BRITAIN AND MAINLAND EUROPE VIEWED LONG:
FROM CONCERT OF EUROPE TO COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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Britain has long had a yoyo-relationship with mainland or continental Europe. Its fluctuating nature has many well-known roots. One is geography, which maintains a maritime barrier between the British Isles and mainland Europe; or at least has done so since sea levels last rose significantly after the most recent Ice Age (c.6,200 BCE), inundating the ancient Doggerland between East Anglia and the Netherlands to create the North Sea.[1] Another is the history of many generations of travel, settlement, and colonisation/decolonisation, which directs British attention to a global array of destinations in the Americas, Africa, India, the Far East and Australasia, as well as some parts of Europe (Spain's Costa del Sol).[2] Yet another is the cultural effect of shared language. That allows Britons to feel quick kinship with their fellow-English speakers anywhere around the world, in contrast to more laboured contacts with non-English speakers close at hand (although as English is fast becoming the world's new *lingua franca* that barrier is diminishing).[3]

And the list could go on. As well as big general factors, there are particular symbolic moments too. The epic case remains that of Britain standing alone against the power of Hitler's Germany and his allies in the summer of 1940, after Dunkirk. The story of the collective heroism of that generation remains deep, deep

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[1]   V. Gaffney, S. Fitch and S. Smith, *Europe's Lost World: The Rediscovery of Doggerland* (Council for British Archaeology: York, 2009).

[2]   C. Drew and D. Sriskandarajah, *Brits Abroad: Mapping the Scale and Nature of British Emigration* (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2006).

[3]   D. Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge, 1997).

in the national sub-conscious, particularly since, after acquiring new allies of our own, we eventually won the war. Had we lost, then British resistance might have appeared as merely futile and foolhardy. But, as it is, there is a magic resonance still within the simple words: *'Very Well, Alone!'*

Fig.1: David Low's most famous cartoon, 'Very Well, Alone!'
expressing Britain's national mood post-Dunkirk:
Evening Standard, 18 June 1940. Copyright © David Low.

Nonetheless, the history between Britain and continental Europe both was and is far more intricate than easy stories of isolationism imply. This short BLOG is not the place for a detailed history.[4] Instead, I want to give two examples of positive British involvement with pan-European cooperation, to counteract the simple myth-history which claims that plans for 'uniting Europe' have always come from Britain's enemies. Hostile examples often cited are: Charlemagne,

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[4]   See e.g. B. Simms, *Britain's Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (2016); and J.R. Gillingham, *The EU: An Obituary* (2016).

Napoleon and Hitler. An unlikely trio, in that their aims, methods and historical epochs were very different. And none of them works as anything like a prototype for the European Union, which (whatever one thinks of it) remains a democratic project, which is not being undertaken by warfare.

Yet the myth-history does offer a just reminder that the foreign policy of Britain (and of England, before the 1707 Act of Union) has always been determined to prevent one hostile super-power bestriding continental Europe, leaving Britain in isolation. Even in those (comparatively rare) periods when the country was not deeply engaged in cross-Channel politics and alliances, it kept a watching brief on the state of play.

My two examples of positive initiatives both date from periods immediately after devastating warfare across continental Europe as well as in wider battlefields. The motives for intervention were obvious. The first was the Concert of Europe, also known as the Congress System. It was a system, established after the battle of Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna in 1815 by Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia, and (later) France, which was designed to maintain the balance of power.[5] It did not set up new international institutions. Instead, it provided that, in the event of problems, a trouble-shooting Congress would be convened to iron out differences; and for some years such Congresses duly met. The only agreed rule was that the current state boundaries in 1815 could not be altered without agreement of the treaty powers.

