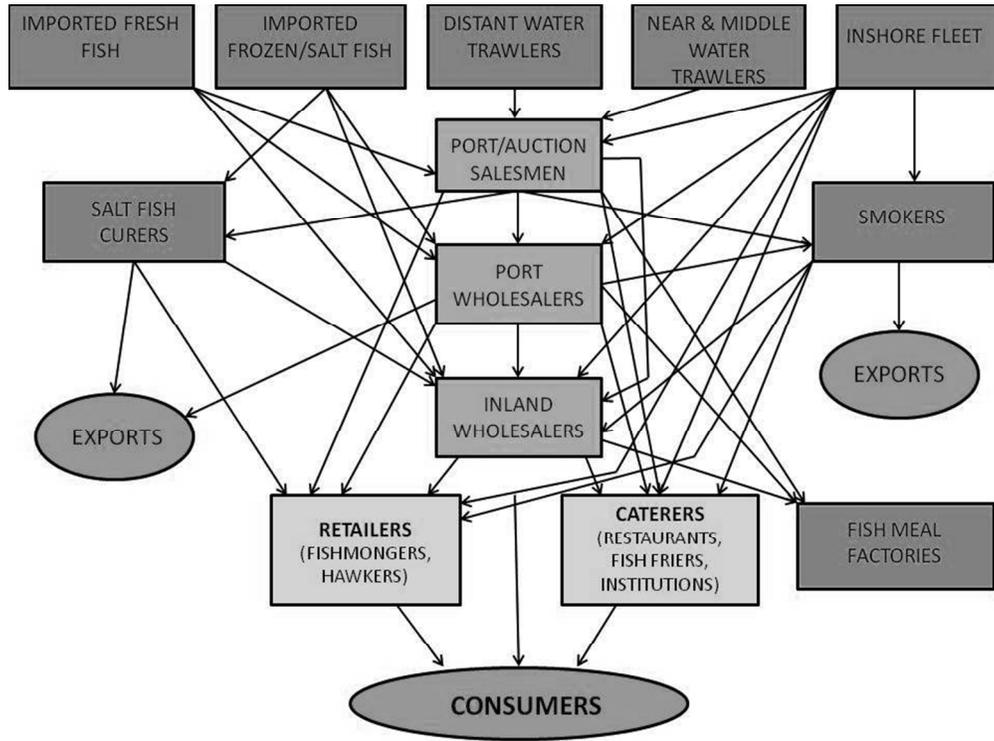
**'To Save the Industry from Complete Ruin' : Crisis and Response in British Fishing 1945-1951**

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Source: National Archives, MAF 209/709, Cabinet Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Minister of Food, 19 Jun 1950.

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## Tables

Table 1

## Distribution of Deep-Sea Trawlers, 1951

Port	Near Water (70-129')	Middle Water (130-140')	Distant water (140' and over)	Total
North Shields	41			41
Hartlepool	6			6
Scarborough	3			3
Hull		4	163	167
Grimsby	139	6	91	236
Lowestoft	120			120
Yarmouth	10			10
Ramsgate	2			2
Poole	1			1
Brixham	8			8
Newlyn	5			5
Plymouth	4			4
Cardiff	2	8		10
Swansea	7	3	3	13
Milford Haven	71	9	8	88
Fleetwood	80	22	23	125
Aberdeen	199	11	3	213
Montrose	3			3
Leith	39	14	1	54
	740	77	292	1,109

Source: White Fish Authority, *First Annual Report and Accounts for the period ended 31<sup>st</sup> March 1952*. London: White Fish Authority, 1952, 24.

**Table 2**  
**Ownership of Trawlers at selected Major Ports, 1934**

No. Vessels per firm	No. firms	No. vessels	Percentage of Vessels in each class of ownership					
			Total	Hull	Grimsby	Aberdeen	Fleetwood	Milford Haven
Under 5	206	352	28	11	25	41	31	56
5 to 9	39	240	19	15	17	28	20	13
10 to 19	26	326	25	22	25	22	36	31
Over 19	12	362	28	52	33	9	13	0
Totals	283	1,280	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Great Britain, Sea Fish Commission, *Second Report: The White Fish Industry*. London: HMSO, 1936, 20.

**Table 3**  
**Average Net Profit of Trawlers at Selected Ports, 1946-9, in Pence per Stone (14lb)**

	1946/7	1947/8	1948/9
<b>Distant Water</b>			
Hull	23.03	17.68	12.46
Grimsby	18.74	12.38	9.05
<b>Near and Middle Water</b>			
Grimsby (middle water)	5.13	4.11	-3.30
Grimsby (near water)	2.90	-8.01	-4.22
Fleetwood	10.66	9.54	6.61
North Shields	14.30	7.37	-4.85
Aberdeen	11.29	-6.57	-10.96
Milford Haven	6.75	-2.65	-7.00
Swansea	9.59	1.84	-10.17

Source: TNA, MAF 209/751. White Fish Industry: Short Term Remedies. Report of Official Committee.

## 'To Save the Industry from Complete Ruin':<sup>1</sup> Crisis and Response in British Fishing 1945-1951

### Abstract

Fishing is a small, complex and fragmented industry, which arguably exerts political significance disproportionate to its size. This article traces the prolonged period of depression which affected British deep-sea fishing between the wars, and then a more virulent crisis which erupted in the post-war years. It explores how the industry proved unable to respond effectively, requiring intervention from government which followed a similar pattern to that elsewhere in the economy, albeit tailored to the industry's peculiar circumstances and idiosyncratic nature.

### Keywords

Fisheries, Labour, productivity, crisis, reorganisation, industrial policy

Fishing is an idiosyncratic industry. It is the only primary producer that involves harvesting wild creatures. Defined broadly to encompass marketing and distribution, as it is here, it also contains elements of secondary processing, and tertiary marketing and sales. It is thus a complex and multifaceted business, and geographically highly dispersed one, with units scattered around much of the country. It is also a small one, which in part is why it has received relatively little attention from economic and business historians, and even some maritime historians have tended to overlook it, or to treat it as unimportant. Studies of its twentieth-century history tend to focus either on the labour history of the catching sector or on the science and politics of overfishing and attempts to ameliorate it, telling a familiar story of increasingly circumscribed access to fishing grounds leading to the collapse of the distant-water sector in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> This leaves important areas unexplored, including many key aspects of the business history of the industry. Among these is the crisis which enveloped the deep-sea fishing industry in the years after World War II, a crisis which came close to forcing the lay-up of most of the trawler fleet and cutting off much of the nation's fish supply almost overnight. Despite its seriousness, and despite the fact that government responded by putting in place two key planks of fisheries policy which remain in place, the crisis is virtually unknown. It is not mentioned even in the most comprehensive history of the deep-sea fisheries,<sup>3</sup> and even some major participants in the industry in the ensuing years are only dimly aware of it.<sup>4</sup>

This article examines the causes, course and effects of that crisis. It first provides an outline of the deep-sea fishing industry between the wars, and explains how the post-war crisis was rooted in problems that had begun to emerge during the 1920s. It also highlights, by way of background, some of the responses on the part of industry and government during the 1930s, arguing that the industry was too fragmented to address its structural weaknesses and required intervention from outside, although this was fairly limited. It then moves on to trace the debates over intervention which resurfaced in the years after World War II, before examining the renewed and much more serious crisis which engulfed the industry in 1949, the renewed inability of much of the industry to respond and the more aggressive intervention from central government. It concludes with a brief outline of the legacy of those years, and of how policy initiatives taken then endure in modified form to the present day.

### The Deep-Sea Fishing Industry, 1921-1945

The British deep-sea fishing industry experienced rapid growth from the 1840s to the outbreak of World War I. Between the wars, and after, it consisted of three sectors, defined by the size of the trawlers (which by then they all were, long-lining being largely defunct) used and the grounds they fished. Deep-sea fishing vessels were defined officially as those over 70' in length. Within this, vessels of 70-129' were termed 'near water,' and fished primarily for cod, haddock and other demersal fish in the North Sea, English Channel, Western Approaches and Irish Sea. Most were steam trawlers, although a dwindling number of sailing 'smacks' continued to trawl for high-value species, especially soles, from Lowestoft and Brixham until 1939, whilst internal combustion engines began to come into use during the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> 'Middle water' trawlers of 130-139' fished around the Faroe Islands, Rockall, the northern North Sea, and in summer off southern Iceland. 'Distant water' trawlers of over 140' fished Icelandic grounds, catching mainly cod and haddock, and from the 1920s the North Cape of Norway, Bear Island, Spitsbergen, the Barents Sea and the coasts of Greenland and Newfoundland.<sup>6</sup> The distribution of these vessels by port is given in Table 1.

[Table 1 here]

These figures pertain to 1951, as similar figures for the interwar period are unavailable. However, the distribution of the fleet was roughly similar, although the total number of vessels was greater.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the sailing smacks which dominated the industry until the 1880s had been owned by their skippers, and a few owner-skippers remained in the inter-war period, operating usually elderly near-water steam trawlers at Milford Haven and Aberdeen, and sailing trawlers at Lowestoft and Brixham.<sup>8</sup> The majority of vessels were owned by limited companies, but most of these were small concerns, as Table 2 indicates.

