

Lloyd's List, 69-77 Paul Street, London, EC2A 4LQ

Not out of the woods yet

THE rebound in the main container trades is utterly perplexing. It is confusing to the extent that even though carriers appear to now be experiencing volumes that have returned to pre-crisis levels, the broader economic data does not yet support the notion that a fundamental recovery is under way in the US and European economies taken as a whole.

The trunk east-west container trades on the transpacific and Asia-Europe routes have traditionally relied upon Asian — principally Chinese — exporters supplying the high streets of North America and

Europe. Even though container shipping lines have returned to profit since last autumn, almost all remain extremely cautious about what lies ahead.

This is hardly surprising given recent evidence: unemployment continues to increase, an alarming number of shops on many high streets remain boarded up, and the message from many governments across Europe is that further cuts in public spending are on their way as part of the painful process of restricting state finances.

Figures out today from the UK's Office for National Statistics show that the country's gross domestic product grew by just 0.3% in the first quarter of 2010, compared with the final quarter of 2009. This compares with a GDP quarter-on-quarter growth of 0.4%. However, GDP in the first quarter of 2010 shrank by 0.2% year-on-year.

What makes for further worrying reading is that the ONS believes the recent growth was underpinned by emergency interest cuts, increased government spending and a beneficial sterling exchange rate, while household spending has already begun to decline.

The first two of those factors are due to come under serious pressure, leading to further belt-tightening by

UK consumers. The announced government cuts could, according to some reports, lead to up to 1.5m job losses and it is difficult to see how container volumes can continue to grow in the face of that.

That is only the UK's picture — it is likely to be replicated across Europe and there are indications of manufacturing output in Asia already beginning to fall. Global trade needs a profitable container shipping industry, but a profitable box sector is utterly reliant on the strength of global trade — and it is over this that the question marks hang.

Bad call in Brussels

THE European Commission is justly celebrated for its ability to generate controversy from even the most arcane regulatory issues — attempts to enforce mutual recognition of marine equipment certificates is a case in point.

This is not something that will get pulses racing, even among most shipping professionals, let alone the general public. But please stay awake, because there is an important safety question at stake.

Transport commissioner Siim Kallas' renewed insistence that Brussels is correct and that flags representing the majority of the world's tonnage are wrong is, to our mind, an attempt to defend the indefensible.

Efforts to eliminate market distortion and remove restraint of trade are normally something this newspaper applauds. But the fundamental problem we have on this one is that standards vary so wildly between one recognised organisation and another.

A marine equipment certificate issued by 'two dodgy men and a dog' back-alley RO is most emphatically not equivalent to a marine equipment certificate issued by a reputable classification society.

The phrases 'reputable classification society' and 'member of the International Association of Classification Societies' are not precisely coterminous, and charges that IACS is something of a cozy club not entirely without foundation.

But until a better yardstick is developed, mutual recognition opens the doors for the shoddier players, and strips flag states of their right to decide which ROs are up to scratch. Sorry Mr Kallas, but you have made a bad call. The EU should back down. ■

Industry Viewpoint



JOHN CARTNER

Foreign masters get a raw deal in US

Heavy-handed security measures by US Coast Guard boarding officers are unfair and have not improved safety

AT THE outset, suffering readers, I am American. My ancestors, dour of visage and carrying blunderbusses, arrived early in the 17th century.

I love the place and the maritime industry of my four-and-a-half decade professional life. However, there are some things in the US which trouble and disturb me greatly. The US government targets foreign masters.

In the best case, a boarding may be by polite, professional officers where the transaction is wholly satisfactory.

In the worst case, boarding may be gun-slitting, combat-garbed buckaroos dressed as banana republic dictators in uniforms and sunglasses, who have more zeal than training, more testosterone than experienced maturity and less leadership than Boy Scouts.

However, in either case, it is not what the American boarders do, it is what they can do that counts.

The US conflates security with safety. The US Coast Guard's safety functions have been seduced by the siren of the surveillance and security state. The irony is that the expended hundreds of billions of taxed and borrowed dollars on security have not materially increased the safety of its people.

The US policy for 20 years has been the Cold War strategy redux of total awareness. Accordingly, it has strained its constitution, often on dubious legal logic, and made new laws with powers to create a vast security and intelligence apparatus.

That machinery is often run by true believers, technocrats and chauvinistic apparatchiks.

Now, every person everywhere always is a potential threat — one US jurisdiction even has the crime of 'attempted threat'. Secret lists are kept of suspected persons and of those disagreeing.

In one bizarre twist, the Transportation Security Administration makes up names of the persons it is listing if it does not like theirs. The bureaucrats running all this ultimately are scared witless that a nuclear bomb will be sneaked in. The overall result has been the transmission of their collective paranoia to the media and thence to the world.

