

January 2019

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES



One of the inescapable lessons gained from experience is that unintended consequences can be found to have applied in a good many cases, far more times than one would welcome.

The story of the rise and fall in the popularity of diesel engines is a classic case of how the law has applied and caused a great deal of heart searching as a result. Heart searching about the health and well-being of people is now having very serious consequences in finding solutions to traffic congestion and for the motor manufacturing industry too. But of course one man's difficulties raise opportunities for another to exploit. Mr. Herbert Diess the head of VW and Elon Musk come to mind.

But it needn't have been like this at all.

Many years ago, probably in the 1980s, I attended a Prince of Wales' Committee workshop on environmental topics and in a presentation by a gentleman whose name I cannot recall we were presented with a slide just showing 'NOx, SOx and ROx'. Everyone was confused since none of us knew what ROx was. "Well" he said "Say them all out loud, knocks, socks and rocks. What I am concerned about and what we all should be concerned about are the rocks we need to be seriously concerned about the ROxs. ROxs are very small particles, very small rocks. I think that particulates are especially dangerous and we should be well aware of the risks that they pose to human health".

It was probably not long after that that certain people decided that diesel powered vehicles were the future and their use should be encouraged. We all now know what happened, the number of diesel engines in use ballooned but so did health problems. The gentleman at the workshop was ahead of his time but probably not that far ahead because filters were made mandatory on all diesel cars in 2009.

Air quality alongside highways is now a major concern, an unintended consequence of this being that at RML we are now designing highway improvements aimed to improve traffic flow by avoiding doing any of this work in urban areas. In one current project our proposed new road traverses green open countryside so as to avoid creating any increase in pollution in the urban area that is suffering from both traffic congestion and the poor quality of the air that residents are having to breath.

Well things have changed a lot and the year ahead is going to be an interesting and challenging one.

A happy new year to you all.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director

Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD (IF YOU DARE)

2018 has been a good year for us at RML. Fee income rose by more than 20% compared with 2017. We must be doing something that pleases our clients. That is the good news. But there is more good news.

During 2018 we have been joined by people with excellent experience of working in today's world of regulation and regulators, but more on this in a moment, and at our present number our resources are totally committed for 2019. We hope and expect that we will have a few new and interesting projects brought to us during the year so we hope too to attract some new employees. It will be nice to see the RML team and their horizons expanding.

We are also told that our specialist environmental clerks of the works are highly valued.

We are enjoying the challenge of thinking about how we can influence the future wellbeing of Wales especially with respect to highway improvements, but really every kind of development should address the issue of our national wellbeing.



There was a report in The Times on 21st December last that in procuring new work the government would consider how tenderers treated their subcontractors in respect of paying them promptly for work done. There is something positive happening out there. Although to my certain knowledge the Welsh Assembly have been including such a clause in their contracts for highway projects for some time and we have benefited from this. Is this a case of Wales leading the way again with some forward thinking?

What does concern me is that the time we spend investigating, reporting on and negotiating with public bodies about issues has grown out of all proportion to the design effort we now put into a project. Ivor keeps commenting about this when we put together budgets for new projects. Project

coordination and gaining approvals from outsiders seems to be so dominant. He compares things today with how things used to be when “What I said as an engineer went”! I suppose he was lucky in that he was leading from the front and there was no one to argue with him.

I think that this change in practice has come about because nobody trusts anyone to do the right thing and this disappoints both Ivor and me. Promoting the science art and practice of good environmental management should be enough out of self-interest. After all didn't Professor Hambley tell us that if engineers did not respect the environment then the image of the profession and hence the industry would suffer? But I suppose we do need a few regulators and the occasional court case ‘pour encourager les autres’

In thinking ahead I see great merit in having our national wellbeing at the front of our minds at all times. Prosperity and quality of life is so dependent on connectivity between people and between places so this means that we have to build new things like roads and railways but we must also become better at building them. I certainly believe that there is always room for improvement.

I wish our readers good collecting, reporting, designing, building and wellbeing in 2019.

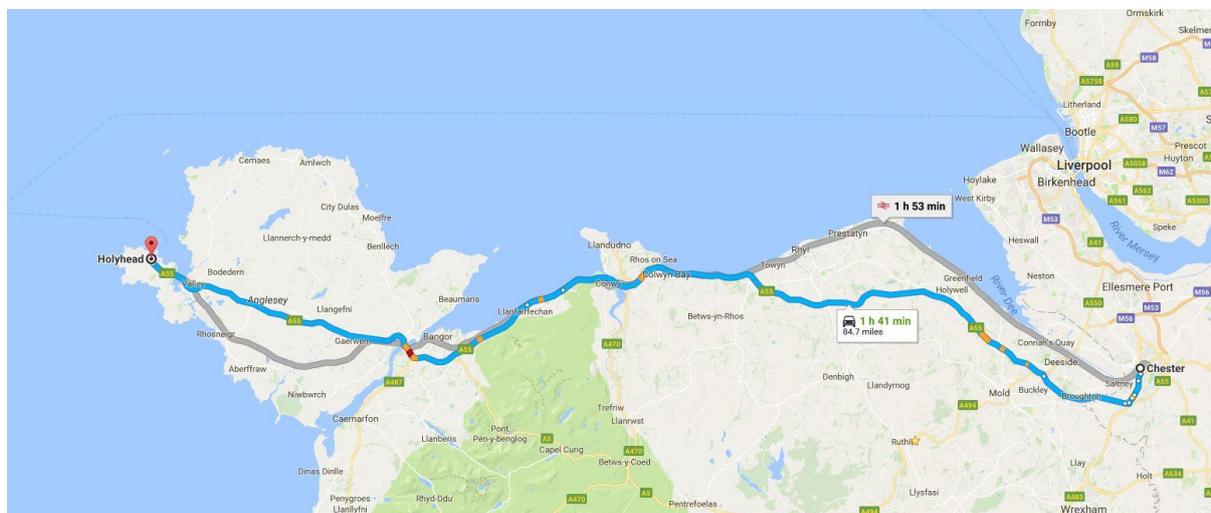
Kind regards

Idris

Chief ranter and problem solver

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CONGESTION



Traffic jams and railway bottlenecks are costing ports more than £500 million a year -

This really is dreadful if only half true. £500 million/year is an awful lot of wealth being denied to the rest of us. That is the bad news and although RML are not working on any of the problem areas mentioned in the report we are doing our bit to help solve the overall problem I would say that whilst the report mentioned highlighted many notorious points of congestion nationally there are certainly many others around the UK. In the last 12 months we have completed significant stages of the design of road improvements around Deeside and are working on 4 more in North Wales and one in South Wales. The ones in North Wales should help to reduce congestion along the A55, the A494 and the A483. A programme and timescale for these works has not been determined to the best of my knowledge but they are on their way, so watch this space. Our involvement in them may well continue, I hope so anyway!

I am not an accountant or on the same page as the Chancellor of the Exchequer so I do not understand why the UK government is reluctant to borrow more so that these restrictions to our commercial expansion are removed as a matter of urgency. A £billion or two extra each year, or even £500 million to match the figure in the report, would make a big difference and the construction industry could do with the work too. When so many people are telling us that we must reduce carbon emissions and pollution then surely this is somewhere where money would be well spent. Heavy vehicles pumping out NOx's, SOx's and ROx's whilst queuing for 19 million hours every year is doing no one any good.

Not only would our productivity improve but so would our well-being which must be a serious consideration for all of us

Kind regards

Idris

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