

Comments to ICONS Mr. Ed Verbeek, The Netherlands

Have_Your_Say:

After many accidents such as the Erika a lot is said about the specific circumstances of these accidents, but seldom the deeper lying causes are addressed. People make mistakes and will continue to do so. Therefore less than perfect ships and machines are built, less than optimal rules are made, and less than flawless operational decisions are taken. To try to prevent these resulting in accidents, safety nets have to be built in the system.

At present there are several layers of safety nets.

- The Owners, who mostly are interested in well crewed sound ships. Unfortunately there are some who are willing to compromise. All owners are under commercial pressure to be the cheapest, as in general the cheapest has most chance for the job.
- Class. Class is selected by the owner, and thus subjected to the same commercial pressure as the owner. Class has to make sure that the lightest, most efficient ship is built that still complies with the rules.
- Flag State. Flag States are also selected by the owners, and so subjected to the same commercial pressure. If a flag is more demanding than others, the owners have to choose another one. Most Flag States do not have their own inspection force anymore (or never had them) and are relying on class to do most inspections. However, class is not ready to do a policing job, and for an individual surveyor it is hard to change hats during a survey, one moment the advisor of the owner, the other moment the police officer from the Flag States, knowing the owner can select another class society if they are unhappy with him.
- Port State. This is the last safety net and fortunately not under the same commercial pressure as the other ones. Unfortunately there is only a limited possibility for structural checks, owing to the nature and scope of the inspection. PSC has another commercial pressure: the one from the port. Arrested ships take berths, which could have been more profitably used. In some ports real substandard ships from bad owners, which might have to stay for years in port if arrested are allowed to sail for this reason.

As the first 3 are all subjected to the same commercial pressure, the one experienced by the owner, to be among the cheapest, these safety nets all have the same weak spot. I think that the best way to improve safety would be to make sure that these safety nets would become subject to differing commercial pressures and thus have different weak spots. A possibility would be to have class selected by the underwriters. This way the preferred class society would be the class which is involved in least structural failures.

A negative would be that class would not have an imperative to develop innovative efficient designs. Another would be to have the class society representing the Flag States different from the class selected by the owner. This would be less efficient, as flag has the same pressure as the owner, but the pressure would be less direct, and flag is more sensitive toward negative public opinion.

I think that a review of the whole Flag States system, which at present is wholly commercial, with the question if that is proper for a law enforcing agency, is long overdue. It would make good sense if owners could not select flag as easily as they can now (how about a change of flag procedure similar to a change of class). Flag States are as much responsible for accidents as Erika and Leroy Strength as class societies are. However I think that changes to the flag structure, needed as they are, are politically very difficult.

Ed Verbeek

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