[Table 2 here]

Small the trawler firms may have been, but they were still much larger than most of the firms on the distributive side of the industry, where the majority of wholesalers both at the ports and the inland markets were very small concerns. In 1934, the average Grimsby wholesale merchant handled just 4,666cwt of fish, worth only £5,500. Many were one-man businesses, often financially precarious and short-lived.<sup>9</sup> Most processing firms, too, were small-scale operations, frequently undercapitalised and operating from cramped and insanitary premises.<sup>10</sup> The supply chain as a whole was very fragmented, as Figure 1 indicates.

**Figure 1**  
**The Fish Distribution Chain**

[figure 1 here]

Fish therefore could pass through the hands of four or more concerns, acquiring a mark-up at every stage, until by the time it reached the consumer its price was nearly double that which the wholesale merchant had paid to the trawler owner, whilst it was often none too fresh.<sup>11</sup>

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3 Not only was the industry as a whole fragmented, but it was also fractious. As Lowestoft MP  
4 Edward Evans noted in 1950, it was 'one of the least integrated of industries,'<sup>12</sup> in which ports  
5 jockeyed for position against one another, the three parts of the catching sector had differing  
6 priorities and problems, and the interests of catchers, wholesalers, retailers and processors diverged  
7 sharply and sometimes acrimoniously. This made it difficult for the industry to represent its  
8 collective interests to government and to powerful bodies such as the railway companies, upon  
9 which it depended for most long-distance transport.<sup>13</sup> It also ensured that 'unity of outlook and  
10 loyalty to an agreed course of action' were very difficult to achieve.<sup>14</sup>

11  
12 Such structural issues had mattered little in the years of steady growth before 1914, but  
13 became serious during the interwar period. Wages and costs had been driven up during World War I  
14 and fell but slowly afterwards, whereas fish prices peaked in 1919, and then entered a declining  
15 trend which lasted almost until the end of the 1930s.<sup>15</sup> This squeezed profits at all levels of the  
16 industry. Small and undercapitalised near- and middle-water trawler firms were unable to invest in  
17 new vessels, so the fleet became increasingly elderly. By 1934, 88 per cent of the fleet at the major  
18 ports, Hull excepted, were more than fifteen years old and a third had been built before World War  
19 I.<sup>16</sup> Many of these were operating in the North Sea, in which the problem of overfishing, and  
20 consequent low returns to catchers, had first been highlighted in the late nineteenth century and  
21 was increasingly serious by the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the period, seagoing employment and the  
22 number of vessels fell, and the legacy of outdated and unprofitable vessels persisted until well after  
23 World War II.

24  
25 On the distributive side the number of wholesale merchants increased. Wholesaling  
26 businesses required minimal capital to establish, and it was therefore an easy business for someone  
27 with some knowledge of the fish market and the ability to obtain a little credit to enter. Many of the  
28 new firms were founded by former employees of established ones. As their numbers grew, their  
29 average turnover fell. By 1934 the majority of wholesalers were making profits on turnover of less  
30 than one per cent, and at Grimsby, in particular, the average merchant was reckoned to be  
31 operating at a loss. As firms struggled to survive suspicions of sharp practice, such as the 'topping'  
32 inferior fish with a layer of high-quality fish to boost the price, and the formation of 'rings' to drive  
33 up prices, multiplied. Such activities tarnished the reputation of the industry and its products.<sup>18</sup>

34  
35 Despite these problems, national landings went up sharply because of the rapid  
36 development of distant-water trawling, which by 1930 had driven white fish landings to twenty-  
37 seven per cent above their 1913 level.<sup>19</sup> British fishing vessels had worked grounds around Iceland  
38 since the 1890s, but the interwar period saw a major move into waters further north, with a new  
39 generation of big trawlers, the majority owned and operated from Hull, which was exclusively a  
40 distant-water port after 1936, opening up grounds around Bear Island, Spitsbergen and the Barents  
41 Sea.<sup>20</sup> Catches from these grounds were very large, and although the fish was often of indifferent  
42 quality, it found a ready market through the expanding fish-and-chip shop trade. Distant-water  
43 fishing was therefore profitable at a time when much of the rest of the industry was struggling, and  
44 Hull presented 'air of enterprise and confidence' that contrasted sharply with the stagnation evident  
45 elsewhere. The industry at Hull was able to do this because trawler firms were fewer and larger,  
46 and therefore better able to invest in new vessels, and, because they were all distant-water  
47 operators, shared the same interests and priorities. In 1934 half of the Hull fleet was less than ten  
48 years old. Wholesale merchants in Hull, too, were on average much larger and more profitable than  
49 at the other major ports.<sup>21</sup> Trawler owners were able to introduce a voluntary scheme to prevent  
50 market gluts by restricting landings from northern waters in the summer months, and also a  
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3 minimum price agreement and a scheme whereby fish was filleted before sale and the resulting offal  
4 processed in a meal and oil plant owned by a consortium of vessel owners.<sup>22</sup> This was not achieved  
5 without some friction, notably between trawler owners and wholesalers over the minimum price  
6 scheme, to which the latter were strongly opposed,<sup>23</sup> but nevertheless Hull demonstrated the  
7 advantages of homogeneity and concentration, which made possible the 'unity of outlook and  
8 loyalty to an agreed course of action' so notably absent elsewhere.

9  
10 Hull's success, however, was alleged by others to have worsened the plight of the rest of the  
11 catching sector, as heavy landings from distant waters dragged down prices across the board.<sup>24</sup> Hull  
12 owners disputed this, arguing that they served separate markets and that their catches had no effect  
13 on prices for higher-quality fish from the home grounds.<sup>25</sup> It does seem, however, that heavy  
14 distant-water landings fed into the general trend of falling wholesale prices, worsened by the onset  
15 of the global economic depression in 1930. By 1931 the government's Economic Advisory  
16 Committee could write that:

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19 We are ... confronted with a situation in which the fish which the British trawling  
20 industry can market is substantially below its productive capacity.<sup>26</sup>

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23 The situation was exacerbated by rising imports of fresh fish. On the recommendation of the  
24 Economic Advisory Committee the Sea Fishing Industry Act of 1932 restricted imports to a total of  
25 1¼ million hundredweight, a ten per cent reduction on the 1930-2 level. That same Act empowered  
26 the Minister of Agriculture to impose restrictions on landings, and an Order was immediately made  
27 prohibiting landings from some of the distant-water grounds in the summer months, giving statutory  
28 force to the voluntary scheme previously agreed by Hull owners.<sup>27</sup>

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31 Restrictions on imports, ameliorated by bilateral deals with selected countries, were in line  
32 with the general thrust of British government policy during the depression.<sup>28</sup> The precedent they set  
33 was invoked repeatedly after the war when imports once again became controversial. Typical, too,  
34 were other measures taken to bolster the industry. Their problems were in some respects similar to  
35 those afflicting agriculture, and so were the solutions, which aimed at eliminating overcapacity,  
36 stabilising markets, bolstering demand and encouraging effective self-government. Under the  
37 Agricultural Marketing Acts, marketing and minimum-price schemes financed by levies were set up  
38 by new bodies such as the Milk and Potato Marketing Boards.<sup>29</sup> The first application of this thinking  
39 to fisheries actually addressed the herring fishing industry – not part of the deep-sea sector – for  
40 which the Herring Industry Board was set up in 1935 to oversee a programme of grants and loans to  
41 encourage investment in more efficient vessels, research and development of new catching and  
42 processing technologies, and improvements in marketing.<sup>30</sup> The Herring Industry Board, which  
43 survived until 1981, set the precedent for intervention in the deep-sea fisheries, which came in the  
44 form of the White Fish Commission, established under the Sea Fisheries Act of 1938.<sup>31</sup> It was tasked  
45 with conducting a comprehensive review of the industry, in the wake of which it would introduce  
46 regulations on handling, grading and quality control, and develop marketing schemes similar to  
47 those already in force for various agricultural products.<sup>32</sup> It was also empowered to enforce  
48 registration of firms and individuals engaged in the fish trades, and to co-ordinate research and  
49 development work. This was not just in line with British government policy: in many other European  
50 countries governments took broadly similar measures to protect and stabilise their fishing  
51 industries.<sup>33</sup>

