

Insight & Opinion

Lloyd's List

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Storming in on storm damage

TAKE a look at any chart recording the tracks of hurricanes, cyclones, tropical revolving storms or typhoons and whatever else you find, there is no logical pattern to be found, even over decades.

There are more than there were 40 years ago, but their tracks are as haphazard as they ever were when they confounded mariners trying to second guess when they would recur in order to stay in the "safe semicircle".

Even today, when satellites give us a precise location of a storm, no one can predict its track from one minute to the next.

It is curious why insurers seem to set such great stock on hurricane forecasts, whether from government agencies or private meteorological data suppliers, as the actual number of these storms is almost irrelevant. It is where they go that matters and will ultimately affect the claims.

A monster like Katrina, which devastated New Orleans, could happen again this season, which the experts are forecasting to be a bad and exceptionally active year.

Or it could just go elsewhere and decay over some unpopulated part.

It is no more scientific in Japan and the China Seas, or the western Pacific or northern parts of Australia or anywhere else these ferocious storms inhabit.

But the odds of these storms being ex-

ceedingly harmful has been greatly affected by the insistence of developers spreading along vulnerable coastlines and the authorities permitting such unremitting urban sprawl.

If a hurricane comes ashore, it will be bound to damage something valuable, whereas it once might have missed everyone.

The message of the underwriters to their insured perhaps ought to be something to this effect: "We have no more clue than you whether this will be a bad year for tropical revolving storms. It is, as it always has been, in the lap of the gods."

"But if you insist on building your luxury houses, gambling malls, offices and so on out of flimsy materials on low lying land a few feet from the Gulf of Mexico, and cramming real estate and trailer parks all along the shore line, we will insist on socking you with eye-watering premiums and policies laced with all sorts of exclusions.

"It is called risk management, and perhaps you could do with some yourself".

The nuclear reality

THERE may be huge enthusiasm for green energy, and a rush on energy saving light bulbs despite their dim glow, but last week saw the British government finally admitting that "sustainable" power prospects have been built more on hopes than expectation.

Just 13 years remain to meet the completely unrealistic target of 20% electricity from renewables, and the wind-mill builders could not work fast enough, even if sufficient sites could be found to park their hugely unpopular devices.

The country cannot afford to be running out of options, what with the rundown of North Sea sources and difficult diplomatic ties with a country which is supplying increasing quantities of oil

and gas. The global warming debate will not go away to oblige anyone, and the proportion of power to be derived from renewables is almost certain to be raised, such is the green enthusiasm of Europe.

So it is back to nuclear, which exercised retiring prime minister Blair as he spoke about energy targets in Parliament last week to the noisy accompaniment of grinding molars from his own benches.

It is a return to reality in the dying days of his government, although Mr Brown probably will not thank him for lighting this fuse just as he is to retire.

But, bearing in mind that it would take a minimum of seven years from contract signing to plugging a nuke into the National Grid and years of argument, despite the new planning laws, before the contractors can get to work, it could be that confronting such a truth will be really worthwhile part of the Blair "legacy".

Time for a hard sell on 'soft values' of the world's port scene

WOULD an "independent commission" of the good and great have been sufficient to get the Dibden Bay container terminal built in Southampton?

It surely would not have seen nearly £40m (\$79m) completely wasted as the sundry interests that gave evidence to the long public inquiry eventually prevailed against Associated British Ports.

It is all something of a conundrum as the British government attempts — we assume — to rebalance the planning process that some suggest has swung towards a lawyer-infested and vastly expensive process that serves only to prevent anything ever happening.

Defenders of the environment and those against nuclear power stations, airports, supermarkets and, probably, port development are appalled.

The fact that the planning announcement roughly coincided with suggestions that the Severn Tidal Barrier — which "could generate 7% of the United Kingdom's electricity" — was favoured by the incoming Brown administration caused wildfowl and Severn Bore surfers to be very worried indeed.

Depending where the said barrier is to be erected, the Port of Bristol may be a trifle annoyed, too.

Ports of course have found themselves seriously engaged with the planning process, for better or worse.

They are not universally loved. Indeed, all a port has to do to fan the fires of the objectors is to announce that it wishes to replace a couple of bollards.

To propose a little light dredging or the development of a new berth is a preliminary to hysteria breaking out with demands for public inquiries and regiments of lawyers briefed, along with the involvement of at least half a dozen government agencies.

It is difficult to understand why port development is so unpopular, and why so many people feel such a surge of satisfaction when it is announced that cargo handling is to cease at such and such a port.

Don't they have any sense of history, and realise that it is because of the port that a port city was built in the first place?

If the Romans, for instance, had decided that the present site of Southampton on Sea was the perfect place for landing their war stores to subdue the Iceni, London would not now exist, perhaps being today no more than a tranquil river settlement like Henley on Thames.

All those wonderful north European cities of the Hanse existed only because they were ports, while Venice, Genoa and the Mediterranean city states grew to be more than inconsequential fishing villages because of their facilities for ships.

It is time to spell out the "soft values" of seaports, cries Professor Erik Van Hooydonk, a self-confessed "seaport devotee" and professor of maritime law at the University of Antwerp, which itself would probably be no more than a swamp on the shores of the Schelde if a

Viewpoint



Michael Grey

port had not been built on the site.

Professor Van Hooydonk, who spends a good deal of his spare time as an advocate defending port development against its many detractors, feels so strongly about this he has written a book setting down strategies for the restoration of public support for seaports.