An out-of-touch Supreme Court, an undisciplined and spendthrift Congress, a population not known for the literacy of its youth, extraordinary technological ability and enormous available sums means that nothing is sacred within US government hubris.

Exaggeration? Look at acts, not words. That the master has the warrant of the flag state to enforce its laws is ignored by American boarders. Foreigners have few rights and those are applied lightly.

The international human rights laws have not come to the US. Justice is often obtained by money applied within a broken criminal system.

In a state where the Supreme Court approves of dollars buying power, where most look landward, what occurs outside is often shrugged away as happening to



US Coast Guard officers board a ship: masters must always keep up their guard to avoid problems. USCG

those of the lower orders, who deserve it for other sins if not the proximate ones.

The Department of Homeland Security allows an officer of one service to act for another service.

Each boarding officer is a "law enforcement" agent; each is armed; each may be minimally technically trained. Rest assured that each is indoctrinated and motivated to intimidate and trained to fire guns at people.

Finding crimes is foremost to any boarding officer — he or she gets kudos that way.

Whether boarded for port state control, a contraband search or a hunt for nuclear weapons, the master should always keep up his guard and act knowledgeably to avoid great potential problems for himself and his company.

Seafarers like to help. This is not safe. Boarders are not friends. Help suggesting crime will be used against the helper. To lie to a US officer is a felony. Disagreeing statements may be lies.

Most boarders are not multilingual. Suspicion is aroused if the English of the master is foreign. Hence, a nuance improperly understood or a flippant remark — officers are trained to treat any statement seriously, putting aside any remnant of common sense — or a

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mispronunciation can be interpreted as a lie. Entrapment is unlawful.

An officer, however, can mislead, prevaricate or trick with impunity. The courts allow this and later when in court, the tricked defendant must get past the government being presumed to be acting "in good faith". Even if all other charges are dismissed, one can go to jail for telling a lie to an officer.

Foreign seafarers on foreign vessels have no rights of privacy. Boarding officers may inspect any part of the ship and leave private quarters a shambles without redress.

Poor co-operation makes matters worse. Officers are trained to "take control of the situation" by gun pointing, making theatrical gestures and shouting unintelligible singsong jargon in order to intimidate and "neutralise".

A master should always comply in these cases, no matter how seemingly bizarre or childish. This is especially important when the Rambo-squad of special operations shock troops arrive to ferret out putative nuclear bombs.

Not to comply risks death by shooting in the head while kneeling in front of the boarders with one's back turned to them. The boarders, however, are shielded from punishment on the thinnest excuses.

In my next column, I will discuss how companies should train masters to deal with this danger. ■

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Maritime Blogspot

New designs could be a bridge too far for shipyards

I WROTE early this year about an augmented reality application that may allow ships to be piloted blindly by an iPhone.

Now someone has designed the iBridge, or something like it.

I first met Christoffer Lange and Anders Kittilsen, masters students at the architecture and design school of Oslo, back in March.

They had just been to sea on *Bourbon Orca*, as Ulstein was backing their masters diploma project — a rethink of the bridge on offshore boats.

Ulstein ignited imaginations in the global offshore segment years ago with its X-Bow, a revolutionary hull profile.

Now it wants to redesign the inside of offshore ships too. So they urged Kittilsen and Lange to apply their creative energies to an offshore bridge.

And the two delivered as much freshness as Ulstein could ever hope for.

They interviewed offshore officers, and videotaped them at work. They compared offshore operating stations with those of backhoe operators. And they sketched, sketched and sketched some more.

This is a field begging for change. Lange and Kittilsen pointed out that bridge consoles today resemble airport control towers in the 1950s. Rules and a limited list of suppliers have strangled development.

So Ulstein agreed to let Lange and Kittilsen disregard the rules, and the capabilities of its suppliers. If this means that the results will be only imaginary, it is the price they were willing to pay to unleash innovative forces.

In early June, the two students presented their concept to an audience with the kind of thumping rock music, strobe lights and models that would excite the envy of any Detroit automobile show.

I know many maritime marketing types who could take lessons in how to create a glamorous Hollywood atmosphere from these students.

The results were two concepts: Ulstein LOOP and Ulstein Boomerang.

The first is a Star Trek-looking bridge station ("Set the GMDSS to stun, First Mate Sulu") and the second an intriguing new bridge layout shape.

Both would look at home in a Devo video, or more charitably, a Mac store.

Will these concepts ever be realised? It is partly yards' own fault if bridge technology looks stuck in the cold war — they have systematically starved out competing suppliers so only one local, conservative supplier remains.

Only change-minded shipowners might make it happen.

Right now, though, they are probably not thinking big, as more and more boats focus on cleaning up oil, and not helping produce it. ■

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