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3 The White Fish Commission represented a recognition on the part of government that  
4 'considerably improved organisation within the Industry ... is an indispensable condition for any  
5 comprehensive solution' to its problems,<sup>34</sup> and that the industry as a whole was incapable of pulling  
6 together to achieve this for itself. It made an energetic start, and during 1938-9 mounted a series of  
7 enquiries that highlighted problems such as resentment of foreign landings, import restrictions  
8 notwithstanding, and rising costs, especially of the coal that fuelled most trawlers at the time.  
9 However, by the time it completed its first annual report the outbreak of war was imminent. The  
10 report was never published, and in September 1939 the Commission was suspended and its staff  
11 diverted to war work.<sup>35</sup> It had achieved little, but did open the way to government intervention in  
12 an industry traditionally hostile to interference from outside.  
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15 The war caused huge disruption to the fishing industry. Many vessels were requisitioned for  
16 naval service, especially the largest and fastest trawlers, and most of those that remained in service  
17 were redirected away from the vulnerable east coast. Hull was left with just one trawler from its  
18 pre-war fleet of 191 by the end of 1940, and there were none at all at Lowestoft.<sup>36</sup> Landings by  
19 British vessels throughout the war were less than a third of their pre-war level, and imports, quotas  
20 on which were suspended for the duration, rose sharply to compensate. Total imports in 1938 were  
21 1,123,524cwt, whereas by 1944 they stood at no less than 4,176,302cwt, of which 71 per cent came  
22 from Iceland.<sup>37</sup> The distribution system was also reorganised. The government's initial plan to  
23 distribute fish from regional depots failed before the end of 1939, and was replaced with a new  
24 system whereby wholesale merchants at the ports were granted an allocation by the Ministry of  
25 Food. This entailed a licensing scheme for merchants, the first time entry to the trade had been thus  
26 controlled, and also from 1942 the division of the country into zones, each supplied by certain ports.  
27 Transport arrangements were altered too, with the introduction of a flat rate of carriage to cut the  
28 cost of transporting fish from more remote, especially northern Scottish, ports.<sup>38</sup> Fish was not  
29 rationed, but prices rose steadily from the summer of 1940, and reached 'phenomenal' levels the  
30 following spring, which forced the Ministry of Food to introduce price controls from June 1941.<sup>39</sup>  
31 The wartime arrangements were unpopular, because fish remained expensive and was often of poor  
32 quality, and because there were periodic shortages.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, fish never disappeared from the  
33 shops altogether, and catchers and distributors alike made reasonable profits. All of this served to  
34 mask the difficulties that had beset the fishing industry during the 1930s, which began to re-emerge  
35 in the post-war years.  
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### 43 **Reconstruction, Prosperity and Slump, 1945-50**

44 The Labour government that came to power in July 1945 faced unprecedented economic problems.  
45 To the dislocation and physical damage caused by the war were added vast debts which  
46 necessitated loans from America and engendered recurrent balance of payments crises, and also  
47 severe shortages of fuel, food and other goods.<sup>41</sup> Alongside these formidable and well known  
48 difficulties, fishing hardly loomed large on the political agenda. It was a small industry, widely  
49 dispersed around the country and lacking in organised political representation, and although some  
50 fishing-port constituencies did return knowledgeable and able Members of Parliament they came  
51 from across the party political spectrum and rarely acted in concert.<sup>42</sup> Yet fishing did matter. Firstly,  
52 it was a major employer in parts of the country where alternative employment was at best scarce, at  
53 a time when the experience of mass unemployment was fresh in policymakers' minds. Secondly, it  
54 was strategically important, as a provider of food and as a source of vessels and highly skilled labour  
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3 for the Royal Navy to draw upon in wartime. Finally, the activities of fishing vessels in the waters of  
4 other states gave it an international dimension absent from other industries of comparable size.  
5 From 1948 onwards, the industry began to assume greater prominence in the minds of politicians, as  
6 the problems of the 1930s re-emerged in more virulent form, and were joined by new issues thrown  
7 up by the changed geopolitical climate.  
8

9 The Duncan Commission had highlighted inefficiencies in the supply chain, an aged fishing  
10 fleet and overproduction. The first of these was in abeyance, since wartime distribution  
11 arrangements remained in force, but the second had been worsened by the war because many of  
12 the newest vessels had been lost on naval service. The fleet had already begun to expand again,  
13 however, as the Admiralty began to demobilise vessels and pass them back to their owners, a  
14 process which had begun as early as 1943 and ensured that the major east coast ports were  
15 functioning again by the time the war in Europe ended. Some firms also went on a building spree,  
16 such as Hull-based Kingston Steam Trawling, which embarked upon a programme of updating its  
17 fleet by selling off old vessels and purchasing new tonnage.<sup>43</sup> Between 1945 and 1948 the numbers  
18 of trawlers active at Hull rose from 99 to 149, at Grimsby from 168 to 254 and at Fleetwood from 31  
19 to 127, although there was a small drop at Lowestoft, from 66 to 62.<sup>44</sup> The pre-war pattern, of near-  
20 and middle-water vessels dispersed around a variety of ports whilst the Humber and Fleetwood  
21 dominated the distant-water sector, quickly re-emerged, as the figures in Table 2 show.  
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24 During 1949 alone, 32 new distant-water trawlers came into operation. Many of these were  
25 deployed on the northern grounds, which had been little exploited for six years and now yielded  
26 very high catches, and they also made slightly longer trips than before the war.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, by  
27 late 1946 some on the distributive side of the industry were already voicing concerns about a  
28 recurrence of the overproduction problem.<sup>46</sup> Total fish supplies in 1947-9 were over the million-ton  
29 mark, as opposed to 800,000 before the war, primarily because of the resurgence of distant-water  
30 fishing. Moreover, costs were rising again. Kingston Steam Trawling noted in 1947 that the cost of  
31 new vessels had risen from £83,000 to £99,000, and by 1949 they had reached £125,000.<sup>47</sup> Labour  
32 costs were rising, the coal shortages of 1947-8 drove up the fuel bill, and across the industry there  
33 was a 'persistent increase in prices of stores and supplies.'<sup>48</sup> This began to squeeze the incomes of  
34 trawler firms, especially those deploying near- and middle-water vessels on the North Sea grounds  
35 where, even by late 1946, signs of overfishing were re-emerging. Yields began to drop off after a  
36 post-war high, and much of the catch was small and of low value.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the pre-war import  
37 controls had not been reinstated, although a ten per cent *ad valorem* duty was in force, and imports  
38 were well above their pre-war levels. Britain imported 6,029,808cwt of fish in 1947 and 4,997,366  
39 the following year, as opposed to a 1938 figure of 3,558,000.<sup>50</sup>  
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44 All of this could have spelled a rapid return to the depression of the 1930s, but two factors  
45 stabilised the situation for the time being. Firstly, the general economic climate of the late 1940s  
46 helped to shore up demand. Substitute foodstuffs, especially poultry and red meat, were still  
47 rationed, and indeed the meat ration was cut to below wartime levels in 1946. Moreover, although  
48 fish had not been rationed, shortages had served to limit consumption during the war. For both of  
49 these reasons there was sufficient demand from consumers to absorb the increase in supplies in the  
50 immediate post-war years.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, for the time being much of the wartime distribution  
51 structure remained in place. Price controls continued, as did flat-rate transport and the system of  
52 merchants' allocations. This was slightly modified in 1947 and allocations were granted to some  
53 new entrants, drawing protests from existing merchants whose allocations would be encroached  
54 upon. During 1947-8, too, the zoning scheme was amended and some of the controls on which  
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3 inland wholesalers port merchants could supply were withdrawn.<sup>52</sup> These were only slight  
4 relaxations, however, and the wartime distribution scheme remained essentially intact.

5 By 1948 the climate was changing. Controls, which were felt to have outlived their  
6 usefulness, were beginning to be removed in various sectors of the economy, culminating in Harold  
7 Wilson's 'bonfire of the controls' at the Board of Trade.<sup>53</sup> The government's attitude towards  
8 sectors such as fishing was becoming clearer too. Minister of Food John Strachey explained to Hull  
9 merchants in 1947 that it intended 'to create open competition in trades which could not be  
10 nationalised in order to safeguard the public against exploitation.'<sup>54</sup> Such thinking underlay a  
11 broader attack on monopolies and restrictive practices.<sup>55</sup> All of this pointed in the direction of  
12 decontrol in the fish trades, and during 1948 pressure for this began to build up, especially from the  
13 BTF.<sup>56</sup> Consideration was given to a staged process, controls on retail prices remaining temporarily  
14 whilst those on prices further up the supply chain were removed, but merchants opposed this on the  
15 grounds that it would create chaos and encourage the black market, an argument the government  
16 evidently accepted.<sup>57</sup> The tide was now flowing in the direction of complete decontrol, and during  
17 1948-9 expectation built up that 'controls would be off altogether.'<sup>58</sup>

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21 As decontrol came into view the first signs of serious trouble began to emerge. The first  
22 issue was the connected problems of overfishing and fishery limits. Neither was new, but the latter  
23 was beginning to assume a more intractable form, and bore especially hard on the distant-water  
24 fleet. Britain had signed an international convention on overfishing in the North Sea in 1946, in an  
25 attempt to prevent a recurrence of pre-war overfishing, and two years later the White Fish and  
26 Herring Industries Act of 1948<sup>59</sup> gave the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries the power to impose a  
27 licensing scheme on vessels working the North Sea grounds. The convention did not come into force  
28 until 1954, however, and even then it was largely ineffectual.<sup>60</sup> In any case, British attempts to  
29 combat overfishing aimed at securing multilateral agreements controlling fishing effort on the High  
30 Seas, whereas by this time, in the wake of President Truman's 1945 proclamation on the United  
31 States' right to control the resources of the continental shelf, others were more focused on  
32 unilateral extensions of fishery limits.<sup>61</sup> Iceland posed a particular problem in this respect. Having  
33 gained independence from Denmark in 1944, in 1949 the Icelandic government gave two years'  
34 notice of intention to abrogate the 1901 Anglo-Danish treaty which fixed Iceland's territorial waters  
35 at three miles and allowed fishing right up to that limit.<sup>62</sup> British trawlers also faced increasing  
36 restrictions on their activities off the coasts of Norway and the USSR, about which the British  
37 government could do little.<sup>63</sup>

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41 Nor could much be done about the catching sector's costs. For much of 1948 fish sold in the  
42 shops at or near to the controlled maximum price,<sup>64</sup> but the rising cost of catching, especially in near  
43 waters, meant that this was no longer enough to return a profit. Table 3 presents the results of a  
44 Ministry of Food investigation of the costs and revenues of various trawlers between 1946 and 1949.

