

Substantive text of speech given as part of a debate held at the Informa Manning and Training Conference, Manila. 15th November 2012.

The comments in this piece represent the personal views of the author and do not reflect the position of anyone else, or of any other organisation.

Motion before the house:

“This house believes that the shipping industry gets the MET it deserves”

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to speak. These debates afford us the opportunity to present in a different way to the normal type of conference presentation. My talk will perhaps take a slightly different tack from those of my colleagues. I hope so anyway.

At first glance the proposition that ‘we get the MET we deserve’ could be dealt with fairly simplistically. We’ll no doubt be voting on this in a few minutes – but what is it we’re actually voting on? Is it in fact a vote about MET and whether we get what we deserve, or is it a much larger, philosophical question we need to address, about which this is a mere and inconsequential footnote? I thought it would be interesting to look at where this expression comes from – that one group *deserves* something from another.

And, in order to really *understand* the question, we need to deconstruct it, to take it apart and see what assumptions and ideas underline such an innocuous sentence.... ‘Gets the MET is deserves...’.

You’ve probably heard the same form of words used with dozens of variations, such as:

‘we get the technology we deserve...’

‘we get the politicians we deserve...’

‘we get the society we deserve...’

There’s even a biblical version where St Luke in Chapter 23 records one of the men at the crucifixion saying ‘we receive the due reward of our deeds...’ or in modern parlance ‘we get what we deserve...’

Over the recent past with the political events in the US and China you may have read and heard ‘we get the government we deserve...’

So where did all this political deserving come from? Well, it’s usually and erroneously attributed to one Alexis de Tocqueville, a political scientist, historian and politician in Paris in the 19th Century who says it in one of his letters.

In fact, the phrase originates earlier than that and was first used by another man of French origin, Joseph de Maistre, in 1811. He was serving as the King of Piedmont-Sardinia's envoy to a Russian Czar - Alexander I.

Now at that time, Alexander was introducing reforms that were moving Russia toward a European-style constitutional government. It's ironic that Maistre's quote is now commonly used to suggest that we should involve ourselves more in politics, and take action to encourage democracy, open government and rebel against dictators.

The irony is that Maistre was actually *anti*-democratic. He believed that hereditary monarchies were a divinely-sanctioned, superior form of government.

For example, he argued *against* the French Revolution and, as a staunch royalist, supported the restoration of the French monarchy. And, in his 1811 letter, Maistre was actually expressing his *negative* views of Alexander's reform policies in Russia. He said a European-style constitutional system would be "over the heads" of the Russian people. Maistre wrote in his letter that:

"Toute nation a le gouvernement qu'elle merite."

The popular translation of this - the one we hear most of the time - is

"every nation has the government it deserves"

But this doesn't seem to represent quite what Maistre was saying. A more apt, if somewhat paternalistic, translation would be:

"every nation has the government which it's fit for"

Not a great difference, but it sounds less punitive, less about the fault or deservedness of the people and more about their readiness, or perhaps unpreparedness, to engage with their government.

So what, I hear you say, has this got to do with us deserving, or not deserving the MET we have? Bear with me, I'm getting there!

The point, unfairly attributed to Maistre, inferred by this motion, is that we *deserve* something done to us by someone else and we who are being done to are in no position to affect the outcome of the doer. We deserve it therefore it will be done unto us.

Now you may agree or disagree with this, but surely you can see that this philosophy, this world view, is far more of a fundamental discussion than the whys and wherefores of maritime education.

No, this topic concerns one of the oldest, most hotly debated, most intractable dichotomies of the human condition. It's a debate that stretches way back before St Luke and his biblical contemporaries, it's a debate that has exercised the minds of the greatest philosophers who have ever lived and is the subject of hundreds of learned

dissertations and theses. It is of course the debate concerning our own being, our very existence, our future and how it unfolds.

It's usually referred to as determinism on one side and anti- or non-determinism on the other.

Determinism is a philosophy which argues that for everything that ever happens, there are conditions such that, given those conditions, nothing else could happen.

Given any set of conditions, our behaviours are determined, foretold and inevitable, almost *controlled* by the events surrounding them. The theories that determinism spawns are numerous.

Alternatively, are we in charge of our destiny, able to shape, change things and control events? Are we able to exercise free will?

And why is this important today? Because depending on your philosophy, depending on your view of life, depending on how you see yourself in this world, will influence whether or not you think we *deserve* anything and whether the question really matters at all.

If you are a hard supporter of determinism then it doesn't matter very much what we have done in the past, what we do now and what we do in the future, since all our behaviours are determined, predictable and inevitable. In other words the MET training we see around us today – and there have been enough stories to keep us going till Christmas – isn't *deserved* - it's just normal and what has to be.

So where is free will in all this? Well, staunch believers in determinism would argue that there is no such thing and that every single action you take and have ever taken and will ever take is already mapped out. For them, the thought of determinism and free will standing alongside each other is simply incompatible. In fact, they're even labelled incompatibilists.

On the other hand, some argue that there's no such thing as determinism, that we exercise control over our actions and that events are the result of our collective and individual free will. There are many, many mid-positions.

So, back to the question. Do we *deserve* what we get? Some will say 'yes', it's ordained to be that way. It's inevitable that someone will do something to us because it's our unavoidable behaviours that have caused this state of affairs and, by extension, we must therefore be collectively guilty. If it wasn't for our sinful ways, life would be a bed of roses. The projected guilt rests firmly on our shoulders.

Taking an opposite view, we may see that for what, in my view, it almost certainly is. I nail my colours firmly to the mast of Free Will. I think we can change the events that we experience (a hard determinist would say that's all part of the plan!) and that therefore we should NOT accept the guilt that others are willing to place upon us. We should use our influence to persuade, cajole, lobby and influence those around us. Write

to newspapers, make speeches, become a politician, be constructive, speak your mind with honesty, remember the values and things in life that sustain you and that you cherish. Be human. Make our society, our industry, our noble tradition of seafaring, along with its magnificent tradition of education, training, teaching and learning, what it *should* be.

Don't ever, ever subscribe to the view that we '*deserve*' anything. Ladies and gentlemen I implore you to vote against this motion.

Thank you

Dr Chris Haughton
Education Consultant, Videotel Marine Limited
E: info@haughtonmaritime.com
www.haughtonmaritime.com