

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 72 August 2011

Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

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This weekend [1], a German fishing hut makes its solo political debut at the Hanse Sail tall ship and marine festival event [2] in Rostock, on the Baltic Sea. It's there because it's part of Angela Merkel's political heritage and because, while she's Europe's most important politician, she's largely absent from the crucial politics surrounding reform of the CFP, or Common Fisheries Policy.

I don't often write about projects I've been working on but in this case I thought you might be interested in the back story. I'll try and draw out the campaign design principles behind it. I'm taking a bit of a risk as the whole thing may sink without trace but that's always the case with campaigns.

Like so much real EU politics, reform of the CFP has rather little to do with the ostensible issue: in this case, fish. For example, I've heard that, behind the scenes, Germany and France (major recipients of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) funds) are prepared to turn a blind eye to some of the worst excesses of the fisheries policy in return for the same from countries like Spain (biggest recipient of fishing funds) when it comes time to look at the CAP. Pointing out the best way to run fisheries is going to have little effect on such cynical politics.

Why A Fish Hut?

Our fish hut, or to use its proper name 'Angela's Fischerhuetten', has its own website at <http://www.angelas-fischerhuetten.de/> and is part of a project to try and make the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) a bit more interesting. Its aim is to register 'fish' with Mrs Merkel in a way that's harder to completely ignore than a policy wish-list.

Readers may remember me writing (Newsletter 36, on 'The Big Ask', http://documents.campaignstrategy.org/uploads/campaignstrategy_newsletter_36.pdf) about the importance of 'being interesting'. Mike McCarthy, Environment Editor of *The Independent* newspaper pointed out that most NGO campaigns deal with the significant but a major difficulty in 'selling' their stories within a newspaper, is that many are not seen as very 'interesting'. The CFP reform process has this problem to the max.

The CFP has over 300 rules and its reform involves 27 EU Member States and hundreds of 'actors' or stakeholders. Just the conservation minded coalition <http://ocean2012.eu/> for example, has 128 members, and every fishing nation has a diversity of fishing interest groups who rarely agree on objectives and, where they agree about objectives, they disagree about the means. If you are looking for a case study of a nightmare 'issue' to negotiate or campaign on, look no further (see below [3] for some links).

One of the many difficulties afflicting CFP reform is that while some people are interested in fish - and some are very interested - most are not. And of those that might be interested, the impenetrable complexity of the process and the apparent impossibility of achieving inter-governmental agreement, is usually enough to stop the "engaging". A notable exception to this is Hugh's Fish Fight, a tv-led campaign fronted by a British celebrity chef, briefly discussed in the last Newsletter, which by focussing on just one particularly gross side-effect of fishing (discards -

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 72 August 2011

Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

throwing fish back to die in the sea), has to date attracted 737,000 supporters (<http://www.fishfight.net/>).

It has to be said that most NGO campaigns on the CFP fall foul of the attempt to 'explain the issue' which is simply too complex to communicate in a way that can drive people to action.

Everyone agrees, even those politicians who say the only solution is to leave the EU, that the CFP is an intensely political problem. Yet in Germany, by far the most powerful country in the EU and about the only one not suffering severe economic problems, it's said to be not even a third order issue. As of today while over 600,000 people have signed up to Hugh's Fish Fight in the UK, which followed another influential book and film *The End Of The Line* (<http://www.endoftheline.com>), only a few thousand had done so in Germany. With only a very small direct interest in fishing, although plenty of fish-eating Germans, there is little reason for German politicians to help EU Commissioner Maria Damanaki in her attempts to forge consensus around a new, more sustainable CFP.

Change the Politics

So when we [4] sat down and thought about what our small project might do to try and help change the politics, rather than offering yet more policy prescriptions that hardly anyone pays attention to, we wondered if we could help do something in Germany to make the problem more real, more interesting, and most of all, more salient for German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

I asked our team if they could find an emotional connection between Merkel and fish. They came back with The Hut, which turns out to have played an iconic role in her political career, indeed without which she might never have been elected, and re-elected, and re-elected...

Angela Merkel was born in Hamburg but, thanks to her father's role as a Pastor and their family connections to the old Prussia, she was brought up in East Germany. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the young Angela Merkel was elected to the Bundestag in a Baltic Coast constituency of the old East, including the Nordvorpommern district, the Rügen district and the city of Stralsund, in December 1990.

