

Robert Boothby, Britain’s responsibilities in Europe


Caption: In 1952, Robert Boothby, a Conservative Member of the House of Commons and British delegate to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, publishes an article in the French magazine Notre Europe on the United Kingdom’s European policy.

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Britain's responsibilities in Europe

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Before considering the Council of Europe's work, we should try to be clear about its nature. The Council of Europe came out of the 1948 Hague Congress, organised on the initiative of a group of British statesmen led by the current Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. It was the Congress that recommended establishing the Council of Europe with its Committee of Ministers and Consultative Assembly. The project came to fruition in a remarkably short time. In May 1949 the Council was instituted under the terms of a protocol signed by the participating countries, who met for the first time in August of the same year. Almost immediately a joint committee was set up comprising representatives of the Committee of Ministers and the Consultative Assembly, its purpose being to take important decisions on matters of shared interest and to function as a link between the two bodies. One of the very first steps was to create a permanent secretariat, whose members could fairly be called international civil servants. In fact, what we have here is an unprecedented effort to combine executive action at international level with a system of democratic consultation — and I use the term 'consultation' advisedly, for it is not a system of democratic scrutiny. The Council thus represents an attempt at confederation, and an extremely interesting experiment. What was accomplished at the Hague Congress was, in my opinion, an example of practical achievement that no official or private assembly in modern history can rival.

The Council of Europe quickly became operative, and it already has a number of important achievements to its credit. The Assembly's influence, in particular, was instrumental in the adoption of the Convention on Human Rights — an essential basis for any truly democratic union — and this will eventually be reinforced by an international court. The Convention is crucially important because a democratic union can be neither sustainable nor effective if it is not founded on a moral code. The Convention in its current form is not precisely as we would have wished it, but — notably as a result of intervention by the present Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe — it does embody the essential principles. The Council of Europe has since devoted every effort to expanding its activities, and it was largely the influence and initiative of the Consultative Assembly that helped Federal Germany to reintegrate so rapidly into the Western community of nations. Moreover, the concepts of the coal and steel pool, industrial and agricultural cooperation and a European army were all first aired in the Consultative Assembly.

A period of confusion then set in with the dispute between 'federalists' and 'functionalists'. It was a sterile dispute that ultimately tried the patience of the Assembly itself, and the issue was settled, happily, in the functionalists' favour. Yet the quarrel weakened the Council of Europe and was a disappointment in terms of public interest and public attention.

As I see it, the Council of Europe currently faces three specific dangers. The first is from the great mass of competing organisations and committees that have enmeshed Europe like a spider's web over the past three years. These organisations are not answerable to the Council of Europe, although it might seem more logical that they should be, and because they largely overlap most of them are inefficient. This state of affairs clearly needs to be remedied. The second danger lies in the fact that the Council of Europe makes a great many recommendations to which no one pays the slightest attention. The Council comprises a number of committees that would function much more effectively if they confined themselves to making general recommendations rather than producing long and detailed reports on highly specific issues based on inadequate information from official sources. The third danger, however, is by far the greatest, for the first two can be countered without difficulty. The principal threat to the Council of Europe comes from public apathy — and the apparent indifference shown by too many governments, including those that brought the Council into being.

We must not forget that we ourselves bear a large measure of responsibility here. After all, it was British statesmen who took the initiative on the creation of the Council, as indeed they took the initiative on a European army. In fact, the overall concept of European union probably owes more to the influence of

