

The reason for that Cork trawler protest

Fishermen's blues

TO BE brought to court like common criminals — like rapists and drug dealers — is totally unacceptable.

That was the central message carried by an armada of 50 fishing vessels who stormed up Cork Harbour to the city quays last Friday, bearing banners stating 'We Are Not Criminals'.

Up to 300 fishermen staged a simultaneous protest in the country's main ports to raise their concerns over the new Sea Fisheries Bill, which is intended to update ageing fishing legislation.

Proposed amendments to the Bill will be discussed in Dublin this week and the concerns highlighted by the protesting fishermen are expected to feature in the talks.

The fishermen claim the Bill will see them pick up 'unfair' criminal records and 'incredulous' fines as a result of fishing offences.

"Why should we have to get a criminal record and why should we have to pay fines in excess of €10,000, €20,000 or even as high as €200,000?" said Jason Whooley, from the Irish South and West Fishermen's Organisation (ISWFO), which represents more than 90 fishermen in the Cork/Kerry region.

"We are already struggling, these laws will put us out of business," he added.

Even though fishermen charged with fishing offences have been brought before the courts since 1959, Mr Whooley said it is unfair that they appeared in such a 'draconian' fashion.

He called for administrative sanctions or a penalty-points system to be introduced instead.

These sanctions would work similarly to those given for on-the-spot parking or a speeding fine — by paying that fine the person would not have to go to court.

While countries Europe-wide regulate their fishermen by such sanctions, Ireland and the UK are the only countries that do not.

However, the UK is currently looking into such a system.

Mr Whooley also said that under EU regulation, Irish fishermen can easily make a minor offence by virtue of an honest mistake.

"We have to deal with 800 pages of EU legislation on a daily basis.

"I've said it before and I'll stand over it, a lot of the time our fishermen would require a barrister in the wheelhouse — not a skipper.

"We have young skippers starting out on their career who might make genuine mistakes.

"Everyone makes mistakes, but not everyone is taken to the Circuit Court over it.



Trawlers from the South West fishing fleet arriving in Cork Harbour during last week's protest against proposed new fisheries legislation

By

Olga Cronin



"We aren't criminals. If a young skipper does something as small as put an 'x' in the wrong box, he could end up in court. That's ridiculous.

"Up to 85% of all fisheries offences in Europe are dealt with by administrative sanction. Ireland and the UK are the only ones left," he added.

"There are a range of alternative administrative measures that would alleviate concern."

Cork Fianna Fáil TD Noel O'Flynn, who is also chairman of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, the Marine and Natural Resources, said that while he is disappointed that administrative sanctions have not been included in the amendments, it is up to the Government to make legal changes.

"If I was the Minister for the Marine, I would introduce administrative sanctions for offences," he said.

Deputy O'Flynn admitted that he

finds himself in a difficult position on the issue.

"I am supporting the Government's position even though I disagree with them, but I have no option," he said.

Deputy O'Flynn, who was mainly responsible for the Government abolishing the proposal that the Navy could fire into a vessel if necessary, said his committee's legal opinion differs to that of the Attorney General's, who is reported to have said introducing administrative sanctions would be unconstitutional.

"Our legal opinion indicates a different opinion to the Attorney General," he said, adding that because there have been 222 amendments proposed since October, the Bill has been 'defective' from the start.

He also said the fisheries committee in the EU have stated that they would like to see uniformity when it comes to penalising fishermen in the EU.

"I'm not going to play politics with this issue," he added.

"I have no vested interest, there are no boats in Cork North Central, but what I do want is fair play."

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O'Shea on Monday



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ROBERT O'SHEA finds poets working in all sorts of mundane jobs...

A DRIVER who challenged a £30 parking ticket in Cumbria, England last week received a poem in reply from the parking authorities. The 16-line verse began: "Park only and wholly in a clearly marked bay. That's what the signs in the car parks say..."

The local borough council has apologised for the "inappropriate" response.

"...And if you ever pull a stunt like this again you'll be off out the door quicker than you can say cock robin."

"Yes sir."

Stanley bowed his head and tried to compose his face in a way that would suggest regret, but he found it difficult to hide a tiny smile. Steve, his boss, and the head honcho at the borough council traffic department, was very angry with him, but Stanley was marveling instead at his use of language.

"Steve always has such a lovely way of putting things," he thought, as his boss slammed the door to his office. "Quicker than you can say cock robin. Was that a mixed metaphor?" wondered Stanley. "Surely it should be: 'Who killed Cock Robin?'"

He crept silently up to his boss's office and rapped gently with his fingertips on the panel glass of the door.

"Who killed cock robin, Steve?" he asked.

"F*** off home, Stanley," came the voice from the other side.

People had told Stanley he was mad to take the job at the borough council. Three years at art college. Second prize in the prestigious Yeast Awards for rising young poets. Don't you think you'd be suited to something more creative, friends and family had urged.

But no, Stanley didn't mind slumming it, if you could call €28,000 per annum with benefits slumming it. He wanted to earn his crust. Put food on the table. Face into the daily grind. He wanted to experience life before he attempted to portray it with his nimble pen.

He was completely unaware that he was driving Steve up the wall in the process. He thought Steve liked him and all the dressing downs were the typical bantering that took place in the workplace.

That day when they were discussing banning parking on one side of the High Street and Stanley had said: "To park, or not to park, Will that ease congestion?" had been the first inkling to Steve that a moron had been assigned to his department.

And so it had gone on for the past fortnight. Each day Stanley seemed to have a new suggestion on improving the local transport system: "Let's plant daffodils on the verge of the dual carriageway... Let's add a tint of blue to these parking signs... Let's put some sculpture of Greek pottery at this dead end and call the street: Road to a Grecian

Urn"; or have some objection: "You can't build a car park on that waste land; it's symbolic."

After the poem incident, Steve informed him that he was one step away from an official warning. "You're skating on thin ice, Stanley."

"That's as close as you can get to walking on water," he had replied.

And every day at 5.30, before clocking off, his underling would announce: "I shall arise and go now... cheerio Steve."

As Stanley drives home from work he delights in the dappled itinerary of his working environment that surrounds him. The lollipop lady. The traffic cones. The lollipop lady and her ice-cream cones... he scribbles in his head as he passes a school and crosses a roundabout. "This is a roundabout way to get home," he thinks.

The transience of the flashing amber catches his observant eye. So too the forbidding parallel white lines, the blood-red cycle lane. And the signs, all the signs. Stanley is fascinated by them; they communicate without the need for words; they are the purest poetry.

There is no sign ahead for the fork in the road, however, something he will have to tell Steve in the morning. Stanley brakes and peers down both roads. The one to the left has no street lamps working and if he took it he would probably add 10 minutes to his journey. The five cars ahead have all turned right, so Stanley swings off to the left.

"So what happened to my predecessor," asked Dave.

"He drove down a one-way street," answered Steve.

"Isn't it slightly ironic, someone from the traffic department going out that way?"

"I suppose he was sort of Byronic."

"That's not what I said."

"I hope he did not go gently into that good night, that he raged, raged against the dying of the light."

"Yeah, I suppose we should get those street lamps seen to."

"Street lamps! Don't you realise that we've lost a poet?"

"He's gone Steve, forget about him."

"He may be gone, but one corner of this office will be forever Stanley."

And with that, Steve slammed his office door.

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I hope he did not go gently into that good night, that he raged,