

ADDRESS BY MR. RICHARD BURKE

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AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING

OF NEW PREMISES FOR

IRISH BUSINESS SYSTEMS,

AT EMMET PLACE, CORK.

8 SEPTEMBER, 1980.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to say how pleased I am to be here and to have the opportunity of saying a few words about an important subject - the role of telematics in our society - which I am sure is of keen interest to all of you gathered here. But let me say before turning to this, the main subject of my speech, that it would be unthinkable for me to visit Cork at this time without also making reference to another problem which is nearer to home, more immediate and, unfortunately, a good deal more painful. I mean the problem of shipping safety, and the safety of oil tankers in particular, which has been given such tragic prominence for the people of Cork - and the people of Brittany as well - by the Betelgeuse disaster twenty months ago, and again by the powerful report on the disaster published by Mr. Justice Costello at the end of July.

I have read this document with admiration, and also with gratitude, not only for its self-evident authority and lucidity, but because I believe that the Costello report can become a landmark on the way to proper standards of safety at sea, which we are still so far from attaining. I believe it will serve to sharpen our consciences and our will to act in an area where action is overdue. I myself have left to me a little less than four months of responsibility for maritime policy, but I mean to use every effort during that time to ensure that the European Community does its clear duty, in seeking to ensure by every means possible that in its waters there will be no more sub-standard ships, and no more ships operated by sub-standard crews.

I do not imagine that the last word has been spoken about the Bantry disaster; indeed, we still await the report of the French Government's own enquiry. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the Irish tribunal reached the conclusion that the hull of the Betelgeuse was seriously weakened as a result of inadequate maintenance, and that this weakened hull was then subjected to excessive stress through incorrect ballasting procedures while the vessel lay at Whiddy.

It is not for me to allocate praise or blame. But this accident must bring home to us all the enormity of the problem of sub-standard shipping which we face in the ports and sea lanes of the Community. The Community is the greatest trading power in the world, which means that all of the worlds shipping visits our ports. We cannot be blind to the fact that a proportion of these ships are sub-standard; that is, their structure or equipment or crews do not measure up to the standards specified in the various international Conventions which define universal norms for these matters. I have heard an estimate that 5% of all ships are sub-standard; and these present a constant threat of accident and death and, in the case of oil tankers, of pollution as well. The current loss and accident record of shipping around the world is extremely worrying. 1978 and 1979 were particularly bad years during which the rate of tanker mishaps in particular reached a level which is quite unacceptable.

Fortunately, however, the Community is not powerless in face of these events. It is in fact in a strong position to impose some order on the ships which use our seas and ports. Each member state is already empowered to check that shipping of whatever flag using its ports is up to standard in terms of the requirements of the international Conventions on shipping safety and pollution prevention. But unhappily these powers are not always exercised, and here is a chief source of our current troubles. At the moment, it is for each member state to decide whether or not to exercise these enforcement powers; and I have to say that some states, perhaps because of a shortage of skilled resources, are less zealous about it than others.

The Commission however has recently presented to the Council a proposal for a Directive which would end the discretion allowed to member states and would require them to make full use of their powers in a co-ordinated and cohesive way. In brief, the Directive would require each state to identify all sub-standard ships using its ports, and to oblige them to be put in order before leaving the Community. The twelve Articles of the proposed Directive set out specific procedures for doing this, and they include also the idea of establishing a single "Shipping Information System" for the Community, intended to give the authorities improved advance information about the ships which are about to enter their ports.

My aim with this proposal is to make the Community an area which sub-standard shipping would enter at its peril. I am hopeful that the Council of Ministers will adopt the Directive by the end of the year.

This legislation will unfortunately do little to console the families of the Whiddy Island victims, nor will it guarantee - because nothing can - that such tragedies will not occur again. But I believe it will decisively reduce the number of accidents in our waters, make pollution of the seas a game not worth the candle, and constitute a strong deterrent to those shoddy practices into which certain commercial interests may be led when they are tempted to value profit more highly than human safety.

I turn now to the main business of the day, and to the agreeable task of declaring these premises open.

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New electronic technologies : Impact on Society and Employment

Recognizing the need to identify new sources of growth and employment to offset the difficult adjustments that traditional industries are being forced to undergo, the Commission has been looking to the dynamic complex of information industries based on the new electronic technologies. Given their current annual growth rates (about 30%) these industries offer an important source of such economic growth and social development.

Modern European society is already an "information society", with scientific and intellectual activity of all kinds, economic transactions and the whole pattern of daily life dependent on a subtle network of information.

The new family of electronic technologies is transforming the way this network of information can work, promising to reduce its cost enormously, to transform office work and industrial production, and to offer the citizen a vast range of new or improved goods and social services. The speed and skill with which these new technologies are developed and applied are critical to the social development of any modern community, to the efficiency and productivity of its industry and services, and, not least, to its position and influence in the world.

.../... These changes mean that

These changes mean that virtually every industrial product or production process, from automobiles to machine tools and toys, and very many services are open to enhancement or improved efficiency by the application of the new "microelectronic" technology. It means that distributed intelligence in terminals, computers, or the family television set can be cheaply linked in European and world-wide networks of great power.

European society will be obliged to apply these technologies on an immense scale. They are essential to the competitiveness of its industry in world markets and necessary for the mastery of the information processing and flows that are its lifeblood. But whether the process is a painful one, or a positive one that generates new economic growth, new social possibilities, and hope, will depend on how the new revolution is handled, and on the social, industrial and political choices that are made.