Election 1990 – the First photograph

Although today less than 4% of the local population works in fishing, forestry or agriculture, the area has a strong cultural connection to the sea. During her first election campaign, Merkel met with five fishermen in their hut at Lobbe, a small village on the island of Rügen. They spoke a strong local dialect, and their names were Rainer Ehlers, Martin Wood, Erwin Bull, his son Hans-Joachim Bull, and their leader, Eberhard Heuer. Fishing had been in their families for generations – in one case going back to the sixteenth century.

The breakfast-time meeting of the young Merkel and the five salty fishermen was captured in a beautiful, atmospheric photograph by Michael Ebner [5]. The image has been widely reproduced and has even been turned into a wall tapestry by artist Margaret Eicher [6]. Merkel won the election and remains the MP for Lobbe to this day: a career launched, in part at least, by a shed full of fishermen.

Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

Election 2005 – *Der Spiegel*

In June 2005, the photo featured prominently in the leading German news magazine *Der Spiegel* [7]. The article was entitled *Die Fischer und ihre Frau* (the fishermen and their woman). It was a month into Merkel's CDU-sponsored run for the Chancellorship against Gerhard Schröder of the SPD. The story by *Der Spiegel* journalist Von Markus Deggerich played on the contrast of the coarse, brandy drinking, tobacco-smoking fishermen in their rude hut and the vulnerable looking young woman who had unexpectedly visited them in 1990. The Hut had become a central part of Merkel's political myth.

Deggerich makes it clear that Merkel had gained political credibility by aligning herself with the fishermen:

'They couldn't imagine who would knock on their door in the morning fog ... The five men were all stronger, taller, a group with clear rules and hierarchies ... In the blue work clothes and heavy boots, the men sat silent, tired on their chairs, with cigarettes and beer "Before we speak, you first have to drink" says a fishermen to Merkel ... There they sat, strong, hard-drinking men who barricaded themselves behind a beard and a cap, and looked even then much older than they were. In their midst, the slender woman with short hair, linen blouse, a blue denim skirt and a cardigan. A word of a fisherman on the counter of the village pub could be more powerful than dozens of posters on the roadside.'

Merkel beat Schröder and was confirmed as Chancellor in November 2005. The *Der Spiegel* article describes Merkel as a *Menschenfischerin*, or a 'fisher of men', and as such goes right to the heart of the political problem with the CFP. When fishing for votes, politicians like to be photographed with fishermen, particularly the 'traditional' small fishermen who have a great place in the hearts of Europeans. Yet once elected, the policies adopted by politicians are most often driven by the lobbying efforts of big business which now controls the great majority of fishing quotas, and they threaten most fishermen [8] as much as they do the fish.

Decline

It's widely agreed that two thirds of EU fish stocks are over exploited, due partly to over-capitalisation, the EU fleet (capacity) is 40% too big, a third of all catches are thrown back as discards, and, although taxpayers have spent over 1 billion Euros a year to support the industry, the number of people employed continues to decline.

In 2005, *Der Spiegel* found 'mixed feelings' towards Mrs Merkel among the four surviving fishermen of Lobbe (Erwin Bull had died). They still recalled the 1990 meeting positively but were disappointed and frustrated with their situation, the economy and the politicians, Although they still 'raised their glass' to Merkel when they saw her on tv, the last one had stopped fishing, unable to make it pay, back in 1998.

Journalists kept chasing down the fishermen of Lobbe to ask them about Angela Merkel. In 2006 a report in *Die Welt* newspaper [9] recorded that the fishermen remembered Mrs Merkel had promised to help them back in 1990 but their hopes had come to nothing. *"If someone has power for the first time, he quickly forgets where he comes from"* said Eberhard Heuer.

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 72 August 2011

Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

Election 2009 – the *Bild* photo

It says something about the political value of being associated with the image of 'traditional fishing' that Angela Merkel went back to Lobbe to meet the fishermen yet again, just ten days before the Federal Elections of September 2009.

This time the biggest popular German newspaper *Bild* re-created the famous meeting in The Hut, took photos and video, and put Merkel's latest meeting online [10].

Merkel told *Bild* that her 1990 assignation with the fishermen had been *"By the light and the people .. a very special moment"* but *"time has moved on. There are only a few fishermen in the village. This is a shame"*. The 2009 Merkel promised tax cuts and the creation of new jobs - but there was no mention of sustainability of fishing, perhaps as none of them fished any longer.

Bild interviewed just two of the original five: Hans Joachim-Bull (now a janitor at the local Spa), and Eberhard Heuer. This time they explicitly attacked the EU CFP: *"thanks to the EU law on catch quotas and closed seasons, we could not live on fishing anymore"*.