Given a little time, goodwill and some effort, it might be possible to persuade people to love their ports, cherish what it is they do and be less hostile.

The cover of his book shows a summer day on the Elbe, with happy Hamburg sunbathers sitting on the sands opposite the HHLA container terminal, watching the traffic going up and down the river and the big ships alongside with evident contentment.

Certainly no placards protesting at the industrial activities are to be seen and we must assume that the attitudes of the sunbathers are broadly positive.

Why do ports have such a negative image? Compared with the pretty ships of yesterday, today's monsters are not everyone's cup of tea.

But Van Hooydonk notes that, in times past, the waterfront was not always the place where polite society was to be found, being "havens of sin, poverty, crime, disease and worse".

Our little Weymouth on the Dorset coast has always resented its label of being for ever more the place where the Black Death came ashore in England.

The book, on the principle that the bad news is best got over with, lists a whole raft of reasons why ports are unpopular, from the moral decay and political corruption of waterfront life, driven by Mammon, to the battlefields of irrational competition that would have half a dozen ports destroying their environment simultaneously, rather than agreeing to focus development at a single site.

Attractive to the Mafia in some parts of the world, they are often areas of supreme ugliness, destroyers of the natural environment, "cesspools of pollution and disaster areas" and, if that does not put you off your dinner, they are accused of being "dehumanised islands drifting away from society".

There again, the modern port is also seen as an opportunity for property de-



Ponte dei Mille Cruise Terminal in Genoa: commercial shipping made it more than just a backwater fishing port.

velopers who like to move the ships away and erect luxury flats on the site, while the automation of so much modern cargo handling has decimated the armies of employees who would once ride to the defence of the port.

The public also fails to make the connection between the goods it buys in the shops and the ships that brought such delights from foreign shores.

It is why there is such nonsense being erected by agitators about "food miles".

Sensible port management recognises the need to bring the public on side with good public relations, identification with port-related events, the use of

socio-economic studies which demonstrate the value of a port and "green" port policies.

Van Hooydonk recommends that ports go even further by stressing the "soft functions and values of a port" and think rather more about their less "crunchy" assets or those which would normally excite the attention of an accountant.

He encourages port people to use their imagination and search out the positives.

Think of the spiritual soft values of seaports, their role as refuges, as bridges between civilisations and historical eras, their role as a breeding ground for

high intelligence and as a subject of great art

Consider, he urges, how the port can be such a source of civic pride even today.

Consider a port and have one's senses stimulated by the wealth of cargoes moving across the wharves, the heritage of our older havens and a unique man-made landscape.

It can be a place for creative architects and planners to demonstrate their talents. It is often a brilliant tourist attraction if the port authority elects to make it so.

Van Hooydonk suggests that, just as a port authority can have its commercial

Historical significance: since Roman times many of the world's principal cities have prospered due to their hard-working ports.

plan and environmental management strategy, so it can develop Soft Values Management, accentuating dormant values, restoring public support and striking a new balance with environmental concerns.

Ports can integrate themselves with the landscape and heritage protection, so they are seen not as a destroyer but as a supporter.

He provides numerous examples of ports which are cultivating these softer values and as a result being rather better thought of by the public.

Port days which, despite the fears about insurance and the dreaded ISPS code, can still be made to work.

Cultural events in a port, sponsored or supported by the authority, will build bridges.

It takes a lot of imagination to hold a concert in a floating dock like they did in Hamburg, but why not? The annual Port of Antwerp Tango festival is now globally celebrated.

Above all, provide places where the public can see and be informed about the port, so they can appreciate what is going on when they see ships being handled in the harbour or alongside.

The use of educational tours and an input into schools both promotes interest and encourages future recruitment. The availability of an information centre, possibly even a port museum, is invaluable.

A couple of weeks ago the launch of the professor's book coincided with a day conference at Antwerp University on these soft values, with a big turnout from ports all over Europe.

Speakers from Rotterdam, Antwerp, Hamburg, Le Havre, Paris, Liverpool,

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London and Lisbon spoke about what they were doing to build bridges between town and port.

Patrick Verhoeven, of the European Sea Ports Organisation and someone who also might be considered a port enthusiast, suggests that the European Union could be a force for good in this respect.

Jean Trestour of the commission was positive and enthusiastic.

A "Declaration on the Restoration of Public Support for Ports" was signed and duly presented to the European Commission.

What most port people got out of this workshop in Antwerp was "ammunition", and a lot of ideas as to how to reach out to the public and make connections that may have a positive result.

You can do the same and read the book, although it will not perhaps give you the flavour of John Hinchcliffe from Liverpool City Council, who showed exactly why this famous old port has become a Unesco World Heritage site.

I shall go and spend a few days there and just look at some of the treasures that I never even noticed when I sailed into those docks.

You can remain on the defensive behind your security fences, keep a low profile and hope that when you want to expand it can be accomplished without too much blood, sweat and tears.

But it makes sense to try to connect, to subvert the opposition before it even begins to oppose you.

It makes a lot of sense to think with imagination of why your port is important, what it has to offer the community, and to set aside appropriate resources to make it happen.

I hope that the port industry will buy Professor Erik Van Hooydonk's beautifully illustrated and well-argued book in massive numbers and start breaking down the barriers which disfigure their relationships with their public.

• *Soft Values of Seaports*, by Erik Van Hooydonk, ISBN 978-90-441-2148-3. Published by Garant www.garant-uitgevers.be