In the long term, the Concert dwindled into abeyance. The system had no enforcement powers; and no agreed timetable for regular meetings. It remained *ad hoc*. And eventually its own member states began to flout its rules, as the national

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[5]   T. Chapman, *The Congress of Vienna, 1814-15: Origins, Processes, Results* (1998); M. Jarrett, *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy: War and Great Power Diplomacy after Napoleon* (2013).

interests of the component members diverged. In July 1914, Britain (which had never been consistently sympathetic to the scheme) belatedly proposed to convene a Congress – but Austria-Hungary and Germany refused to attend.[6] Nonetheless, the Concert of Europe can be seen as a potential move towards a framework of inter-national pan-European collective security. It also had made some moves, under pressure from campaigners, to support various humanitarian causes, such as abolition of the slave trade.[7] However, the Congress system ultimately lacked any institutional timetable or authority. Before long, it seemed to represent a purely conservative force, and an inefficacious one at that. The frequency of the set-piece Congresses declined markedly from the 1830s onwards.[8] In practice, therefore, the system had lost good will and support long before 1914.

Some of the same problems afflicted the League of Nations (1920-46), which was an international organisation, seeking to preserve world peace, but which again fell foul of great power rivalries. The challenges facing cooperation across one world-region were much multiplied when applied to the entire world.

For my second case-history, however, I am focusing specifically upon Europe – this time in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Having stood alone in 1940, British ministers were well aware of the perils of isolation. Hence they took a prominent role in the postwar creation of a new Council of Europe, launched by the Treaty of London (1949). Initially signed by ten member states, the number of signators has grown to 47,[9] with only three independent state

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6   D. Stevenson, *1914-18: The History of the First World War* (2005), p. 5.
7   B. Fladeland, 'Abolitionist Pressures on the Concert of Europe, 1814-22', *Journal of Modern History*, 38 (1966), pp. 355-73.
8   The list includes: Vienna (1814-15), Aix-la-Chapelle (1818); Carlsbad (1819); Troppau (1820); Verona (1822); London (1832); and Berlin (1878).
9   Alphabetically: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbeijan, Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, the

units not having membership.[10] That total makes the Council much more representative of greater Europe, in contrast to the 28 states which are currently members of the European Union (of which more later). Its creation drew upon cross-party hopes in postwar Britain for better relationships with its closest neighbours. Winston Churchill was one who had floated the concept of some form of federation of the European states – an idea which had a lengthy prehistory.[11]

Based in Strasbourg, the Council of Europe has a Secretary General, who is elected by a Committee of Ministers (comprising the Foreign Secretaries of all member states, usually acting via a Permanent Ambassador) and its own Parliamentary Assembly (comprising parliamentarians from all member states, reflecting each country's balance of political parties). This structure, which directly reflects the politics of its members, seeks to reduce the risks of conflict between the Council and the participant democracies.

Its core remit is the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The Council itself makes no laws, working instead via conventions or codes of common legal standards.[12] It does have, however, the task of upholding agreements made between the participant states. That role led to its most important achievement, the European Convention of Human Rights (1950), and its most powerful creation, the European Court of Human Rights (also located in Strasbourg). That body is composed of a judge from each member state, elected by the Council's Parliamentary Assembly for a non-renewable period of nine years.

From this account, it's apparent that the system is much more complex and

Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

10   They are Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Vatican City. In addition, various other disputed territories, such as Kosovo, do not have independent membership.

11   P. Pasture, *Imagining European Unity since 1000 AD* (New York, 2015).

12   Many of these have gained international recognition; and the Council works closely with the United Nations on a range of humanitarian issues.

thorough-going than the primitive arrangements, made under the Concert of Europe almost one hundred and fifty years earlier. But there is a recognisable legacy from one to the other – trying to uphold common values, seeking cooperative mechanisms, whilst not infringing upon the powers of the participant states. Today one set of criticisms comes from some British Conservative right-wingers, who object to judicial overview from Strasbourg (even though one key designer of the European Convention of Human Rights was the Conservative MP and lawyer Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe).[13] However, the latest indications are that Prime Minister Theresa May does not wish to complicate further the tasks facing her. Withdrawal from the Council of Europe was *not* an option on offer in the British Referendum in 2016. So there is no electoral mandate for such a change. Hence it is likely that Britain may succeed in withdrawing, either wholly or partly, from the European Union, but will *remain* decisively within the Council of Europe.