Merkel posed with the fishermen for a second photo in the hut [11]. There were smiles for the camera but by now it was forlorn, empty, vandalised and sprayed with graffiti.

By this point local commentators were beginning to point out what the fishermen themselves were reluctant to say - that for all this high-level attention from Europe's most powerful politician, their industry was simply vanishing. One blogger suggested that local news outlets were rewriting reports to edit out complaints by the fishermen and noted that *"of the 123 men who worked in the GDR era in the fish production co Mönchgut {Lobbe}, only 16 remain"* [12] Reportedly, Merkel again promised to help the fishermen.

2011 - Re-creating the Hut

The next German (State) elections are in September this year, so perhaps Mrs Merkel will be back in Lobbe again to meet the surviving fishermen. But as the CFP reform process is already underway, we decided not to wait, and instead to take the hut to her.

So a few months ago, our colleague Thore Kuster visited Lobbe, to find out what had become of the hut, Eberhard Heuer and the others. We'd read reports that it was closed up and entry was forbidden on pain of a fine from the Lobbe Town Clerk. Thore met with Eberhard Heuer, who showed him that the hut was now being used to store redundant ice cream refrigerators. Lobbe is after all, in a popular German holiday area.

Since then, we have been re-creating 'Angela's Hut', only in mobile form. Rostock is its first stop, and then we hope to move on to Berlin. This way Mrs Merkel won't have to travel back to her constituency to get in touch with the state of the fishing industry, it can come to her.

Angela's Hut is a lifesize replica, kitted out much as it was in 2005, and will enable visitors to pose for photos with our own Mrs Merkel (a *doppelgänger*), as well as the real one, should she turn up.

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 72 August 2011

Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

Visitors will also be able to send their own message to the Chancellor - by post or electronically - to ask her to pay some attention to the reform of the CFP, and help save the fishermen, and the fish.

For the creation of Angela's Hut, to read its political backstory, to see interviews with local German fishermen, and follow its travels, visit <http://www.angelas-fischerhuetten.de>. You'll also find an image of Eberhard outside his former hut, holding a sign in German which reads "*Haben Sie Uns Vergessen Frau Merkel ?*", or "*Have You Forgotten Us, Mrs Merkel ?*"

Starting From Where People Are

So most politicians don't care much about fish - after all, fish can't vote. But politicians do care about fishermen, at least at the level of photo-calls.

The majority of the European public also tend to care more about fishermen (and fisherwomen - in Spain there are thousands of them) than they do about fish. The research we reported on in Campaign Strategy Newsletter 44

(http://documents.campaignstrategy.org/uploads/campaignstrategy_newsletter_44.pdf) showed that the British were mighty reluctant to blame fishermen for any damage to the marine environment, even for "over fishing". It's hard to identify with a fish but easy to identify with a fisherman.

Hence, on the basis that it is normally better to start from where people already are rather than to first try to shift them somewhere new, our project has tried to find common ground with fishermen, to connect with the concerns of both publics and politicians.

Of course it is political theatre - it is not a literal policy prescription. We have had some kick-back from a few colleagues in the green sector who point out that not all 'small fishermen' are angels, and nor is all 'small scale' fishing sustainable. Well of course not. But there is a basic unfairness - for instance 76% of the UK fishing fleet is made up of smaller boats under 10m in length but they hold only 4% of the quotas.

Most importantly, the dynamic of interests in the CFP, and the *realpolitik* of euro-fish is such that unless some environmentalists and some fishing interests start to get alongside each other, it will remain expedient for political leaders to pay lip service to the problems of overfishing and destruction of the marine environment, and sustaining jobs, while buying off the biggest 'fat cat' industrial fishing interests with grants and quotas which ensure the industry continues to over-exploit the seas, over-capitalise, over-mechanise and over-fish. That's not just in the EU's own waters, but increasingly, around the world. Europe is now sucking in ever more fish from waters off Africa and elsewhere.

So, in my view at least, the best chance of dismantling the monster that the CFP has become depends on environmentalists and those fishermen practising the smaller scale and more sustainable types of fishing, forming an effective alliance. This will need to be bottom up as well as top down collaboration. A recent example of what might be done is the Marine Reservation of Fishing Interest (MFRI) set up by Spanish green group '*Ecologists in Action*' and *Conil de Frontera's* static gear fishermen [13].

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 72 August 2011

Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

It is one of those cases where by campaigning only for their ideal policy position, NGOs are never going to change the politics so that their policies have any chance of actually being taken up.

