

The TCA and its role in the Turbot War of 1995

The Turbot War was a dispute between Canada and Spain which took place in 1995. The rights to fish in certain areas were the cause of the conflict, and the world saw the lengths countries would go to in order to protect their fisheries. Throughout the turbot dispute, Canada was widely hailed as a hero for taking bold action against the Iberians. Hundreds of British fishermen flew the Maple Leaf to protest Spanish overfishing in their own waters. Pro-Canada fervour reached dizzy heights when a Cornish fishing boat from Newlyn was mistakenly arrested by French customs. It was flying the Canadian flag, and the local authorities assumed that it was Canadian, landing fish illegally in France. Overnight Canadian flags became a craze all over the UK.



The contribution of the TCA to this story is best told by the main protagonist in this drama, David Hutcheon, a Looe boy, who regaled us with his heroic tale during his presentation at the 20th Anniversary celebrations of the TCA.

Now for those who missed the historic Turbot War of 1995, let me briefly take you back to those times of European intrigue and skullduggery when Canada once again had to come to the aid of the Mother Country. And the role the Toronto Cornish played in the fight to save the Cornish way of life.

Spanish factory ships were illegally overfishing the halibut on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. The West Country fishermen and Irish fishermen

understood this problem well, having seen their fisheries devastated by the Spanish and other European Union fishermen.

It was even claimed by the British Press, in particular, The Sunday Express, that the Spanish fishermen were also transporting drugs for the Columbian drug cartel families. These pirates were hoovering up Dogger Bank.

The Cornish fishermen asked the British government for help. The British government initially was slow to respond. Then into the breach stepped Canada. In March 1995 the Canadian Government sent the navy out to apprehend the Spanish. Shots were fired over the bow of a Spanish Trawler and the Estai was seized and its crew apprehended. Its illegal nets were recovered.

The Honourable Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Brian Tobin took our case to the international press. In New York City on a barge in the East River in front of the United Nations Headquarters the Estai's illegal net was put on display for all the world to see. Tobin denounced such practices and declared that the fishery would soon be reduced to "the last, lonely, unloved, unattractive little turbot clinging by its fingernails to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland." Tobin shamed the Spanish and the European Union who were supporting them.

The Spanish government asked the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands, for leave to hear a case claiming that Canada had no right to arrest the Estai. However, the court later refused to hear the case. On the same day that Tobin was in New York, the United Kingdom blocked an EU proposal to impose sanctions on Canada.

At sea, the Spanish and Canadian Navies faced-off against each other. Prime Minister Jean Chretien ordered our navy to fire on Spanish vessels that exposed their guns. A Cornish fisherman down Penzance-Newlyn way, got frustrated waiting for the British Government to act and raised the Maple Leaf on his boat, the Newlyn, in praise of Canada's actions. A French ship that believing the Newlyn to be Canadian arrested it. This dragged Britain from its position of passive backing into full support of the fishermen. Overnight, Canadian flags began to fly from all manner of British and Irish vessels and this upset the Spanish once more.

It was a time when more Maple Leaf Flags flew off British and Irish fishing boats than in Ontario. Every Cornish and West Country port you visited flew the Maple Leaf flag in honour of Canada's position on the Spanish and shamed the British government into supporting them. A very successful appeal was launched in The Toronto Sun for more Maple Leaf flags, which were duly shipped over by The Sun and Toronto citizens.

During this time, I had recently been elected as Toronto City councillor for what was then City of Toronto's Ward One. I understood the fishermen's plight and supported the Canadian Government's actions. So, I resolved to fly St. Piran's

flag high above City Hall. My motion in honour of the fishermen who were flying the Maple Leaf was adopted unanimously by Toronto Council at its meeting of March 27th and 31st, 1995.

The Toronto Sun had been covering the Turbot Wars and my good friend, journalist Rob Benzie, flew over to Britain to cover the story. The Cornish fishermen gave him St. Piran's flag which he carried back for me to fly over City Hall. Mayor Barbara Hall assisted in hoisting it up the flagpole at Toronto City Hall on Friday, April 7th.



Mayor Barbara Hall and Councillor David Hutcheon raise the Cornish flag at Toronto City Hall

But the story continues:

Maple Leaf Memento of Blooming Cornish Canadian Friendship

An article in the Evening Herald of Monday, June 5, 1995

CANADIAN visitors to Looe went hundreds of miles out of their way to prove they are fishermen's friends. They were on a mission to make links with Looe in the wake of the fish wars which broke out between Spain and Canada and British fishermen.

Ironically, as John Tyacke and Brian Waters, of the Toronto Cornish Association were handing over a commemorative photograph to Looe leaders, news was coming in that a Spanish fishing boat had cut through a Newlyn fisherman's nets off Penzance. West fishermen have been flying the Canadian flag in support of the Canadians.

Don Webb, chairman of Looe's Harbour Commissioners, said: "The fishermen here are very apprehensive, especially with this development just 100 miles off Cornwall." He said: "The fishermen are carrying on their arguments with the Government, but we will have to play it by ear, while doing everything we can to help."

Sid Gardner, Looe mayor, agreed. "The Canadian fishermen have had some effect, and I wish we could have a similar effect on our Government."

The picture given by the visitors was of Toronto City Council, a member of which is former Looe man, David Hutcheon. Mr. Hutcheon, 40, who emigrated to Canada 15 years ago, was responsible for flying the Cornish flag above Toronto City Hall and put his council in touch with Looe.



Looe Mayor, Sid Gardner (left) with the framed picture and flag presented by Brian Walters (right) treasurer of the Toronto Cornish Association