

Running aground

Friday 27 July 2007

THREE hearty cheers for the North of England P&I Club's managing director, Rodney Eccleston, who, like an enormous number of people in the UK and elsewhere, seems to have lost patience with people who are genetically hostile to the marine industry.

You hear them everywhere. Just the other day there was the BBC's World at One, with a supporting cast of environmental activists, whingeing about emissions from ships in Felixstowe, with only a few short and clipped sentences from the port itself and Hatsu's chairman Maurice Storey trying to provide some balance. Ships are awful and the sooner they are stopped the better it will be. Like plastic bags and 4x4s. These people know how to hate.

Eccleston thinks it is time the industry around the world resisted this hostility, notably from the regulators and courts that exhibit such unremitting hostility. He thinks much of this is politically motivated, undoubtedly piecemeal and fails to give any credit to the vehicle that carries 90% of world trade with consummate efficiency "at a fraction of the cost and environmental impact of any other mode of bulk transport".

He singles out for special mention the usual suspects that threaten the global shipping industry. Ill-concieved local regulations pour from the rule-making machinery of the European Union, the US, China and elsewhere. And, because these furious regulators don't understand shipping, they don't understand the implications of what it is they are doing, which is, he says, putting the marine transport system "at risk of running aground".

Nobody, he points out, benefits from this approach, neither the consumer, who has to pay for the increased costs of regulations that are not needed, nor the shipowner who is in the immediate firing line.

The club suggests that one serious reason behind the very high claims levels is the negative approach of the regulators, from the governmental, non-governmental organisations and the communities. If we replace fault-based compensation with strict liability, the sky is the limit. The EU's infamous Ship Source Pollution Directive and elements of its Third Maritime Safety Package exhibit such horrors. Claims are also "massively exaggerated and shipowners pay", he complains.

He is urging a more cohesive response to all this maritime industry hating, demanding that shipowners speak out on these matters with more abandon. Enough is enough, he infers, raising a standard under which the industry might rally.

It is a refreshing approach he advocates, but will it work? You only have to see the way that the great juggernaut of the EU steamrollers along, oblivious of the wishes of its member states, en route to the consummation of the Great Project. Various shipping organisations have tried hard to build influence in a diplomatic fashion, bearding the regulators in their respective dens and attempting to sway their decision-making processes with rational argument and high-level rapprochement. One is not sure that this method works either. Eccleston advocates a more robust approach.

We could give it a try.

New star rising

INCREASING attention is being paid to what is available in Vietnam. A well-educated workforce with talents in science and engineering has been recognised by Japanese and other engineering firms, which are moving fast to capitalise on the skills.

A growing number of shipping companies are also sourcing seafarers from Vietnam, and across this small and revitalised economy, the maritime industry opportunities look encouraging.

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