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47 [Table 3 here]

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50 As Table 3 shows, generally healthy profits in 1946-7 dwindled rapidly until by 1948-9 most near-  
51 and middle-water vessels were making serious losses. Nationally, of 837 such vessels, no fewer than  
52 637 had been built before 1921. Many were worn out and expensive to maintain, and as coal  
53 burners they were vulnerable to the general increase in fuel costs. They also offered dismal  
54 accommodation and working conditions, which were held to deter young men from entering the  
55 industry at a time of full employment.<sup>65</sup> There was little hope of replacing them in the foreseeable

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3 future. To tide them over, the Ministry of Food began paying a subsidy of ten pence per stone on  
4 fish landed from near- and middle-water grounds from November 1948, joining an international  
5 trend towards subsidising fishing which had accelerated between the wars but which Britain had not  
6 joined.<sup>66</sup> This was just about sufficient to restore profitability, but few can have been under any  
7 illusions that it would resolve the industry's difficulties.  
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9 An already precarious situation took a sharp turn for the worse a year later, when  
10 predictions of a renewed overproduction problem were suddenly vindicated, and the sellers' market  
11 of the immediate post-war years came to an abrupt halt. As the general food shortages abated and  
12 rationing, especially of meat, was eased, consumers looked upon fish with increasing disfavour and  
13 consumption began to fall.<sup>67</sup> Price controls had encouraged catchers to aim for quantity rather than  
14 quality, and much distant-water fish, especially, was stale. This in turn dragged down the price of  
15 better quality fish.<sup>68</sup> As *The Economist* put it, fish embodied 'all the least attractive features of  
16 austerity,' and consumers were 'sick, tired and fed up' with it.<sup>69</sup> Wholesale prices suddenly  
17 collapsed in November 1949. A year earlier, a stone of cod at Grimsby had sold for 6s 6d, but this  
18 now fell to 3s 7d. Nationally, cod prices fell from 5s 10d per stone to 3s 7d.<sup>70</sup> This plunged the near-  
19 and middle-water sectors back into crisis, and the distant-water fleet into 'crippling' losses.<sup>71</sup> It was  
20 apparent to all concerned that there was no easy solution, and that the 1948 subsidy scheme, which  
21 had helped to hold the line up to this point, would not prevent the situation worsening. Equally,  
22 however, it was widely accepted by now that controls were part of the problem. Not only did they  
23 encourage catchers to prioritise quantity over quality, but by assigning quota to each merchant they  
24 destroyed competition and removed any incentive to improve efficiency. In short, 'trade channels  
25 became stereotyped.'<sup>72</sup> This hastened the move towards decontrol, in the hope that it would  
26 encourage catchers to land better quality and thus more valuable fish, which should help to restore  
27 profitability.<sup>73</sup>  
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32 Decontrol came on Saturday 15 April 1950. At the same time, the Ministry of Food subsidy  
33 to near- and middle-water catchers ended, and also the flat rate transport scheme and the  
34 remaining licensing restrictions on wholesalers, the latter against the advice of the trade, which was  
35 well aware that the wholesaling business remained all too easy for the unscrupulous and unsuitable  
36 to enter.<sup>74</sup> The result was chaos. The number of wholesale merchants on the fish market in Hull  
37 went up from 400 to 600 literally overnight, and similar increases occurred at other ports. Amid  
38 'frenzied bidding' at the auctions, prices rocketed. Two days later, on the Monday, this was 'sharply  
39 corrected.'<sup>75</sup> Wholesalers at the inland markets refused to purchase fish at such prices, and  
40 consumer resistance also emerged. As Barbara Castle put it in the House of Commons a fortnight  
41 later, 'the Housewife is becoming tired of these conspiracies against her purse.'<sup>76</sup> Demand ebbed  
42 away, and the spike in prices gave way to a renewed fall. The price of distant-water fish dropped  
43 from an average of 4s 6d per stone in the week ending 22 April 1950 to 3s 1d by 13 May, and  
44 distant-water trawlers' average earnings dwindled from £173 per day at sea to just £115, against an  
45 estimated cost of £200 per day to keep a big trawler at sea. Once again, plummeting prices for  
46 distant-water fish served to drag down prices across the board.<sup>77</sup>  
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50 In the face of such losses, owners began tying up their vessels. Thirty-nine trawlers were  
51 laid up at Grimsby by the end of April, and eighteen at Lowestoft a fortnight later.<sup>78</sup> Nationally, by  
52 the last week of May, 170 of the estimated national fleet of 1,142 trawlers were laid up. The  
53 position was especially serious at Milford Haven, where nearly a third of the fleet lay idle, but  
54 Aberdeen, Grimsby, Fleetwood and Hull had also been badly hit.<sup>79</sup> At a stormy meeting on 18 May,  
55 the BTF decided against ordering a complete lay-up of its members' vessels, mainly because such a  
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3 move would cost the industry dear in terms of goodwill,<sup>80</sup> but the position remained highly unstable,  
4 and on 19 June Federation President Jack Croft Baker again reported to the Ministry of Agriculture  
5 and Fisheries that he had 'had great difficulty in restraining the meeting from deciding to lay up all  
6 trawlers' forthwith.<sup>81</sup> Croft Baker may have been exaggerating, and certainly some within the  
7 Ministry felt that a 'complete stoppage' was unlikely, not least because the BTF did not speak for the  
8 whole sector.<sup>82</sup> Hull trawler owners had left the Federation before the war and only rejoined in  
9 1950, but thereafter all were members, whereas in early 1951 only 36 of the 113 trawlers at  
10 Lowestoft were covered.<sup>83</sup> Nor did the BTF cover Scotland, whose catchers were represented by the  
11 Scottish Trawlers' Federation. BTF members or not, however, trawlers were losing money and  
12 increasing numbers were being laid up, and whilst a complete stoppage was unlikely it remained an  
13 alarming possibility.  
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16 How serious would such a stoppage have been? The first result would have been to cut  
17 much of the nation's fish supply off, almost literally overnight. Given that in 1949 the deep-sea  
18 trawler fleet landed 90 per cent of the British catch, if only half of the fleet had tied up the effect on  
19 supplies would have been profound.<sup>84</sup> There would doubtless have been a surge in imports to  
20 compensate, which would have helped to support processors and distributors but would have  
21 depressed the catchers' position further. Nor would it have been sufficient to prevent prices  
22 soaring. Even though wholesale prices had plummeted this had not yet been reflected in the shops,  
23 where fish continued to sell at around its former control prices, and there was now nothing to  
24 prevent it rising further. This in turn could lead to a demand for the reintroduction of price controls,  
25 something the government was keen to avoid.<sup>85</sup> Certainly, shortages and high prices would have  
26 been unpopular. It is telling that two years later the British Housewives' League and Cheap Food  
27 League, along with *The People* newspaper, mounted a major campaign against renewed landing  
28 restrictions by distant-water trawling firms.<sup>86</sup> What the government and civil servants professed to  
29 fear most, however, was unemployment. By late May 3,500 men were already out of work and  
30 thousands more would follow in the event of a mass lay-up, not only among fishermen themselves,  
31 but in ancillary industries such as trawler maintenance and supplies, and in processing firms starved  
32 of fish.<sup>87</sup> This would have caused severe hardship in the fishing ports, where alternative  
33 employment was not easily found, and civil disturbances could follow.<sup>88</sup>  
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38 One thing that was certain was that the crisis was becoming an increasing embarrassment to  
39 the government. Conservative MPs such as Richard Law had already used it to mock Labour's 'claim  
40 to have provided full employment,' and similar sentiments were being voiced behind closed doors.<sup>89</sup>  
41 For all of these reasons, even though it affected a small and dispersed industry, the crisis was  
42 greeted with some alarm. As the Fisheries Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries,  
43 Peter Dunn, put it, 'the situation is deteriorating so rapidly and is likely to become [so] acutely  
44 embarrassing to government that some announcement on policy cannot long be delayed.'<sup>90</sup>  
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### 48 Responses

