

Herring sellers' last stand for 'Dutchness'

From our correspondent



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Fish from the North Sea and blooms from the flower fields of the Netherlands are as Dutch as windmills, clogs and the Old Masters who celebrated them.

But Amsterdam's famous herring and flower stands are to vanish under EU rules that critics say threaten hundreds of years of tradition and culture. If imposed, the rules would remove permanent permits for stands, putting them up for a lottery every ten years.

For centuries traders have offered their wares across Amsterdam.

Just as life in Amsterdam is under threat from mass tourism and housing shortages, the traders' stands, often run by families for generations, could disappear over

the next decade owing to European Union single market rules.

Hans van Tellingén, a Dutch retail expert, is the author of *Why Bricks Beat Clicks*, a defence of the traditional high street. He is angry at the implementation of EU rules that would replace the permanent permits with a lottery system.

"This is a disgrace," he said. "Dutch cultural heritage is being destroyed by European and Amsterdam bureaucracy. The stalls are typically Dutch. We might not wear clogs any more but flowers, tulips and fish — herring — are part of our heritage."

Controversy over removing permanent licences from family businesses goes beyond Amsterdam. Italy is also at odds with the EU over plans to open up beach trading permits to competition, including to foreigners.

Giorgia Meloni's Eurosceptic government is defying the rules. But the Netherlands is not opposing the regulations, perhaps because they were drafted by Frits Bolkestein, 91, a Dutch former European



The Old Masters celebrated the flower and herring traders of Amsterdam



commissioner for internal market who mentored many in the political establishment.

Van Tellingén, an adviser for the Strabo retail consultancy, said Amsterdam should also reject "this crazy plan". He said the change would lead to "more of the cheap candy kiosks, kebabs or tourist rubbish you can see in the centre of Amsterdam — even money laundering".

The EU defends the rules as giving "new entrepreneurs" a chance. "Otherwise such a market would be closed to new sellers forever," the

European Commission explains. In the late 14th century and for the next 200 years, the Dutch technique of curing herring was a vital source of nutrition in northern Europe.

It was intrinsic to Holland's rise as a nation that celebrated simple food as an expression of Calvinism and liberal humanism.

Every year on June 22 the Dutch mark *Vlaggetjesdag*, "flag day", to celebrate the year's first herring catch at the port of Scheveningen.

The sliced herrings are usually served in a roll with pickles or eaten whole while holding the tail. Jasper

Frens, 38, said Amsterdam's herring stands were in danger as he sliced his fish. "There used to be a herring stand on every bridge 50 years ago," he said. "It's part of the culture and heritage of Amsterdam and it will disappear."

Luuk Jansen, 28, one of his customers, said: "There is not much real Dutch street culture left here in Amsterdam. It is mostly tourism now. We should be protecting it, not throwing it away."

Amsterdam's city council said that next year current permanent permits would be fixed for ten years, then allocated by draw or lottery.

A spokesman said: "Herring carts and flower stalls belong in Amsterdam and will remain in Amsterdam. We are changing the current system because it does not comply with European regulations."

Chris Briet, 59, runs a family flower stall. "This is my life," he said. "You cannot just take someone's life away and gamble it in a lottery. Flowers are real Dutchness, our culture and heritage. I find it hard to talk about it, I am so upset."