Mr Churchill than to any other public figure. It is a concept that has made a major impression throughout continental Europe — an impression not fully appreciated by the British. It is no exaggeration to say that young Europeans — young German, Dutch, Belgian and French citizens — see it as the only practical ideal that they have left. They can no longer believe in nationalism, for nationalism failed to protect them over the past decade from invasion and occupation, but they believe wholeheartedly in the ideal of a united Europe. We encouraged that belief, we turned the ideal into a practical reality and, most importantly, we created the hope that it will succeed. If, by our attitude, we were now to destroy the confidence that the young people of western continental Europe have invested in European union, I am convinced we would leave them easy prey to communism. We must not underestimate that danger, nor the responsibility that we bear here. Continental Europe and the United States are asking whether we intend to withdraw from the whole endeavour, not just from the European army but also from the Council of Europe and all the other efforts to achieve European unity. Were we to do so, it would be an act of madness. From my own experience (after the lonely battle that I had to fight in Strasbourg last December against the representatives of the American Congress — basing my argument on a simple clover leaf and little else), I am convinced that the United States has no intention of accepting us into an Atlantic union under its auspices if we abandon Europe. They want to see us leading the way towards a united Europe first — and only when that is a reality might an Atlantic union eventually come about. There is no need to remind you how important such a plan is to us politically and militarily.

The defence of Europe is another problem area in which we bear a heavy responsibility. In 1950, when Mr Churchill, addressing the Council of Europe Assembly in Strasbourg, so enthusiastically launched the idea of a European army, he called for it to be placed under a joint command in which all of us would have — and I quote — an ‘effective and honourable role’ to play. I was present in the Assembly that day, and I am sure that no one there imagined for a moment that the United Kingdom would play less than its full part in the European army that had been proposed. Had I suspected for a moment that the resolution would soon be transformed into an attempt to rearm an occupied enemy country with which we had not yet even signed a peace agreement, I would certainly not have supported it. The whole problem arises from the simple fact that what we call the ‘Consultative’ Assembly was not consulted. Had anyone taken the trouble to ask us, we could have told the governments that the Germans did not want to rearm and that the best means of getting them to rearm would be to conclude peace with them, negotiate a political agreement and then place the entire matter in the hands of NATO. But we committed the fatal error of believing that political unity could be achieved through rearmament. We could not have been more wrong.

Western Europe is not in itself a viable economic entity, no more than it is a viable military entity. Western Europe’s economic systems essentially compete with, rather than complement, one another. Nonetheless a certain amount of progress had been achieved before the rearmament programme raised its head. Under the auspices of the European Payments Union, trade had been significantly deregulated. The Organisation for European Economic Cooperation was working well, particularly since it had been linked to the Council of Europe, which proved of great assistance to it, before the rearmament programme placed an obstacle in the way of economic recovery.

The Consultative Assembly, for its part, had been greatly assisted by the work of the OEEC, which had made it confront certain realities that it had previously ignored and enabled it to debate economic problems with experts. The Schuman Plan was also progressing steadily. We in the UK will sooner or later discover that we too shall have to participate in the coal and steel programme. The time will come, particularly as the rate of production in Germany accelerates, when there will again be a steel surplus in Western Europe (and remember that the Eastern European markets behind the Iron Curtain are now closed). When that time comes, the less profitable mines and the old steel plants will be shut down, either by agreement or of necessity. I recall — for it was something which I studied in detail — how the relentless competition of the 1920s adversely affected British coal and steel. I hope that this time we shall manage to avoid a similar crisis. For the UK, the alternative to the Schuman Plan is not the vague and ultimately illusory notion of having a free hand: it is the unrelenting pressure of rampant international competition, squeezing the basic industries on which the entire economic life of the country depends. In the meantime, the Council of Europe is in the process of creating a top-quality ‘European civil service’ capable of effectively bridging the gap between the Consultative Assembly and the Committee of Ministers. If the members of that service focus

their efforts on eliminating unemployment, developing a more flexible monetary system, coordinating financial policies and organising and developing basic industries by means of joint plans and capital investment programmes, they may succeed in creating an economic policy tool that combines the benefits of competition with those of collective planning.

The serious economic imbalance affecting the free world looks likely to be with us for some time. The United States has taken over from the UK as the world's leading economic power, but with one crucial difference: whereas in the 19th century we constituted the biggest market, now in the 20th century the Americans are the biggest sellers and producers of goods — and therein lies the root of all our problems. The economic recession that afflicts us every couple of years is symptomatic of the underlying imbalance in the world, and the only way of countering that, as I see it, is by establishing an economic entity in the free world that will be capable of sustaining itself and standing up to the empire of the dollar. Western Europe alone could never form such an entity, no more than the sterling area countries alone could do so. The European Payments Union and the sterling area countries currently face a major threat, for they are all permanently indebted to the empire of the dollar. I believe that there is still time to build the type of entity I am talking about by instituting close economic cooperation between the countries of Western Europe and those that are currently part of the sterling area.

