

Time to Stand Up to Tom, Dick and Harry.

I first became involved in the minerals industry when I took over the lease of a Scottish quarry in 1982. Cloburn is a large deposit of red granite which has been worked continuously since 1896. New to the industry, one of the first things I noticed was the marked contrast between the regulatory regime in quarrying and my previous career in plant which had included road haulage. This was highlighted by the content of the trade journals. Whereas the transport press was dominated by drivers hours, licensing and overloading offences, the minerals journals were much more focussed on technical and social matters. Reports of new plants intermingled happily with Institute visits and I seemed to have gone back in time to a happier, bygone age. It was perhaps fortunate that I was not to know what lay ahead

The first sign of impending doom was the advent of quality assurance schemes, which to me represented a complete waste of time and money. Having started off selling machinery before I left college, I was already acutely aware of quality control in the real world. If your goods were not up to the mark then you either could not sell them, could not get paid or lost your customers. Tough, effective and self policing. However the pen pushers eventually had their way and large chunks of the industry opened their gates to peculiar people with clipboards, strange procedures and large invoices.

The Health & Safety Executive then followed suit and demanded more and more paperwork. They decreed that every move, potential move and past move must be fully assessed and recorded. This at least gave them something to read when they came on site as what was happening at the sharp end was apparently now beyond their comprehension. The UK minerals industry had by this time already become one of the safest, if not *the* safest in the world. I personally witnessed the advent of ROPS and FOPS cabs, laser aided blast design, earth leakage circuit breakers, reversing radar and CCTV, improved air conditioning, proper dust suppression and lock out systems, as well as greatly enhanced health screening. At this point it is worth noting that these improvements were for the most part delivered by advancing technology driven by manufacturers competing for sales in a healthy market.

However, the status quo was not an option and once again people with clipboards, wacky vocabulary and even larger invoices invaded our sites. I think of all their weird and wonderful terminology, "hard target" is probably about the daftest. It still makes me laugh to see notices at site entrances proclaiming that they do not intend to have any accidents. If only I could lay my hands on industrial quantities of lucky white heather or rabbits' feet, I could make a fortune. Another safety statement which causes mirth is "zero tolerance" which roughly translated means that "if you do have an accident, don't report it or you might have an even bigger one." Although this may have reduced the number of recorded accidents, the sale of sticking plasters, smelling salts and crutches is on an upward curve and some 'office workers' are now larger and hairier than ever before. There is far too much political correctness and hypocrisy attached to health and safety nowadays. Political correctness refuses to acknowledge that in trying to eliminate accidents altogether we may actually be achieving the reverse. Hypocrisy is shackling our domestic industry to such an extent that we now import stone from countries with a much worse record on both health and safety and the environment.

Next off, quarry managers were not to be allowed to delegate responsibility for blasting operations to specialist contractors unless they first acquired their own "qualification." A dangerous concept as no-one should expect to attend a two day course and then issue orders to someone far better qualified. The argument I put to the inspectorate, in vain, was electricity. There could be no similar requirement for authorising electricians as there was no way quarry managers could be expected to oversee the work of time-served electrical engineers. However, electricity is much more dangerous than explosives and for a very simple reason. With explosives, we sound a siren, post lookouts and evacuate everyone to a place of safety before lighting the blue touch paper. Electricity on the other hand is always present, silent and potentially lethal. Industry protests fell on deaf ears and scores of managers were compelled to go off-site to obtain a worthless piece of paper. This one at least has now been dropped.

To add insult to injury we were then mugged by the Treasury who claimed that the only way to control our alleged noise, dust and visual intrusion was to *'internalise these externalities'* by imposing a swingeing levy of £1.60 per tonne. A cynical ploy indeed. Not only nationalisation by the back door but a classic stealth tax which has yet to be spotted by the people who pick up the tab, the general public.

All the time that this horde of politically correct nonsense was coming through our front gates an even more sinister force was attacking our markets, the majors. The UK has now lost control of the majority of its minerals production as the five remaining big guns are all multinational with four of them domiciled overseas. They have honed their techniques in market domination all over the world and now that they have complete control of the European cement industry, the remaining UK independent operators are very much a threatened species. I regard the influence of these massive companies as being singularly malignant. They buy out viable resources and close them down, they control the market by vertical integration and they now have the ability to subjugate independent ready mix and block companies with inflated cement prices. They even threaten our equipment supply chain by issuing preferred bidder lists. Few SME companies are able to get onto these lists and those that do are screwed into the ground on price. Even their own employees do not escape unscathed as they constantly reduce staffing levels in a never ending quest for greater profits.

Meantime the legislative onslaught continues apace with the call for Workplace Qualifications, the Road Transport Directive, the Working Time Directive, the Waste Oil Directive, Good Neighbour Agreements and huge increases in planning and environmental agency fees.

Many people reading this article will still remember a time when a "hard target" was a low flying grouse and when regulators and operators worked together and with mutual respect to drive up standards. A time when regulations were sensible, pragmatic and evidence based and we had no need to hide behind a mountain of paperwork. It really is time we stopped kow-towing to every Tom, Dick and Harry who runs down our industry. We have used local minerals for local applications for thousands of years. It is sustainable, it is sensible and it makes environmental sense. It is the dimwits who attack this concept who are the most likely to harm the environment, the economy and the welfare of our staff.

Ends: