

Fear of grey boxes

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Andrew Craig-Bennett on another virulent form of sea blindness.

Timor arcium griseum. I hope I have got the Latin for “Fear of grey boxes” correct, because it is the widespread fear – almost a medical condition – of container shipping that I want to write about.

There was a time when fear of the grey box was widespread in the liner shipping industry, and with good reason. Liner shipping companies operated in so-called conferences which promised exporters a reliable service in exchange for restrictive practices aimed at limiting competition. This was because mid-Victorian shipowners had very soon discovered that in the absence of controls on competition liner shipping companies compete to the point of bankruptcy, and the entry premium into conventional liner shipping is low.

The conferences had conference tariffs which were based on the useful insight that a given commodity on a given route always had a maximum freight rate which it could stand – i.e., if the shipping line charged more than ‘x’ the delivered cost of the commodity would be too high for it to sell, and thus to be worth shipping.

The freight rate on wool was different to the freight rate on soap, and so on. Each tariff rate was set at a point that made it worthwhile to ship whatever it was, and these rates did not change by much, so an export industry could plan ahead. I will not spend more time on this huge subject, but I will recommend the excellent Wikipedia page on the Far East Freight Conference.

The first form of '*Timor arcium griseorum*' occurred amongst liner shipping companies of the old school when they realised that one ISO container is just the same as another, that being, in the immortal words of President Obama, the whole idea, and that, this being the case, it was impossible to apply different tariffs to different cargoes when they were all being carried in the same grey boxes and treated in exactly the same way.

That is one reason why the container revolution literally ate its parents – the traditional liner companies. Today, the only survivors of the hundred and more liner shipping companies that operated under the conference system in its glory are Hapag-Lloyd, Mitsui OSK, NYK, and K Line. Maersk began as a conference outsider. It was allowed in, eventually, but it was always basically piratical – their hearts were never really in it.

The liner conference era is generally held to have come to an end on October 17, 2008, when the Far East Freight Conference wound itself up following the withdrawal of the EU exemption of the conference system from antitrust rules.

A clear win for the grey box

So much for the first outbreak of fear of grey boxes. That occurred within our industry. The current outbreak is taking place outside shipping and involves the public and in particular the politicians. It is unlikely to result in a win.

Splash readers who read my column on sea blindness correctly observed that it is possible to move military stores and equipment through a container terminal if the stuff is in ISO containers, although, for big stuff like tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, a ro-ro terminal is preferable, and that it is possible to fit a cruise missile and the hardware needed to launch it into an ISO container, but we all know just how very vulnerable a gantry container crane is. I still think that container terminals are more military targets than military assets, but equally these places seem able to inspire fear in the general public and in the sorts of people, be they journalists, influencers, or actual politicians, who prey on the fears of the public in every land.

I blame the Port of Long Beach, myself. As general cargo jumped into grey boxes, leaving the Port of Long Beach's ample estate of warehouses and quays with less and less to do, the port found a new income stream in renting out its property to the almost adjacent film industry, as locations for action films. We have all seen some of these. For the first time, ports became scary places where nefarious activities went on.

A container terminal is even more scary than a deserted general cargo berth. There is no human scale. Immense machines, many of them made in China, move big metal boxes around rapidly in what is clearly a planned and organised system, but the casual observer has no idea of what the plan is. It is like watching a colony of gigantic ants. There is absolutely no way to let the public see for themselves and explaining it all to politicians of the calibre of Vance and Hegseth would be counterproductive, as their power depends on stoking the fear of the unknown. People who seriously propose to look for the kill switch in a container crane are capable of any amount of nonsense.

Timor arcium griseorum is a virulent form of sea blindness.