In social and political terms the new technologies could offer new tools for individual development and expression, new possibilities for small to medium-sized enterprises, new communication facilities for distant regions, new facilities for the underprivileged, whether the handicapped or the immobile old. Will they be used for these redeeming purposes or as an instrument for reinforcing central political or corporate power?

In terms of employment, the new technologies will certainly bring a reduction in jobs of a repetitive nature, whether in the office or in the factory. The question is whether the industries and services of the Community can generate new products and services for the world market on such a scale that the new jobs created outnumber those lost. A further question is whether the rich and rapidly growing European market, and indeed the world market as a whole, is to be largely supplied from outside Europe or whether European-based industries and services are to take a major and growing share.

Europe's intellectual contribution to the new technologies is still remarkable, but in the commercial and industrial field it is the United States and Japan that lead. The fact is that Europe has so far failed to mobilize a major asset - continental scale with large market.

Nevertheless, the effects of these developments will be felt in every area of European society. Furthermore every effort must be made to have production capacity of these new technologies located in the Community. Recent announcements of industrial projects for production of integrated circuits and micro-processors in Ireland are to be welcomed in this respect.



The new technologies have, notoriously, eliminated many traditional jobs. The Community should not tolerate the loss of the potential new jobs which the technologies can bring and by which they can, to some extent, compensate for the employment they have eliminated.

The introduction of the new technology in Europe is inevitable. We cannot shut ourselves off from it or its consequences. But the social and industrial changes resulting from the new technology cannot be left to chance, but must be developed in the light of society's overall social objectives.

In a period of rapid growth of the active population coinciding with slow economic growth, it is particularly important to foresee how rapid innovation of products and processes in the industrial and service sectors will affect the labour market. Work sharing and income distribution would then be key areas for Government attention.

The large increases in productivity which may be associated with the new technology can fulfil one of the conditions necessary for the reduction of annual working time and overtime, whilst respecting concerns for competitiveness. Another aspect of the technology is the flexibility of operation that it makes possible, and the consequent scope it gives for the development of more flexible employment patterns.

.../... If the new technology

If the new technology succeeds in raising the productivity of labour and capital, and in reducing energy consumption, the quality of life can be improved. The benefits of this process should be seen in terms of the possibilities it gives society to better fulfil its responsibilities to the less fortunate as well as in terms of goods, services and increased leisure.

This can in part be achieved by releasing consumption expenditure and manpower for highly labour-intensive activities related to help for the sick and aged (the latter forming an expanding section of the Community population). But it also implies the specific application of the new technology to social needs such as the relief from the tedious parts of housework or the equipment of old people's homes.

Whatever the ultimate effects on the overall level of employment, the new technology will profoundly transform working conditions. On the most readily identifiable level, namely that of safety and health, there will be both gains and potential losses. Workers will benefit from a healthier environment, less extreme temperatures, reduced demand for physical effort. Against these advantages must be set the hazard of heightened stress in handling the new technology, notably for example in the use of visual display units and related equipment.

.../... At a broader level

At a broader level, the new organization of work which is resulting from the increased use of information analysis and transmission devices in the production process offers the possibility for more flexible working methods. This may ultimately both transform the pattern of responsibility and man-to-man relationships in the work-shop and replace the traditional tendency to concentrate work places in centralized locations by more decentralized working methods. A more decentralized, data-linked, organization system could play its part in correcting present regional and urban imbalances. This would also have obvious implications for transport.

The impact of the new technology on training goes well beyond the traditional concept of marginal re-adjustment and retraining of workers affected. It raises a set of questions to the existing training and education systems and to their ability to equip workers - and consumers - with the skills required to cope with change.

Processes of production will become less concrete and tangible and hence less easy to grasp, and will require different types of man-machine relationships. The development of skills and abilities appropriate to the new technology thus implies the development of a flexible approach which permeates the training process, and not just the provision of explicit training and retraining in skills which are in demand.

Commission's Irish-built Computer.

The Commission, as I have indicated, is most anxious that the new technologies should be established in the Community Member States, including Ireland. The Commission, for its own work, is highly dependent on computers for research and administration. It already has a British computer in Luxembourg and French network computers at its Ispra Research Centre in Northern Italy. When the Commission recently decided to replace its existing main computer - which is American - at Ispra, we opted, to my great satisfaction, for an Irish-built computer. The decision was based not only on technical criteria and delivery time - we also felt that the acquisition of an Irish-built Amdahl main computer would constitute an attractive solution from the viewpoint of industrial policy. In so doing, the Commission has endorsed Ireland as a suitable location for the new "telematics" and "informatics" industries.

Official Opening

Office equipment is an obvious area for innovation in microelectronics. Office procedures and jobs will no doubt change in the future. The search for improved office efficiency and better working conditions has provided a demand for sophisticated office equipment and attractive furniture.

Irish Business Systems, founded in 1972, has been able to benefit and grow in meeting this demand. Through enterprising management it has grown from small beginnings to a firm with a £2½ million turnover, employing 140 workers. I also note that the Group has solid plans to provide 60 jobs in a new microfilm factory in Dublin. May this Firm continue to contribute to employment creation in Ireland.

It gives me great pleasure officially to declare open the new Cork premises of Irish Business Systems.

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