Overall, it is remarkable that, since the Second World War, there have been not one but two creations of pan-European institutions, side by side. (In 2007, they resolved to cooperate more closely; but no amalgamations are envisaged). Cross-party British political leadership was highly important in founding the Council of Europe, although little effort has been made, during the last sixty-six years, to inform the British public about the Council's work. It is a silent achievement.

No doubt that's because the second of the two new pan-European institutional creations has stolen its thunder. The European Economic Community, or Common Market, was established in 1958, under the Treaty of Rome (1957), with six founding members.[14] The new body immediately adapted the Council of Europe's flag (see Fig.2) and (later) shared its chosen theme tune: Schiller's *Ode to*

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[13] David Maxwell-Fyfe, 1st Earl of Kilmuir (1900-67), was a prosecutor at the Nuremburg Trials (1946), later Conservative Home Secretary and Lord Chancellor (until 1963).

[14] Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany.

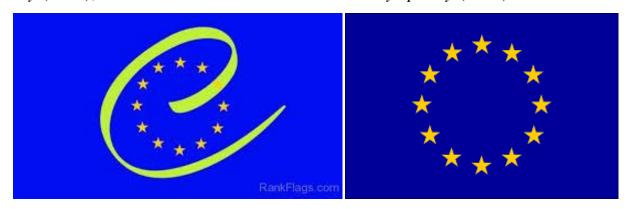*Joy* (1785), as set to music in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* (1824).

Fig. 2: Closely associated flags
(L) Council of Europe (1950)
and (R) European Economic Community (1958), later European Union (1993).
Neither flag was flown much in Great Britain, pre-Brexit Referendum.

Such close overlappings have distracted public attention. The major difference between the two pan-national organisations lies in the fact that the European Economic Community (EEC) has developed from its origins as a trading bloc into a hybrid form of closer integration, named as the European Union (EU). The new identity was instituted by the Maastricht Treaty (1993), at a time of optimism, even euphoria, at the success of democracy and the collapse of the old Soviet Union. However, there are many permutations of membership. Great Britain was cautious from the start. As is well known, it was slow to join the EEC (1975), and has since stayed outside the 1985 Schengen Area (no passport controls) and outside the 1999 Eurozone (common currency). Thus while all countries in the European Union have transferred some powers to the central institutions of the EU, they have not done so equally. Consequently, the EU's hybrid organisation, and the uncertain constitutional relationship between its organising Council and Commissioners with the democratic parliaments within the membership states, together generate continuing tensions.

But this BLOG has not set out primarily to discuss the problems facing the European Union. Instead, it highlights the yoyo relationship of Britain with its

nearest continental neighbours (separation/convergence); and notes that Britain has played a positive role at various times in creating new organisations to express pan-European solidarity. Historically, these bodies come and go, with changing efficacy in changing times. Clearly, too, this story is not yet concluded. Britain will not want to witness one powerful pan-European super-state, just across the North Sea, with which it has no relationship. Moreover, whatever happens to British plans for Brexit and to the internal development of the European Union, Britain still remains within the Council of Europe. Plus, all future generations of Britons will still have to work with the countries on the other side of Doggerland.
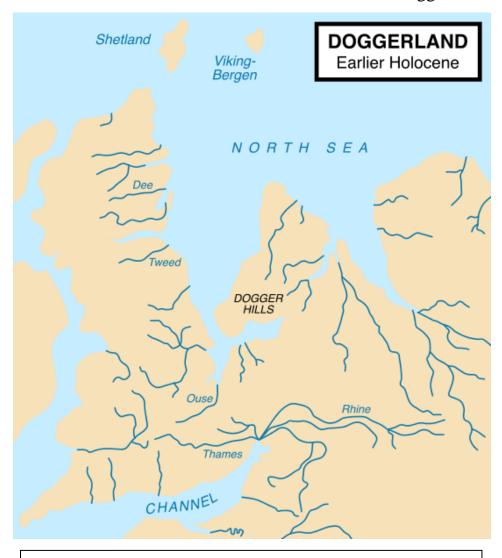

Fig.3 Doggerland before the sharp rise in sea levels c.6,200 BCE,
named after today's submerged Dogger Bank:
based upon the work of marine archaeologists Gaffney, Fitch and Smith (2009).