

# Tragedy on the high seas

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MY sympathy goes out to the families and friends who lost loved ones on the Costa Concordia which hit a reef just off the Tuscan coast. This horrible accident is on a scale comparable to the Titanic, although the current loss of life is considerably less. I say this as there is no comparison between the modern navigation support devices of a current cruise ship and that of the Titanic.

Satellite navigation and built-in redundancies, depth sounders and measurements, detection of submerged mass, radar, autopilots, and even sonar are commonplace equipment today. However, there is one thing that remains an unknown and that is human error, or even worse, human intentions. In the first instance, stubborn behaviour is a constant factor of refusing to re-check vital information, or in the case of the Titanic, take a safer route.

The latter case has been adequately captured in the movie Scream and its sequel, and portrays the darker side of disgruntlement. There is no way that an incompetent captain should be in charge of such a large and expensive vessel, and the norms of the maritime industry do not leave much leeway for imposters. So I will not easily accept any early insinuations of incompetence.

The recordings of the conversations involving the captain and his refusal to get back on board the ship to be in charge of rescue and evacuation leave a cloud of suspicion. In our Jamaican descriptive and illustrative way I would say “the captain just chuck off and lef’ the passengers dem”. This is highly unusual behaviour for a highly trained person in this particular industry, and we should expect to learn more from an inquiry or even a trial.

The regrettable incident will also expose any shortcomings in the practices and procedures of the shipping line and the industry itself. Food poisonings and other foul-ups will again surface, as will fire protection and suppression. If the industry has been sailing too close to the wind, then this will expose any weaknesses as they must expect to face countless legal challenges.

Information that has been subsequently made available suggests that the same vessel and captain passed even closer to the danger point in August 2011, and the cruise line maintains that this was not an authorised sailing plan. It seemed that the captain wished to wave to friends on the shore from his US\$500 million vessel. Then he says he tripped and fell into a lifeboat. Now that is a real sea tale surpassed only by Jonah and the whale!

But the fine print on the ticket contract will probably protect the line from serious litigation awards. Caveat emptor! I anxiously await the actions of the United States when it is realised that the line cannot be sued in their courts, and that a lot of disgruntled survivors will make their Congressmen very uncomfortable in an election year. Perhaps they will invade Italy! That would be a much easier war than Iran.

At home, this will not augur well for the industry as the short-term fallout will be potential passenger confidence. When this is coupled with British Airways playing a crash tape by mistake, the concept of technology and safety will be challenges in most people’s minds. The concept of the high tech control infallibility will be “nothing can go wrong... can go wrong... can go wrong...”

So like the best laid plans of mice and men, although this was not planned for, the Ministry of Tourism will have to go into damage control mode immediately, and again we will have to

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borrow to invest in avoiding a possible debacle. This is not our fault, but we will have to pay to avoid the fallout to an industry that has consistently hoodwinked us into expenditures and waivers that do not provide a commensurate benefit.

I already informed readers that we are a destination for cheap potable water, and only a very low percentage of our so-called visitors ever leave their floating shopping malls to come ashore. The payback on Falmouth development is over 200 years, and we will never recover our investment and further commitments made. This is really a glaring example of either overexuberant stupidity, or something much more sinister.

Vendors, transport operators, shore attractions, and other hopefuls seeking employment stand to be very disappointed as the passengers stay on board their huge multi-storied shopping and entertainment malls. This is not benefiting our country, and we need to grow up and stop the cruise lines from making promises, while taking us for a ride. These negotiations and agreements need some serious forensic scrutiny. If there has been a mistake, we need to learn from it. If it has been done for other reasons, then we need to take strong action.

Beyond the confines of the tourism industry there is an urgent need for an assessment of capital expenditures, and a clear communication of ability to execute without waste. The expenditures on infrastructure projects need to be seen in light of the expected revenue gains. That is to say that if rural roads are repaired then farmers need to produce, and transport operators need to commit to reasonably priced safe and regular schedules.

If incentives or lower taxes are provided to the manufacturing sector, then a commensurate increase in exports should balance that equation. What I am saying is that for every action there needs to be at least an equal (or hopefully greater) reaction. Our economy requires that both hands (public and private) must clap. Investments with no economic or developmental returns cannot be afforded at this time, and there needs to be a collective recognition of this fact.

The Government needs to review whatever expenditures it commits to and ensure that waste, or worse, corruption, does not play a part in those endeavours. The private sector (including the self-employed) needs to stop talking and get on with investing in real goods and services that make profits and employ people. We all need to understand that we cannot borrow ourselves out of debt, and that repayment of loans requires production.

Like the ill-fated cruise ship, we are an accident waiting to happen. However, being forewarned affords us an opportunity to revise our course to a new direction that will avoid all anticipated reefs. We have choices and we should not avoid taking action in order to give a false sense of security to the passengers. Regrettably the safe voyage is too often taken for granted, but believe me, the crash will not go unnoticed by the electorate.

Bon voyage.





**GIGLIO, Italy** — People watch the Costa Concordia cruise liner off the tiny Tuscan island of Giglio, Italy, Friday, January 20, 2012. The cruise ship grounded off Tuscany shifted again on its rocky perch Friday, forcing the suspension of diving search operations for the 21 people still missing and raising concerns about the stability of the ship's resting place. (Photo: AP)

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