49 The deep-sea fishing industry in the 1940s was no less fragmented, fractious and difficult to  
50 coordinate than it had been between the wars. The distant-water trawling sector, relatively small  
51 and concentrated in a few ports, did manage to develop a scheme to combat overproduction and  
52 shore up prices, but even here agreement from all players was impossible to secure. For the  
53 industry as a whole the attitude of government, shared by civil servants in all of the relevant  
54 Ministries, was once again that it was incapable of resolving its own problems and required decisive  
55 intervention.  
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3 The first reaction of almost the entire catching sector, and the one thing on which they all  
4 agreed, was to blame the crisis on imports, pre-war restrictions on which had not been re-imposed.  
5 As early as June 1946 a drop in wholesale prices had led trawler crews or officers at Hull, Grimsby,  
6 Aberdeen, North Shields and Lowestoft, who were paid partly by share of profits, to refuse to put to  
7 sea.<sup>91</sup> Crews blamed imports, a cry taken up by trawler owners, who complained that the  
8 government would do nothing to restrict them despite the 'tremendous harm' being done to the  
9 domestic industry.<sup>92</sup> Agitation became fiercer during 1948 and reached a crescendo in 1949-50 as  
10 their financial position crumbled. In May 1950 the Lowestoft Fishing Vessel Owners Association sent  
11 a telegram to the Ministry and local MPs stating that their situation was 'becoming critical mainly  
12 due to foreign imports,' and stressing the need for 'immediate government action to prevent  
13 collapse and general unemployment.'<sup>93</sup> This was followed a fortnight later by a deputation from the  
14 BTF, which demanded both a subsidy to see the industry through the immediate crisis, and  
15 restriction of imports to 1938 levels.<sup>94</sup> Trawler owners at all major ports were agreed that, without  
16 import restrictions, their future looked bleak.

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20 If the trawler owners and crews had nailed their colours to the protectionist mast, however,  
21 others were not so sure. Some wholesalers felt that the lack of import restrictions was unfair to the  
22 domestic fleet, and in Lowestoft the merchants broadly supported the local trawler firms upon  
23 whose supplies they depended. On the Humber, however, trawler owners' proposals that  
24 wholesalers should refrain from buying fish landed by foreign vessels met with support only from  
25 Grimsby merchants on condition that their counterparts in Hull agreed to do likewise. This, after  
26 some debate, they did not agree to, mainly because many of them were selling fish landed by  
27 foreign vessels, which continued to come to British ports despite facing hostility and sometimes  
28 obstruction from shoreside workers and trawlermen.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, wartime cooperation between  
29 catchers and merchants was starting to revert to the antagonism of the 1930s. In the largest port,  
30 Hull, some trawler owners, via their interests in the local ice-manufacturing firm, attempted to  
31 secure a merchants' licence and allocation, and thus enter the distributive side of the industry,  
32 something the established wholesalers were keen to resist.<sup>96</sup> At least one scheme to improve the  
33 quality and marketing of fish at the port had already collapsed due to lack of cooperation.<sup>97</sup> The  
34 climate of mutual suspicion and occasional recriminations between catchers and distributors did not  
35 make the industry any easier to deal with, and nor did the fact that the distant-water sector's  
36 problems were bound up with the international political and economic situation.

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40 The distant-water sector, though, at least retained its longstanding advantage of being small,  
41 concentrated and cohesive, and this was the one part of the industry that managed a partial solution  
42 to its difficulties. From the late 1940s owners had recognised that the overproduction problem  
43 1930s was likely to recur at some point, and began working on a plan to restrict catching capacity  
44 and limit landings from northern waters. By March 1950 distant-water firms at Hull and Grimsby  
45 had prepared a draft scheme.<sup>98</sup> Negotiations were hastened by the crisis then reaching its height,  
46 and the scheme was signed by most distant-water firms on the Humber in July that year. Even here  
47 agreement was not universal, however, for firms representing eleven per cent of the two ports'  
48 distant-water capacity declined to join what was by then termed the Distant Water Vessels'  
49 Development Scheme.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the only other significant distant-water port, Fleetwood, had  
50 not been consulted and was presented with it as a *fait accompli*, which the Humber firms declined to  
51 modify to accommodate the Lancashire port's circumstances.<sup>100</sup> This was done later, however, when  
52 a revised Development Scheme was worked up in less haste, and within a few years it embraced the  
53 entire distant-water sector in England, although the few distant-water vessels in Scotland remained  
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3 outside it.<sup>101</sup> It allowed for the lay-up of up to 25 per cent of capacity on a seasonal basis,  
4 restrictions on the building and modification of distant-water trawlers, and a system of vessel quotas  
5 to prevent excessive landings.<sup>102</sup>

6 The Development Scheme did not immediately restore the distant-water sector to profit,  
7 and investigations in 1952 and 1953 suggested that it was still losing money.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless,  
8 owners were confident that in the longer term it would solve their problems, and it does appear to  
9 have brought a measure of much-needed stability.<sup>104</sup> Yet the distant-water sector, although it  
10 contributed more than two-thirds of British white fish landings,<sup>105</sup> was but one part of the catching  
11 sector. Resolving the immediate and longer-term problems afflicting dozens of smaller firms that  
12 made up the near- and middle-water sectors, curing the inefficiencies in the supply chain and  
13 creating some order out of the highly fragmented industry as a whole were tasks of a different order  
14 of magnitude. They were tasks that, in the opinion of many in government and some in the industry  
15 itself, required decisive intervention from outside.<sup>106</sup>

16 The task of formulating a plan to intervene fell primarily to civil servants in the Ministry of  
17 Agriculture and Fisheries, who greeted the crisis with some alarm, but also with exasperation. As  
18 one remarked, at decontrol the industry had 'once again demonstrated its utter irresponsibility and  
19 absence of discipline.'<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, they had to fight on two fronts. Firstly, urgent action was  
20 needed to stem the catchers' losses and halt the lay-ups, and secondly, they needed to formulate a  
21 plan to put the industry back on its feet in the longer term.

22 The question of how to stave off collapse in the catching sector was debated intensely  
23 during early 1950. Calls for import restrictions were given short shrift. At an interdepartmental  
24 conference in May 1950 representatives from various departments pointed out that an industry  
25 which catered for 85 per cent of the home market could not, *prima facie*, be considered threatened  
26 by imports, and that they were in any case declining. Indeed, as a representative of the Board of  
27 Trade commented, imports had 'remarkably little to do with the matter.' Instead, criticism was  
28 levelled at the British industry for waxing fat in the sellers' market of the immediate post-war years  
29 and failing to address inefficiencies highlighted by the Duncan Commission, whose report was now  
30 fourteen years old. In short, most departments felt that the problems lay at home, and that  
31 although import restrictions might provide a little short-term relief, they were not the panacea the  
32 trawler owners seemed to think.<sup>108</sup>

33 In any case, the question of protection opened up wider issues of Britain's international  
34 situation. In particular, any attempt to restrict imports would have hurt Iceland badly. Fish and its  
35 products accounted for around 90 per cent of Icelandic exports, of which about a third went to  
36 Britain.<sup>109</sup> Trawler owners were well aware of this, which is why they urged government to use the  
37 threat of restrictions to deter Iceland from extending her fishery limits. Yet this ignored more  
38 fundamental geopolitical difficulties. Iceland was crucial to the Atlantic Alliance and becoming more  
39 so as the Cold War began to take shape, and overlaying everything was the possibility that Iceland  
40 could throw in its lot with the Communist bloc, with serious implications for the position of the  
41 nascent North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in the northern seas. This was why ultimately, despite  
42 the aggressive attitude of the industry and some in the civil service, especially Peter Dunn, who felt  
43 the Icelanders were 'wholly unreliable as friends,' the Foreign Office's conciliatory view prevailed  
44 and Iceland was treated with caution.<sup>110</sup>

45 Moreover, the international economic climate was shifting fast, away from the  
46 protectionism of the 1930s and towards a more liberal, free-trade order. The United States was at  
47 the forefront of liberalisation, and the United Kingdom, beset by post-war economic difficulties, had

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3 little choice but to acquiesce, even though some within the Labour government were unhappy about  
4 it.<sup>111</sup> Among the aims of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation, founded in 1948,  
5 was the promotion of free trade through reduction of tariff barriers and import controls, whilst the  
6 year before Britain had been one of the founding signatories of the General Agreement on Trade  
7 and Tariffs. Its impact was initially small, but it did make imposing new restrictions politically  
8 difficult.<sup>112</sup> In this climate, restricting fish imports, which would hurt not only Iceland but also  
9 Norway and Denmark, and to a lesser extent Belgium and the Netherlands, would create a  
10 'deplorable impression.'<sup>113</sup> It would upset much of Europe and the United States, and undermine  
11 the UK's wider policy on international trade. The Foreign Office also felt that it risked sparking off a  
12 trade war, with potentially even more harmful consequences.<sup>114</sup> For both of these reasons, although  
13 consideration was given behind the scenes to restricting imports, and at one stage the possibility  
14 was even discussed with the OEEC,<sup>115</sup> calls from within the industry and from parliamentary  
15 protectionists of left and right<sup>116</sup> could not be allowed to prevail, and solutions to the fishing  
16 industry's crisis had to be sought at home.

