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Out to lunch

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OUT TO

Lunch



London's Horseferry Road.

Bernard is the money man for the World Maritime University. He has spent most of his life engaged in getting the finances of development projects off the ground. That makes for a lot of travel, and a lot to talk about. Which was just as well.

Bernard is busy launching an appeal for the World Maritime University. He wants to leave it on a firm financial footing. He is thinking of moving on to something else. A project on child diseases and insects in Nairobi. Not much in common with shipping, you might think. Wrong. Both projects are concerned with helping developing states to help themselves. Both projects need someone to look after the money. "I don't know any more about insects than I do about shipping," says Bernard, "but I've had a little practice with reading budgets."

Whilst we are waiting for the antipasta, he tells me about that practice. I start by asking him how he got into development work. "Right here," he grins, "helping the UK after the war." Only then do I realise that here is a man who is past pension age. He shows no sign of wanting to draw it. He was a Treasury attache to the US embassy in London in the fifties, dealing with war debt settlement and getting US bases in the UK onto the right financial footing.

In those days Italian restaurants didn't feel obliged to operate a huge pepper grinder over everything they serve. L'Amico does, to the detriment of both dinner and digestion. Bernard likes spicy food. He went to India as Treasury representative after leaving London. He liked the east, and his career kept him out there, in Bangladesh and Manila, where he helped to set up the Asian Development Bank. He had a seat on the board of the World Bank and got involved in the United Nations. He was US Ambassador to the UN ECOSOC, when George Bush was permanent representative. George Bush has never been to L'Amico, but President Gorbachev has. He ate there when he was last in London. They have named the spaghetti after him. I stuck to the tagliolini, and

Bernard the cannelloni. In both cases, I have had better food in Russia.

Bernard got to the World Maritime University via the UN Development Project, at about the same time as a rather brusque waiter got to us with the fish. And the pepper grinder. Bernard was in at the setting up of the WMU, seconded by the UNDP to advise the chancellor, C P Srivastava, and to get the project onto a good financial base. It was something of an uphill battle at first.

But Bernard was heartened by the response to his efforts then. The generosity of governments, particularly the Swedish, underpinned the institution, but a wide spread of private people and businesses came in. Now, with 500 graduates starting to take over the world, Bernard has got something to sell. He is out on a hunt for long term funding for what anyone can see is a successful project. He is selling it as Fortune 500. He wants money from the shipping industry, which is the main beneficiary of the WMU.

Bernard can quote chapter and verse of specific instances where WMU graduates have influenced affairs to the betterment of shipowners and trade in general. He is most proud of the fact that the number of WMU graduates turning up to represent their countries at IMO is increasing each year. So is the quality of representation. That has got to be a good thing, and deserves support.

Usually the dessert trolley in Italian restaurants deserves close attention, too. I go for the cream caramel. I wait for the pepper grinder, but the waiter is able to resist. Bernard has the raspberries, a wiser decision. I ask Bernard whether a career spent controlling aid money does not include a feeling of superiority. "Not controlling," he grimaces, "pleading for." You don't get superior on that. He is right, here is a man who has no superiority complex. He just likes helping people. He has got a £5m note with a hole in it, to symbolise the paying off of the UK national debt. And he has a headful of memories. He reflects on aid policies, he is not even sure that it all makes sense. The more you help, he thinks, the less incentive there is for them to pull up their own socks. But he knows there is no ideal circumstance, he doesn't control events. "I just bite the bullet," is how he puts it.

For all that, the WMU is the smallest, and most successful project that he has ever been involved in. The evidence of its success is so clear to see. The success is in people, the product of the WMU. Bernard can take some of the credit for that, although he doesn't want to. One of his jobs has been to travel around the world helping governments to select the right people to attend the WMU. That process has been the foundation of the success of the WMU. No institution can turn out good people if it starts with bad. That has not been a problem at WMU, where the student body is a vibrant and keen mixture of hope and experience. The graduates are the best advertisement for the WMU. Bernard is getting them to come to London for a party soon. They will sell the WMU to the potential fund supporters.

I don't suppose Bernard will be inviting them to L'Amico. If he does, he should look carefully at the credit card slip before he signs it. But then he would. He's spent his life keeping an eye on other people's money, and getting the best for it.

John Guy