Using The Hut

We hope that people, even the media, will find The Hut interesting. It has a story: about real people, about their hopes and fears and their relationship with power. You don't need to be an expert to understand that the fate of fish and fishermen are inter-dependent.

Unlike an argument, The Hut is 'real' and tangible; we can take it to places where people are out and about enjoying themselves, and it can be a venue, a place to meet, and, we hope, a resource for fishing or green groups trying to get attention for their projects, even a platform to launch reports. We hope others will link to it online. We'd like to post more videos from small fishermen in other countries. It is in short, the creation of a campaign tool or asset. It's a bit of a gamble as it may not work but it is so well built that you could actually live in it. So if, after the CFP reform process finishes next year, you have ideas as to what we might do with it, please let us know! Even better, if you think you can use it between now and then, please get in touch [14].

Euro-Fish TV

Later this month we also hope to put a political animation about the CFP online, created with animators Leo Murray and Thomas Bristow. I'll let you know when it is available via my twitter feed (<http://twitter.com/#!/campaignstrat>).

[1] Mrs Merkel's Doppelganger will speak at the Fish Hut at Hanse Sail, Kropeliner Tor, 18055 Rostock, 1.00pm, 13 August. For more information contact Margot Lotz, +32 475 288 282, or Greta Fitschen, +49 1577 816 2500 or +32 488 661 370, mail@angelas-fischerhuetten.de or fish@harwoodlevitt.com

[2] <http://www.hansesail.com>

[3] <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/damanaki-seeks-to-cast-aside-bad-fisheries-habits-71685.aspx> (a guide to the proposed reforms of the CFP); http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigning/more_fish/, <http://www.cfp-reformwatch.eu/> (politicians); <http://www.greenpeace.org/eu-unit/en/Publications/2010/greenpeace-submission-for-cfp/>, <http://www.nutfa.org> (small fishers); <http://www.fishsubsidy.org/>

[4] The project is run by Harwood Levitt Consulting and myself for the Oak Foundation, a charitable trust. The objective is to achieve material reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) to ensure that European fishing practices become sustainable. The Hut itself was created by Thore Kuster <http://www.kuk-project.com/>

[5] see <http://www.angelas-fischerhuetten.de>

[6] <http://www.margret-eicher.de/?pageid=02&subid01=1>

[7] <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-40788889.html>

[8] For example between 1997 and 2003 the number of people employed in EU fishing shrank by 23%. By 2008 there were only half the number of ocean going fishermen in the united Germany as there had been in West Germany alone in 1970, and just seven ocean going boats, of which only one, the Atlantic Peace, was not foreign owned. (<http://tiny.cc/50i5s>) That has since been sold to a Dutch company.

[9] http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article93748/Merkels_enttaeuschte_Maenner.html

Campaign Strategy Newsletter 72 August 2011
Angela Merkel's Fish Hut

[10] <http://www.bild.de/politik/2009/ruegen/interview-wie-erklaeren-sie-den-fischern-glueck-der-einheit-9770480.bild.html> (video)

<http://www.bild.de/BILD/politik/2009/09/17/kanzlerin-angela-merkel-fischerhuetten/interview-wie-erklaeren-sie-den-fischern-glueck-der-einheit.html>

<http://www.bild.de/BILD/politik/2009/09/17/kanzlerin-angela-merkel-fischerhuetten/making-of/die-fischer-von-damals-sind-keine-mehr.html>

[11] You can see the 2009 image at <http://www.politplatschquatsch.com/2009/09/innen-hui-auen-pfui.html>

[12] <http://aktion-stoertebeker.blogspot.com/2009/09/frau-merkel-und-die-verschwundenen.html>

[13] The June 10 edition of *Fishing News* <http://www.intrafish.no/fn/> reported an agreement between Spanish green group 'Ecologists in Action' and Conil de Frontera's static gear fishermen to create a "Marine Reservation of Fishing Interest" (MFRI). Ruth Brennan [3] points out that: "The ethos of the MRFI embraces local fishing and promotes the inclusion of low-impact gears in coastal zones. It excludes trawling within the 12-mile limit and includes 3 zones designated as nursery grounds where only scientific activity is allowed. All fishing vessels operating within the MRFI must carry a transponder which allows the areas in which fishing effort is concentrated to be monitored by an Andalusian government authority, and the information used to improve fisheries management in the area the Spanish MRFI seems to have transcended the usual polarisation of views between the fishing industry and ecologists as to marine reserves".

[14] see ref [1]

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