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20 If reviving import restrictions was politically impossible, and there was no prospect of a  
21 resurgence of demand to push up prices, the only short-term option open was to subsidise the  
22 industry until times improved.<sup>117</sup> This was hotly debated between departments in the early months  
23 of 1950. The Treasury held out against a subsidy, arguing that the need for it was unproven. No  
24 other department took quite this line, but objections from the Ministry of Food and Board of Trade,  
25 among others, were founded on the belief that an open-ended subsidy would simply perpetuate the  
26 fisheries' problems, and that any financial assistance would have to come with conditions, and an  
27 acceptance of the need for restructuring.<sup>118</sup> In fact, even those who advocated a subsidy, such as  
28 officials from MAF, were agreed that 'some amount of blood-letting was necessary,' but felt that the  
29 alternative was the collapse of much of the industry.<sup>119</sup> They also pointed out that fish was in  
30 competition with foods whose production was far more heavily subsidised, and that fishing had  
31 received little protection from rising costs and subsidised foreign competition. Moreover, although  
32 representatives from the Ministry of Labour had argued that government money would be better  
33 spent on creating alternative employment opportunities in the fishing ports, in practice this would  
34 be extremely difficult to achieve, so the result of leaving the industry's fortunes to the market would  
35 probably be mass unemployment, spiralling retail prices and perhaps unwelcome demands for the  
36 reimposition of price controls.<sup>120</sup> Perhaps inevitably, the result was a compromise; a time-limited  
37 subsidy intended to tide the industry over until longer-term remedies to its ailments could be  
38 applied from outside.

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43 There was little debate over what form this new intervention should take. Nationalisation of  
44 the fishing fleet was never considered, despite some calls from backbench Labour MPs.<sup>121</sup> Fishing,  
45 unlike the industries that were targeted for nationalisation, was not a basic industry providing  
46 services to the rest of the economy, and the dozens of firms that comprised it lacked a cadre of  
47 professional managers to whom its running could be entrusted.<sup>122</sup> It therefore fitted ill with Labour's  
48 generally technocratic approach to nationalisation. In any case, it was felt that the trawler owners  
49 would almost certainly refuse to cooperate, which was probably correct, not least because the  
50 industry tended to gravitate towards the Conservative Party. Several trawler firms were regular  
51 donors to it, in some cases along with free-market lobby group the Economic League, and regarded  
52 the Labour government with suspicion.<sup>123</sup> Nor was there any realistic prospect of nationalising even  
53 part of the plethora of small firms that made up the processing and distributive sides of the industry.  
54 Therefore, for all that some trawling firms suspected otherwise,<sup>124</sup> the government was determined

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3 that as far as possible fishing would be 'left to the operation of the price mechanism,' and  
4 competition would be encouraged to keep prices to the consumer as low as possible.<sup>125</sup>

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6 The government therefore proceeded on the assumption that fishing would remain within  
7 the private sector, but that some form of independent body was needed to drive through the  
8 necessary restructuring. One obvious option, suggested back in 1947, was to revive the White Fish  
9 Commission.<sup>126</sup> Yet this had been a consultative body, and its powers of compulsion were too  
10 limited for the radical reorganisation now deemed necessary. The Commission was therefore  
11 officially abandoned and civil servants spent much of 1949 and early 1950 drawing up a successor  
12 body with 'dictatorial powers.'<sup>127</sup> Like the Development Councils established in certain other  
13 industries in an attempt to drive through modernisation this was not to be a representative body,  
14 still less one dominated by Trade Associations representing sectional interests.<sup>128</sup> Rather, it was to  
15 be composed of outsiders whose task was to examine and reform the industry as a whole, albeit in  
16 consultation with an advisory council.<sup>129</sup> In short, it was an organisation very much in line with the  
17 Attlee governments' wider commitment to raising productivity and improving efficiency across the  
18 private sector, itself a philosophy rooted in the 1930s and consolidated during and after the war.<sup>130</sup>

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20 Provisionally called the White Fish Industry Board, the new body was to be charged with the  
21 'regulation, reorganisation and development of the white fish industry,' which was defined very  
22 broadly to encompass all sea fish other than herring, whose production and distribution was still  
23 overseen by the Herring Industry Board. What form this reorganisation would take was to be left to  
24 the Board to determine after it had investigated the industry. However, it was to have powers to  
25 'secure the merger of trawler owners, processors and wholesale merchants at the ports of landing,'  
26 to 'rationalise the marketing and distribution of fish by operating marketing schemes controlled by  
27 the Board and not by producers' and 'to operate schemes for regulating catches of fish by British  
28 vessels and dealing with landings of foreign caught fish.' It would be entitled to trade in fish and  
29 operate processing plant on its own account, and 'to acquire and operate fishing vessels and  
30 processing plants.' It would also be empowered to register all participants in the industry, and  
31 endowed with powers of entry and inspection of premises and books to ensure compliance.<sup>131</sup> All of  
32 this pointed to fundamental restructuring of the distribution chain, and rationalisation and close  
33 regulation of catching. From the outset, however, Ministers quietly assured the BTF that the Board  
34 would have no power to purchase companies' shares compulsorily and that its powers to trade in its  
35 own right would in practice only be deployed where existing marketing arrangements were  
36 inadequate, which would be in small ports and would thus affect mainly the inshore fisheries.<sup>132</sup>

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38 The remainder of the Board's powers were less potentially controversial, and resembled  
39 those of the pre-war Commission. It was to be empowered, subject to ministerial approval, to  
40 establish national regulations on handling of fish, quality control and minimum price schedules, to  
41 develop marketing and publicity campaigns to increase demand for the industry's products, and to  
42 establish schemes and bodies to promote exports. It was to act as a coordinating body for publicly-  
43 funded research and development, in collaboration with the Department of Scientific and Industrial  
44 Research, which operated the Torry Research Station at Aberdeen and was in the process of setting  
45 up a branch laboratory in Hull specialising in fish quality and preservation.<sup>133</sup> In this respect it fitted  
46 into the general trend of expansion in government-funded industrial research in the late 1940s.<sup>134</sup>  
47 Finally, the Board was to act as the conduit for government money flowing to the industry. It would  
48 provide grants for training of fishermen and shore-based workers, and it would administer a system  
49 of government-funded grants and loans for modernisation and replacement of shore establishments  
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3 and fishing vessels. All of this would be funded partly by the Treasury, and partly by a levy of a  
4 penny per stone on all white fish, deducted at the point of first sale.<sup>135</sup>

5 The process culminated in Clement Attlee's statement to the House of Commons on 4 July  
6 1950, in which he remarked that:

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8 The difficulties of the white fish industry are basic, complex, and of long standing. There  
9 is, therefore, no simple solution to them. The view has often been expressed in this  
10 House that their difficulties are not likely to be overcome by the industry itself. The  
11 Government agree with this view and have decided to promote legislation to set up an  
12 Authority with adequate powers to regulate, re-organise and develop the white fish  
13 industry.  
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17 By this time the Board had been rechristened the White Fish Authority. Its precise powers and  
18 functions were still being worked out and would not be made public for some months, until  
19 legislation had been prepared. Nevertheless, it was obviously expected to drive through changes at  
20 all levels of the industry. As an interim measure the Prime Minister also announced an immediate  
21 subsidy scheme, in effect a continuation of the Ministry of Food subsidies from 1948, which would  
22 'secure improvement in the fishing ports meantime and until the White Fish Authority is able to  
23 apply long term remedies.'<sup>136</sup> This was given effect in the Sea Fish Industry Act, 1951.<sup>137</sup>

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25 By now the distant-water sector had pinned its faith on its own Distant Water Development  
26 Scheme, and although it could not avoid being brought within the Authority's remit it was exempted  
27 from the subsidies.<sup>138</sup> The middle- and near-water sectors, with their outdated fleets and track  
28 record of unprofitability and stagnation, were more welcoming. F.E. Catchpole, chairman of the  
29 Lowestoft Fishing Vessel Owners' Association, probably spoke for many when he thanked the  
30 Authority for visiting the port in April 1951 and stated that 'already he had the feeling that they were  
31 getting on with the job and would do it well.'<sup>139</sup> The distributive side of the trade was more  
32 cautious, and among the Hull merchants in particular there was concern that the Authority might  
33 end up being dominated by the trawler owners, and that its 'object seemed to be in direct  
34 opposition to ours as they wanted to cut out a lot of dead wood in the Industry.' These fears were  
35 reinforced the following year by the omission of a Hull merchant from the White Fish Advisory  
36 Council, which had first been established to advise the White Fish Commission and was revived to  
37 serve its successor.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, wholesale merchants nationally felt that the levy to fund it fell  
38 unduly heavily upon them, which coloured their view of the Authority from the start.<sup>141</sup> In  
39 Parliamentary circles, with the exception of some right-wing Conservative MPs who thought it was a  
40 vehicle for nationalisation by the back door, and some on the left of the Labour Party who thought it  
41 should be, the Authority enjoyed cross-party support, and it began its work with a fair political  
42 wind.<sup>142</sup>

