

Speech by Lord Hunt to the Worshipful Company of Water Conservators

November 2, 2006

Master Wardens, Liverymen, ladies and gentlemen. It is an honour to be invited to speak at your banquet here in the Drapers Hall, and it is a great pleasure to celebrate the work of the Livery Company of Water Conservators of London, London being one of the world's greatest riparian and coastal cities. It is a special pleasure to celebrate the leadership of the Master, Sue Owen. In the environmental field the many contributions of women are finally being recognised by their promotion to the most senior posts.

Although the Corporation of London's historic buildings do not look out over the Thames, Westminster and GLA's City Hall make up for that, with their closeness to the natural and commercial life of the tidal flow, including its role in London's environment. In the 19th century parliament closed down because of the smells. Now we just see the barges carrying away London's refuse. When you read Moby Dick and check the story on the Westminster Abbey web page, you will also learn the interesting royal connection of the River Thames, whales were caught for Royal feasts and in the Coronation ambergris from sperm whales is symbolically still one of the ingredients of the anointing oil.

Your livery company was set up not far from Westminster at the Institute of Civil Engineers where the walls are covered with distinguished engineers from Stephenson onwards. Next year they too will have a woman president, Jean Venables, who is particularly interested in the environmental aspects of engineering. She has very ably chaired the Thames Partnership.

Although Conservators is an old fashioned term, in parts of England water conservators were the local democratic bodies responsible for water management. Our Dutch friends regarded their polder groups as the founding element of their democracy. Although these bodies have been swept away by the Conservative government, the reforms of water management have been effective, with significant improvement in water quality in many parts of the UK - the Environment Agency brought together the old river authorities leading to more unified standards (and clearer information), for example with better use of the Met Office computer

models and the BBC broadcast with improved forecasts and warnings of flooding. Soon they should lead to phone text messages to vulnerable individuals as they already do in India (in 14 languages) and as some boroughs do now in London for air pollution.

Despite being a large national body, the Environment Agency has involved school children in all aspects of the environment, as one might expect with a Chief Executive Baroness Young who used to run the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds the country's largest environmental non-governmental organisation. Water companies are also sensitive to their community obligations, but more effort is needed (as a recent House of Lords report emphasised). UCL organised a wide ranging conference on London's future environment with Thames Water's support a school environment class who came showed their concern in a breakout session, which they reported in the form of a rap song with a strong chorus line.

Reverting to governance the important changes in UK's public-private system have also enabled the UK to work effectively with the EU and its agencies. The previous EU commissioner Margot Wallström emphasised the need to recycle our rubbish, and the European Environment Agency, now directed by Jacquie McGlade, was pointing out this week Europe's pollution spreading up to the Arctic and the dangerous state of Europe's inland seas. From next year they even include the Black Sea. The EU pressure has helped improve the UK water quality standards as we see with blue flag beaches, and other measures. One hopes that the UK achievements can be more effectively spread around the world. Although the UK water companies are working in Africa and elsewhere, UK government agencies are not funded or even permitted to operate in foreign countries in the same way that the US Environment Agency has such a strong presence, e.g. in China and elsewhere. The US government recognises how agencies and the private sector can work effectively together. I speak as Chairman of a UK environmental consultancy, often competing abroad with the US.

Perhaps the influence of an environmental livery company in the City could move HMG to be more proactive in promoting this growing element of UK commerce.

This banquet was well planned to coincide with a major development in the debate on climate change policy. The message is that climate change is happening, and it will get worse and its social effects will be serious unless action is taken in the next 10-20 years to reduce emissions and also to start adapting to these change - an enormous role for the water

community, dealing with cities, rising sea levels along coastlines, limited water resources, and many types of risks from extreme weather. The prediction of the Stern Report is that if all the major industrial countries start now the world could manage this change with only a small effect on their economies. But it will require a great leap of imagination and understanding by every level of society. The effects of climate change and the best methods of tackling them (as the World Bank has emphasised) will vary from country to country. The ice age 8000 years ago was the last time in the UK we had serious climate change whose effects are still visible. Even part of Shakespeare's England is now under the North Sea, where Henry Bolingbroke arrived 'naked on the shore of Ravensburg' - on the Yorkshire coast near Hull. The melting of the ice sheets caused the muddy flats on the Essex coast to be so different to the sandy shore of Holland. This is the reason why the Chief Engineer of Defra explained we have the wrong sort of mud - of course, and therefore this makes the dykes more difficult to construct than in Holland.

I am vice president of an international NGO of global legislators for a balanced environment. We are talking with other legislators to achieve a stronger policy consensus for reducing emissions after 2012 when the current Kyoto arrangements end. The world will be looking to the UK for a strong lead following the G8 meeting at Gleneagles. I believe that HMG should keep saying that emissions can be reduced (and energy costs reduced) by pointing to examples, such as Woking or energy corporations. The Stern review is also saying that bold policies for introducing nuclear and renewable power systems are essential. But industry requires that in the UK the government must put into place the kind of planning structure that France has to enable businesses to invest.

Although this is a challenging note on which to end, I am sure that the Water Conservators will continue to flourish. I applaud their wide connections across the UK institutions, including, I was pleased to read the armed services. You are exploring and publicising key environmental issues as well as contributing your expertise to City initiatives, which I believe are essential, joining the insurance and other parts of the City which are already involved in their initiatives.

And now I would like to propose the toast to the Worshipful Company of Water Conservators, root and branch, may it flourish forever.