

Although we in Britain, and in the Europe of which we are part, are wholly dependent for our well-being on our seas and on the wider oceans, we address them haphazardly and incoherently. I believe Britain should now properly examine and coordinate its Maritime policies; we should also institute Maritime Coordination throughout the European Union.

There was a rise and fall in British Maritime awareness in the second half of the C20:

1. Revolutionary developments during the 1950s and '60s – particularly economic (transport, oil extraction, fishing technologies, the apparent likelihood of exploitable deep sea-bed mineral resources such as “manganese nodules”) and military (Submarine-launched missiles) - demonstrated the need for a more comprehensive system of public maritime law. For the UK, its experience in successive disputes with Iceland – the Cod Wars – showed that existing law was becoming irrelevant and therefore uncertain; Polaris – offered by Kennedy to Macmillan when Skybolt failed – fundamentally altered the strategic calculus.

2. British participation in negotiations at the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, which opened in 1973, resulted in maritime policies in Whitehall being, unwontedly, coordinated. Within Whitehall conceptual rivalry became evident between advocates on the one hand of the traditionally enforced Freedom of the Seas, and on the other of new restrictions required for successful economic exploitation of ocean resources – the Rule of Law (including Property Rights), Sustainability of Exploitation, etc.. The Ministry of Defence developed the concept of Offshore Tapestry – the enforcement of public order in the management of a large new three dimensional domain where profitable exploitations

interpenetrate.

3. During the 1960s the UK had successfully claimed the oil resources of the bed of the North Sea, and in the 1970s declared a 12-mile Territorial Sea and a 200-mile Fishery Zone (though not an Exclusive Economic Zone). The Rule of Law was ascendant.

4. By 1979, there was considerable experience in maritime coordination, and the Lord Privy Seal – Lord Peart – had been given the job of supervising that coordination by Prime Minister Callaghan. Had the latter won the General Election that year, it was his intention further to institutionalise and coordinate Maritime Policy. The Rule of Law was still ascendant.

5. Instead, however, Mrs Thatcher discontinued the Lord Privy Seal's role, and such coordination as was unavoidable was reputedly put in the hands of a Junior Minister in the Department of Trade, (later of Transport). Since then, the various Departments of State have been responsible for developing policy relating to their own responsibilities. Freedom and Market Forces became ascendant; the Rule of Law, etc., including international cooperation, were in retreat. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea was not signed by the British Government when it became available for signature partly in solidarity with Reagan's somewhat scofflaw US, partly in objection to the arrangements for deep sea-bed exploitation. (In practice, deep sea-bed exploitation has hardly happened: foreseen costs have exceeded expected profits.)

Since 1979, there has been no institutionalised coordination of Maritime Policy within Whitehall. The UK eventually signed the UNCLOS Convention and there has been some little expansion of the Rule of Law

through the International Maritime Organisation and the Maritime Court. At the Rio Conference, Britain signed some maritime “sustainability” commitments, but incoherence in the overall conduct of the UK’s maritime affairs continued.

Overall, in recent years:

Ship-building has collapsed.

Oil and gas reserves have been depleted for short term commercial profit.

Interactive air and water pollutions are rampant.

Maritime studies are more than decimated.

Ocean science has been neglected, and so therefore have the implications of global warming for the UK.

Numbers of British sea-farers have gone down.

City expertise is shrinking.

“Flags-of-convenience” permit disasters.

The maritime insurance industry is excused its responsibilities by Government.

Piracy and smuggling are exploding.

Sharable policing capabilities – e.g. from space – are ignored.

The Navy's roles are confused (exercises double as sales events for the arms industry, etc.).

Industrial and commercial opportunities are missed –  
(development of the Northern Sea Route to the Far East).

and, of most immediate importance, our and Europe's fisheries are in possibly terminal decline.

Opportunities for rational coordination have been and are being lost: Fishery Protection forces (including satellites) do no monitoring of pollution or of sand and gravel extraction (which they easily could, but it's a different Department: they do sometimes do a little smuggling identification). No-one in the DTI or the FCO took any interest (although alerted to it) in the 1999 Conference in Oslo on the Development of the Arctic Sea Route to the Far East, which global warming is beginning to allow. (This is not only of interest to the UK shipping industry, but our shipbuilders could build ice-strengthened ships for the decaying Russian fleet that will be moving resources into and out of Siberia. Russian, Norwegian and Japanese Governments are all actively interested.) When Tony Blair went to Norway a couple of years ago, he and the Norwegian Prime Minister decided some joint science should be done, and they set up an Anglo-Norwegian Initiative on Climatic Change, which Michael Meacher, as Minister of State in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, is in charge of: it now needs some money. And so on.

And I suspect we shall not get the CFP right until it is both disentangled from the EU's Common Agriculture Policy, of which the Treaties (astonishingly) deem it a subset, and all European fishing in non-EU

waters is subjected to proper control and regulation. At present, British and other European firms (fishing, fish importing, fish processing, and therefore the ever-increasing numbers of consumers of fish) are participating in completely unsustainable fishing in Third World and international waters. Necessarily, because in financial terms fish and fisheries appear to be small beer, they get inadequate and / or mistaken attention from Agriculture Ministers and Departments, and there is minimal horizontal contact across Government.

MAFF, virtually independently of other departments, has dealt with the Common Fisheries Policy, and has neglected the importance – for instance – of clean seas (DETR); of coherent fish stock management, including the prevention of disease; (MAFF plus the authorities in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff); of coherent enforcement, both at sea and in the courts (MOD and Edinburgh; the Lord Chancellor); of Scientific Research (DTI, DES); of the role of the processing industries and of the consumer; etc., etc. Official responses have been rather to commercial and political pressures than to professional advice.

An approach to Geoff Mulgan (September 18th 2000) on behalf of the Greenwich Forum, which has frequently had Ministers open its conferences, and is intending to mount a Conference on Britain and Maritime Policy, elicited a quite negative response – “no immediate plans”, perhaps “next year”, the “Foresight Panel...” – amounting to a traditional rejection on the grounds of “Not Invented Here”.

This negativity springs from the prevailing belief that everything is coordinated and is going swimmingly. But it is not. Not even with the (narrowly focused) Maritime Foresight Panel, which itself had to be fought for: “Maritime” was simply left out of the original set of 15 Foresight Panels, and, a few months ago, it had again to be saved - at the

last minute by Lord Sainsbury.

The EU also requires a separate, explicit and comprehensive Maritime Policy, and it should get on with developing the infrastructure for one within the Commission before enlargement. The UK should take the initiative.