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44 With the continuation of subsidies and the promise of fundamental reform from the White  
45 Fish Authority, the sense of crisis quickly abated during the summer of 1950. Most of the laid-up  
46 trawlers were sent back to sea, although some of the oldest went instead to the breakers' yard,  
47 leaving the number of near- and middle-water vessels in 1951 slightly lower than in 1949.<sup>143</sup> The  
48 demand for import controls also faded, although it did not disappear entirely.<sup>144</sup> The situation  
49 improved further that winter, from the catchers' point of view at least, when bad weather and  
50 consequent shortages of supplies, coupled with another cut in the meat ration, sent prices soaring.  
51 This led to renewed calls for the reimposition of price controls, which were taken seriously enough  
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3 to be considered behind the scenes.<sup>145</sup> However, the distant-water owners responded by  
4 suspending the Distant Water Development Scheme and sending all of their vessels to sea, which  
5 served to bring prices back down over the next couple of months.<sup>146</sup> Once again, the sense of crisis  
6 faded into the distance.  
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### 8 9 **Legacy and Conclusions**

10 The period between 1945 and 1951 represented a watershed in relationships between government  
11 and the fisheries. Historically, although sections of the industry had long accepted that government  
12 had a role to play in securing access to key fishing grounds and policing the behaviour of their users,  
13 and at times had advocated greater government action on these fronts, it had generally been very  
14 hostile to government 'interference' in how participants conducted their businesses. However, this  
15 hostility abated in the depressed circumstances of the 1930s, and the crisis after 1945 fostered a  
16 sufficiently strong consensus that reform was needed to quiet most potential opposition to  
17 governmental interference in a business that had generally preferred to be left well alone.  
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19 On the industry's side, the Distant Water Development Scheme remained in force until it  
20 was rendered superfluous by Britain's accession to the European Economic Community in 1973. At  
21 this point it was replaced by the Fish Producers' Organisation (FPO). Producer Organisations, under  
22 European rules, are voluntary associations of catchers set up to coordinate production and  
23 marketing of fish and agricultural products.<sup>147</sup> The FPO was the first such organisation in Britain.<sup>148</sup>  
24 Initially it was composed primarily of Humber distant-water trawler firms. By then, however, the  
25 threat to their main fishing grounds that was already apparent in 1949-50 had become critical, and  
26 three years later Icelandic fishing grounds were closed altogether to British trawlers, tipping the  
27 distant-water sector into terminal decline.<sup>149</sup> The FPO exists to this day, although its membership  
28 has altered greatly with the disappearance of most of the firms that founded it. The distant-water  
29 sector managed to develop reasonably effective responses to the problem of overcapacity in the  
30 early 1930s and again in 1950, but never to resolve the problem of access to its own resource base,  
31 which was tangentially related but ultimately much more serious.  
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33 Between the wars and after 1945, the near- and middle-water sectors, and the distributive  
34 side of the industry, were far less capable of acting in concert, and were vulnerable to disastrous  
35 losses when the market moved against them. It was the threat of their collapse that provided the  
36 impetus for decisive intervention. The interventions of the 1930s were very much in line with those  
37 adopted in other struggling industries and aimed at boosting demand and encouraging industrial  
38 self-organisation rather than intervening in a very direct manner. In the case of the deep-sea  
39 fisheries, however, the White Fish Commission, came too late to have any significant effect before  
40 war intervened, if indeed it ever could, which given its limited powers is doubtful. Elements of it  
41 resurfaced in 1950, however, in the form of the White Fish Authority, which exemplified a more  
42 aggressive form of intervention to reorganise struggling industries not slated for nationalisation.<sup>150</sup>  
43 The Authority commenced its work formally in July 1951 under the chairmanship of Admiral Sir  
44 Robert Burnett. Its powers were formidable, yet its first annual report, in spring 1952, stated that it  
45 had considered and rejected the possibility of drawing up a comprehensive plan for the industry.<sup>151</sup>  
46 The radical reorganisation its founders had envisaged never happened, although in later years it did  
47 become a major force in fisheries research and development both in Britain and overseas, in  
48 addition to mounting large-scale promotional campaigns.<sup>152</sup> In 1981 it was merged with the Herring  
49 Industry Board, whose *raison d'être* had disappeared with the collapse of the herring fisheries, to  
50 create the Sea Fish Industry Authority. Seafish, as it is now known, was shorn of many of its  
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3 predecessors' 'dictatorial powers,' but remains a force in fisheries research, policy development and  
4 publicity.<sup>153</sup>

5 For all the debate over reorganisation, however, the subsidies which were quietly and  
6 uncontroversially introduced in 1948, and then continued under the 1951 Act, proved to be the most  
7 important legacy of the crisis. Britain belatedly joined other countries in subsidising its fisheries, and  
8 has done so ever since. Subsidies were intended to be temporary, to continue only until the White  
9 Fish Authority had reorganised the industry to the point where it could stand on its own feet. Yet  
10 no-one specified how long this was expected to take, and it receded further and further into the  
11 distance. The subsidy was essential to the economics of many of the near- and middle-water  
12 vessels, some of whose owners immediately began to press for more.<sup>154</sup> Subsidies thus continued  
13 on a nominally time-limited basis throughout the 1950s, and were confirmed for a further ten years  
14 by a major enquiry chaired by Sir Alexander Fleck, which reported in 1961. By this time the distant-  
15 water fleet had also begun to lose money again, and was duly included.<sup>155</sup> This time, though, a  
16 definite date was set by which it was expected the industry should be able to operate without  
17 subsidy. The Fleck Committee's recommendation, put into effect by Act of Parliament the following  
18 year, was that subsidies would taper away over ten years.<sup>156</sup> The timescale was later lengthened by  
19 two years, but operating subsidies did indeed cease in July 1973, although the inshore fleet  
20 remained subsidised and grants for modernisation, new building and training in the deep sea fleet  
21 continued.<sup>157</sup> However, the oil crisis and subsequent inflation of the early 1970s, coupled with loss  
22 of access to distant-water grounds and the protracted process of drawing up the European Common  
23 Fisheries Policy, hit the industry hard, and operating subsidies were reintroduced in 1975.<sup>158</sup> Since  
24 then, in Britain as elsewhere, they have 'settled in' and become politically extremely difficult to  
25 remove, and they remain to the present day.<sup>159</sup>