The final point that I want to make is that the struggle between federalism and functionalism is a thing of the past. Europe is not America. This is the 20th century, not the 18th century. And, given the insurmountable problem of devising a system that will not conflict with the sovereign powers of the national parliaments, there can be no possibility of resolving the current situation through a constitutional federation along American lines. The sovereign powers of the national parliaments have evolved over centuries, and they cannot be dismantled. The Council of Europe is the laboratory for a great experiment in confederation. I say 'confederation' because, according to the dictionary, the word signifies a permanent union of sovereign states for purposes of joint foreign policy action, and that is precisely what I mean. The Committee of Ministers has the capacity to become what Mr Schuman called a 'collegiate body' with the task of formulating joint policies on matters of shared interest. The various organisations can then be linked and placed directly under its authority. What we must not do is to set up political organisations that are in competition with one another. Such organisations can only weaken the Council of Europe and are bound to turn into tools of 'technocracy' rather than democracy. What we must do is gradually turn the Committee of Ministers into an authority with limited functions but very specific powers, one which would consult the Assembly on all the problems affecting Europe and would be guided, although not constrained, by its opinion. The Consultative Assembly could thus become a real forum of European opinion, contributing suggestions and providing impetus in every area of activity. There is no need to give it legislative powers — and, to be fair, it does not currently seek such powers. Why should it need them? Most of the worthwhile work of parliaments is done in their debates on matters of essential interest that have a major impact on public opinion. If, as the Assembly has requested, it seems desirable that any plan or international agreement adopted by a two-thirds majority and unanimously approved by the Committee of Ministers should be referred as a matter of course to the respective parliaments of the various member states for ratification, why refuse that request? What we are talking about here is not federalism: it is simply common sense. It is the only way to achieve the type of European unity that will come about gradually and inevitably as each country feels itself to be a member of a single community based on shared values and traditions. Europe today stands at a crossroads. This is a genuine crisis, but we must not allow ourselves to be beaten, even when we seem to be thwarted. In such situations, we simply need to find different solutions, and to think in fresh and more realistic terms. The difficulties that have arisen in relation to the European army, for example, simply indicate that we need to achieve a political understanding with the Germans before we can envisage rearmament; and I am convinced that that will only be possible under British guidance.

At the most recent meeting of the Consultative Assembly, Mr Struye suggested making an 'anguished appeal' to the United Kingdom. He was not asking us to become involved in a political federation; he was asking us to set an example, to help to build a new Europe — and believe me, if we do not respond to the call, Europe will never be built. Mr Eden was quite right, in my view, to insist that the political powers required for the implementation of the Schuman Plan — and indeed the Pleven Plan, should it materialise — will have to be found within the Council of Europe. Only in that way can we avoid creating the competing

political organisations that I mentioned earlier, and only in that way can we strengthen the Council of Europe rather than weakening it. I am less enthusiastic about the idea of a federation of the Six Powers. I have always envisaged the Western European union that we are seeking to achieve in the form of concentric, rather than separate, circles. I doubt very much, however, whether the French, Dutch and Belgians — if the problem were put to them frankly — would agree to form a political federation with the Germans and without the British. Moreover, creating a ‘sub-division’ in an already divided continent, which has demonstrated since the war that it cannot sustain itself politically, militarily or economically, is not the way to resolve any of the critical problems that we have to face. On the contrary, our immediate aim ought to be to expand the national entities of the free world — those that are still outside the empire of the dollar — not to diminish them. We also ought to establish new political links between Western Europe and the Commonwealth as well as closer economic links between the European Payments Union and the sterling area countries.

It is in order to achieve that goal that we need to unite and move forward. And given that we need to unite and move forward, it is up to the United Kingdom to lead the way.