

The Cod War Is Funny Only If Serious Issues Are Ignored

By JON BLAIR

LONDON—A few years ago an African diplomat at the Court of St. James's was rash enough to liken his hosts to a toothless bulldog. Words were exchanged at the highest level and the offender was sent packing by his government back to the tropics. It is a shame, for had he been in Britain these last two months he could have witnessed, along with millions of other British television viewers, some touching scenes of gum-baring.

Courtesy of British cameras aboard the Icelandic Coast Guard vessel, Thor, the viewers saw the Royal Navy frigates, Andromeda and Leander, run rings around a boat one-third their size and half their speed. Shots of the frigates crashing into the Thor made nonsense of British Admiralty claims that the Icelanders were causing the collisions, but the audience at home at least had the consolation of seeing that the frigates had left the gunboat with only half a helicopter deck and some pretty severe dents to her bodywork. United Kingdom, 1; Iceland, 0.

The danger of a fatality apart—in those waters a shipwrecked sailor survives for less than three minutes—the ludicrous aspects of using the might of the Royal Navy against a nation of 216,000 with no army, air force or navy are slow to sink in on a dispirited British public whose faith in the country's faded glory badly needs restoring. The attitude tends to be: We may not be able to tangle with the big boys any more, but at least we can still show these impudent Icelanders a thing or two.

The trouble is that this so-called Third Cod War (the first two were from 1958 to 1961 and 1972-73, and were also precipitated by Iceland's unilateral extension of her fishing limits) won't be solved by the navy's antics on the high seas, anymore than Cod Wars I and II were. The signs are that British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, is beginning to realize this. The Icelanders who lost none of their traditional Anglophilia despite being convinced that the British are acting like arrogant bully-boys, are saying it's about time.

The Agreements Break Down

The "war" itself started in earnest last November after talks to renew a two-year bilateral fishing agreement broke down. The previous agreement had given British trawlers the right to take about 130,000 tons of cod annually from within Iceland's unilaterally declared 50-mile limit. The British wanted this arrangement renewed for a further 10 years although they were prepared to drop the limit to 110,000 tons. The Icelanders offered a top figure of 65,000 tons saying that they couldn't go higher for conservation reasons.

They had a point, but a British Government beset with the highest unemployment figures since World War II was not overjoyed to hear a message that would result in idling 16,000 trawlermen and associated workers. So the Royal Navy went in.

But what the British failed to recognize is that the Icelanders mean business, both over the cod catch limit and the extension of their fisheries zone to 200 miles. They say that their survival on their bleak island, where they've been for 1,100 years, is at stake. They base this claim on a report from their marine biologists, agreed to in substance by British scientists, which proves that the cod is being seriously overfished. If desperate measures are not taken immediately the whole cod stock will apparently disappear by 1980. If that happens, 40 percent of Iceland's export revenues will have been wiped out.

The biologists reckon that if the cod stock is to be saved, no more than 230,000 tons should be taken in 1976. British scientists set the figure at between 250,000 and 300,000 tons, compared with the peak catch of 470,000 tons in 1970. Whichever figure is accurate, Iceland's present trawling capacity is well able to handle a catch that size even if no cod is taken by the Belgians, the Faroe Islanders, the Germans and others who have traditionally fished off Iceland besides the British.

Iceland's Prime Minister, Geir Hallgrimsson, went to London last weekend in response to a British invitation carefully orchestrated by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's secretary general, Josef Luns. His organization's interest in the confrontation in the Atlantic was best expressed by Mr. Luns's reiteration while in Reykjavik of Winston Churchill's description of Iceland as a "huge, unsinkable aircraft carrier" vital to surveillance of Soviet air and sea movements. Iceland's implied threat to leave the alliance if the cod war dragged on put pressure on Mr. Luns.

Mr. Hallgrimsson himself is far from invulnerable. His



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Demonstration on cod fishing in Iceland

conservative coalition Government would certainly fall if he makes an offer to the British that an Icelandic public regards as too high. Mr. Hallgrimsson's defeat would lead to his replacement by a left opposition coalition which includes Communists. They would adopt an even tougher line with Britain.

For his part, Mr. Wilson must surely know that his position is eroding. The United States Senate's approval of a 200-mile exclusive economic zone for the United States, has hastened the erosion but Britain too now supports a 200-mile limit in principle because of its own off-shore oil interests.

The discussions drag on but it is rapidly becoming morally indefensible for British warships to be protecting British trawlers poaching Icelandic fish.

Jon Blair is a British freelance and television researcher who recently was in Iceland.