

The EU ignored years of expert warnings on cruise ship safety

The disaster of the Costa Concordia was foreseen in studies commissioned by the EU.



Italian divers inspect submerged parts of the Costa Concordia Photo: EPA

By Christopher Booker

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When the headlines were filled last weekend with the sinking of the Costa Concordia, I checked the entry for the doomed cruise liner on Wikipedia and was intrigued to see that the ship was named in honour of “continuing harmony, unity, and peace between European nations” (as confirmed by the “ring of stars” shown prominently on its prow). What an apt metaphor, I mused, for the fate of that other monument to European harmony, the euro, which seems similarly to be half-sunk on a rocky ledge from which at any moment it may slide off to the bottom.

But there then came to light a much more disturbing link between the ill-fated liner and the EU. Regulating for the safety of ships is a “competence” long since handed over to Brussels. It emerges (through the researches of my colleague Richard North on his EU Referendum blog) that a whole series of studies, funded by the EU, has been carried out since 2004 by an international team of experts, led by Professor Dracos Vassalos of the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde, warning of precisely the disaster that followed the holing of the Costa Concordia.

The problem repeatedly addressed by Professor Vassalos and his team is what happens to cruise liners when they are holed below the waterline. Because of the network of bulkheads now customary in such “mega ships”, even small amounts of water which break in may be forced to the ship’s opposite side, causing it quickly to capsize.

“As the hull is breached,” one of their papers says, “water may rush through various compartments,

substantially reducing stability even when the floodwater amount is small. As a result the ship could heel to large angles – letting water into the upper decks that spreads rapidly through these spaces and may lead to rapid capsizing.” Hence what happened to the Costa Concordia, which was holed on the port side but after grounding, which forced water across the ship, then listed dramatically to starboard.

Prof Vassalos and his colleagues have been warning of this with increasing urgency for eight years. As they put it in a paper published in 2007 by the Royal Institution of Naval Architects, “the regulatory system is stretched to breaking point”. But even though their researches were part-funded by the EU, it took no notice of their findings. In 2009, for instance, it issued a new directive adding little to one from 1998 before this fatal design flaw had come to light.

One reason, it seems, for the EU’s extraordinary failure on this issue is that regulation for ship safety is handled at a global level by the International Maritime Organisation, which moves at an even more glacial pace. Brussels is reluctant to take unilateral action because, it has been told by European shipping interests, this could lead to the industry escaping from the EU to countries not under its jurisdiction.

So when David Cameron last week assured MPs that “if changes need to be made we will make them”, he forgot to inform them that the UK has no power any longer to regulate for ship safety, because we have surrendered it to the European Commission. On Friday, it assured us that it would be “taking fully into account any lessons to be learned from the Costa Concordia tragedy”.

Since the Commission has already managed to ignore all the lessons it might have learned from the research it has been funding since 2004, prospective cruise passengers should perhaps proceed with caution.

Alex Salmond plans to cheat the English of billions in a green power swap

In all the flood of questions unleashed by Alex Salmond’s desire to see Scotland withdraw from the United Kingdom – what about the Armed Forces, the flag, the Queen, the £11 billion given to the Scots annually by English taxpayers? – one issue has gone unnoticed. Last year, Mr Salmond hubristically pledged that 100 per cent of Scotland’s “gross electricity consumption” will come from renewable sources by 2020, supplied mainly by the thousands of wind turbines he wishes to see covering Scotland’s hills and seas. He even boasted that these windmills will produce so much power that they will “help to keep England’s lights on”.

At the moment, I gather from the “Scottish government”, Scotland exports on average some 1.2 gigawatts of electricity to England, mostly generated by nuclear and coal-fired power stations, which Salmond wishes to see closed down. But within eight years he wants to see these replaced by 16GW of renewable “capacity”, which should generate all the 4.5GW of power Scotland itself

needs.

As we all know, however, the problem with wind is that it doesn't permanently blow at the right speed to generate the power needed. There might be times when Scotland could export large amounts of wind-generated electricity to England. But these would be counterbalanced by all the times when, to keep its own lights on, it needs to import even larger amounts of power from England – generated by the kind of conventional power stations that Mr Salmond so scorns.

As hypocrisy, this is bad enough. But Mr Salmond omits to mention the further anomaly arising from the ludicrous subsidy system for wind energy. Onshore wind farms receive a 100 per cent subsidy on top of the market rate for their electricity; for offshore this is doubled to 200 per cent. So Mr Salmond's green dream implies that Scotland will sell large amounts of inordinately expensive electricity to England, at about two to three times the going rate, while to keep its own lights on it will buy very much cheaper power from England. In other words, he is hoping to pull off an astonishingly advantageous deal, which might soon net Scotland a profit amounting to billions of pounds.

We can already see the absurd situation such green dreams can bring about in the case of Denmark, which has more wind turbines per head than any country in the world, generating on paper the equivalent of 20 per cent of the power it uses. But, wind being so variable, as much as 80 per cent of the electricity produced has to be exported cheaply to Norway, forcing the Danes to import power from Germany at prices which have made Danish electricity the most expensive in Europe.

Mr Salmond hopes to get round this difficulty by selling his own "green electricity" at exorbitant rates to the hated English, while relying on them to supply cheap electricity whenever the wind fails him. Whether he can pull off such a trick is another of the questions that needs to be resolved before Scotland is allowed to float off into his dreamworld where it joins the euro and lives happily ever after, in a land made even more beautiful by 1,000 square miles of windmills.

Sadly, I was right about 'coffins on wheels'

Under the headline "Coffin on wheels", a coroner was reported on Friday ruling that Corporal Marcin Wojtak had been "unlawfully killed" in Afghanistan in 2009 when his Pinzgauer Vector patrol vehicle was blown up by an IED or roadside bomb. The coroner was highly critical of the fact that a soldier had been sent out in a vehicle which, as he had told his family, was known as "the coffin on wheels" because it gave no protection against IEDs – especially since his unit was due to be equipped, the very next day, with mine-protected Mastiffs which might well have saved his life.

This shocking story took me back to October 29, 2006 when, in an article headed "Our troops will patrol in coffins on wheels", I warned that at the heart of the disaster gathering round our presence in Iraq and Afghanistan was the Ministry of Defence's decision to equip our troops with vehicles

giving no protection against IEDs. Astonishingly, I reported, they were about to send Pinzgauer Vectors to Afghanistan – which gave even less protection than the Snatch Land Rovers they were replacing, in which 26 soldiers had already died.

Pinzgauer was so aggrieved by my story that it went to the Press Complaints Commission. It is poignant today to read the exchanges that followed. They attempted to defend the Vector by pointing out that its deployment to Afghanistan had been welcomed by the Tory shadow defence spokesman, Gerald Howarth MP (who was even pictured praising these vehicles on Pinzgauer's website). We defended our criticisms and said we would be happy to take up the firm's offer of a visit to its factory if they were prepared to show us a Vector driving over an IED. The firm's complaint was not upheld.

The Vectors went to Afghanistan, with the predicted results – of which last week's inquest was just one example. After three years, they were finally withdrawn, to be replaced with Mastiffs (but too late to save Cpl Wojtak).

Pinzgauer has since been sold off. But Mr Howarth is now part of the Government's ministerial defence team.

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