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27 The period between 1945 and 1951, then, saw far-reaching changes across the deep-sea  
28 fishing industry, and the beginnings of some key aspects of modern fisheries policy. Some of this  
29 was occasioned by stock depletion and disputes over access to fishing grounds which are the best  
30 known aspects of the industry's twentieth-century history. Yet the question of the industry's  
31 organisation was closely linked with these, and for much of the twentieth century was equally  
32 important.  
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- <sup>82</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies. Report of Official Committee, undated but c. Jun 1950.
- <sup>83</sup> HHC, C DBHB/5/10, KST, Directors' Minutes, 16 Aug 1950; SRO, 1757/2/3, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 7 Feb 1951.
- <sup>84</sup> Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1950.
- <sup>85</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies. Report of Official Committee, undated but c. Jun 1950; Minutes of Interdepartmental Conference, 19 May 1950.
- <sup>86</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/722, Distant Water Vessels Development Scheme: British Housewives' League to Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, 25 Mar 1952; Cheap Food League, *Your Fish; The People*, 2 Mar 1952
- <sup>87</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies, Note by Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 25 May 1950.
- <sup>88</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of the white fish industry: short term remedies. Draft letter for signature by the Minister, undated.
- <sup>89</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 27 April 1950 vol 474 cc1174-262; TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies. Notes of meeting of officials, 2 Jun 1950.
- <sup>90</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the white fish industry. P.D.H. Dunn to R. Herbert, 17 May 1950.
- <sup>91</sup> BPP 1945-6 XII, Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Circumstances and Causes of the Stoppage of Work in the Trawler Fishing Industry, 147-61.
- <sup>92</sup> HHC, C DBHB/5/10, KST, Directors' Minutes, 16 Jul 1946; SRO, 1757/2/2, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 24 Feb 1950.
- <sup>93</sup> SRO, 1757/2/2, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 9 May 1950.
- <sup>94</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies, Note by Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 25 May 1950.
- <sup>95</sup> MHSC, HFMPA, Annual General Meeting, 12 Jul 1950; Jóhannesson, *Troubled Waters*, 54.
- <sup>96</sup> MHSC, HFMPA, Extraordinary General Meeting, 5 Mar 1947.
- <sup>97</sup> MHSC, HFMPA Minutes, 12 Dec 1949, Extraordinary General Meeting, 12 Apr 1950.
- <sup>98</sup> HHC, C DBHB/5/10, KST, Directors' Minutes, 19 Sept 1945, 17 Mar 1950.
- <sup>99</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/722, Distant Water Vessels Development Scheme, Hull and Grimsby Long-Distance Water Owners to P.D.H. Dunn, 13 Jul 1950.
- <sup>100</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/722, Distant Water Vessels Development Scheme, Management Committee to Fleetwood Fishing Vessel Owners' Association, 13 Jul, 9 Sep 1950.
- <sup>101</sup> British Trawlers Federation (hereafter BTF), *Distant Water Trawlers*, 1956, 21-3.
- <sup>102</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/722, Distant Water Vessels Development Scheme, Final Text of Scheme, 12 Jul 1951.
- <sup>103</sup> White Fish Authority, *Fourth Annual Report*, 37.
- <sup>104</sup> Robinson, *Trawling*, 188-9; BTF, *Distant Water Trawlers*, 6,
- <sup>105</sup> Sea Fisheries Statistical Tables, 1950.
- <sup>106</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the white fish industry. 'Position of the White Fish Industry,' Cabinet Memorandum, 18 Apr 1950; Cabinet Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Minister of Food, 19 Jun 1950; SRO, 1757/2/2, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 22 May 1950.
- <sup>107</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the white fish industry. Minute Sheet, see 18 Apr 1950.
- <sup>108</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Interdepartmental Conference, 19 May 1950.
- <sup>109</sup> Bjornsson, 'The Icelandic Fisheries,' 266; Jóhannesson, "'Life is Salt Fish,'" 56.
- <sup>110</sup> Jóhannesson, *Troubled Waters*, 51-63; TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Foreign Office to P.D.H. Dunn, 31 May 1950.
- <sup>111</sup> Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism*, 24-9.
- <sup>112</sup> Findlay and O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty*, 491.
- <sup>113</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies. J. Leckie (Foreign Office) to P.D.H. Dunn, 26 May 1950.

<sup>114</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Foreign Office to P.D.H. Dunn, 31 May 1950.

<sup>115</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the white fish industry. 'Position of the White Fish Industry,' Cabinet Memorandum, 18 Apr 1950; White Fish Authority, *First Annual Report*, 9.

<sup>116</sup> See for example the remarks of Robert Boothby: Hansard, HC Deb 27 April 1950 vol 474 cc1160-73.

<sup>117</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Cabinet Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Minister of Food, 19 Jun 1950.

<sup>118</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies. Report of Official Committee, undated but c. Jun 1950; Notes of meeting of officials, 2 Jun 1950.

<sup>119</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Interdepartmental Conference, 19 May 1950. See remarks by P.D.H. Dunn.

<sup>120</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies. Report of Official Committee, undated but c. Jun 1950; Notes of meeting of officials, 2 Jun 1950.

<sup>121</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 04 July 1950 vol 477 cc236-42, see comments by Hector Hughes; HC Deb 25 January 1951 vol 483 cc322-433, see remarks by Captain Mark Hewitson (Lab, Hull Central).

<sup>122</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the white fish industry. 'Present Position of the Industry,' undated but probably c.25 May 1950; Ashworth, *The State in Business*, 9-11.

<sup>123</sup> HHC, C DBHB/5/10, KST, Directors' Minutes. On 22 Oct 1947 Kingston's directors determined to donate £200 to the local Conservative Party, to be anonymous unless other Hull firms moved to declare their support openly. This evidently did not happen, for on 15 Sep 1948 they made another anonymous £100 donation. On 17 Aug 1949 an appeal for funds by the Economic League, to which Kingston was a regular donor, was left on the table pending possible combined action by the Hull Fishing Vessel Owners' Association. This did not materialise, and on 21 Dec 1949 Kingston donated £50.

<sup>124</sup> HHC, C DBHB/5/10, KST, Directors' Minutes, 21 Feb 1951.

<sup>125</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the white fish industry. 'Position of the White Fish Industry,' Cabinet Memorandum, 18 Apr 1950; MHSC, HFMPA, Annual General Meeting, 27 Jun 1947.

<sup>126</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 12 November 1947 vol 444 cc495-516, see speech by Douglas Marshall (Con, Bodmin).

<sup>127</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Interdepartmental Conference, 19 May 1950. See remarks by P.D.H. Dunn.

<sup>128</sup> Tiratsoo and Tomlinson, *Industrial Efficiency and State Intervention*, 81-4.

<sup>129</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/709, Re-organisation of the White Fish Industry: Interdepartmental Conference, 19 May 1950; Cabinet Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Minister of Food, 19 Jun 1950.

<sup>130</sup> Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism*, 68-9; Tomlinson, 'Mr Attlee's Supply-Side Socialism'; Chick, *Industrial Policy*; Middleton, *Government versus the Market*, 468.

<sup>131</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/772, White Fish Authority: consideration of powers and functions. White Fish Industry Board: Powers Required, 14 Jul 1950.

<sup>132</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 255/544, Sea Fish Industry Bill 1951. Note for Minister, 17 Jan 1951; SRO, 1757/2/3, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 19 Feb 1951.

<sup>133</sup> TNA: PRO, AY 8/63, Humber Laboratory: establishment of new research station on the Humber. Draft proposal by G.A. Reay for Hull Laboratory, 7 Oct 1948.

<sup>134</sup> Tomlinson, 'Mr Attlee's Supply-Side Socialism,' 3-4.

<sup>135</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/772, White Fish Authority: consideration of powers and functions. White Fish Industry Board: Powers Required, 14 Jul 1950.

<sup>136</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 04 July 1950 vol 477 cc236-42.

<sup>137</sup> 14 & 15 Geo. VI, Ch. 30.

<sup>138</sup> SRO, 1757/2/3, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 7 Feb 1951.

<sup>139</sup> SRO, 1757/2/3, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 12 Apr 1951.

<sup>140</sup> MHSC, HFMPA Minutes, 5 Oct 1950, 30 Jul 1951.

<sup>141</sup> MHSC, Federation of British Port Wholesale Fish Merchants' Associations Minutes, 13 Jul 1951.

<sup>142</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 255/544. Sea Fish Industry Bill 1951. Notes for Minister for Third Reading, undated; Hansard, HC Deb 04 July 1950 vol 477 cc236-42, see remarks by Hector Hughes; HC Deb 25 Jan 1951 vol 483 cc322-433, see speeches by Cyril Osborne (Con, Louth). See also MHSC, HFMPA Minutes, 18 Jan 1951: R.K. Law (Con, Haltemprice), believed the Sea Fisheries Act 1951 'appeared to give as wide powers as a Nationalisation Bill.'

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- <sup>143</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/751, Reorganisation of white fish industry: short term remedies, Note by Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 25 May 1950; *World Fishing*, Sept 1952; see also Table 1.
- <sup>144</sup> SRO, 1757/2/3, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 20 Jun 1951.
- <sup>145</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 27 Nov 1950 vol 481 c103W. See speeches by Barnett Janner and Mrs Jean Mann; see also TNA: PRO, MAF 255/544. Sea Fish Industry Bill 1951. Note for Minister on Price Controls, 18 Dec 1950.
- <sup>146</sup> Hansard, HC Deb 19 Feb 1951 vol 484 cc864-6; *World Fishing*, Sept 1952.
- <sup>147</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/market/producer\\_organisations/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/market/producer_organisations/index_en.htm), accessed 7 Feb 2014.
- <sup>148</sup> Goodlad, 'Sectoral Quota Management,' 146-59.
- <sup>149</sup> Robinson, *Trawling*, 244-9.
- <sup>150</sup> Robinson, 'Economic Problems,'
- <sup>151</sup> White Fish Authority, *First Annual Report*, 6.
- <sup>152</sup> TNA: PRO, MAF 209/3182, Review of the White Fish Authority and Herring Industry Board. Submission to Minister, 26 Sept 1980.
- <sup>153</sup> <http://www.seafish.org/about-seafish>, accessed 4 Feb 2016.
- <sup>154</sup> SRO, 1757/2/3, LFVOA, Directors' Minutes, 20 Jun, 12 Jul 1951.
- <sup>155</sup> Great Britain, Parliament, *Report of Inquiry into the Fishing Industry*.
- <sup>156</sup> 10 & 11 Elizabeth 2, Ch.31.
- <sup>157</sup> White Fish Authority, *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report*, 3.
- <sup>158</sup> White Fish Authority, *Twenty-Third Annual Report*, 16.
- <sup>159</sup> Anyanova, 'Rescuing the Inexhaustible,' 147-56; see also Arnason *et al*, *Sunken Billions*.