

'Ports need more support'

By Will Waters - IFW - 9th November 2009

UK facilities let down by lack of government leadership and have to fend for themselves.

Good practice by the UK logistics and ports sector is being let down by a lack of leadership and support from government, senior executives have claimed. At a recent debate hosted by consultancy and recruitment network Experts for Experts (e4e) and the Global Institute of Logistics (GIL), PD Ports said that in a fragmented and largely privatised market like the UK, the Department for Transport (DfT) remained the only player in a position to deliver a coherent freight transport system.

CEO David Robinson said that unlike some European countries, where state owned ports received financial support as well as leadership from government, UK operators were expected to create and develop their own projects, as well as help fund the infrastructure to support them. Bernard Malloy, chairman of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport's warehouse and materials handling forum, said: "PD Ports has been a leader in its field, because of the fantastic level of collaboration it has achieved in the supply chain, including between competitors." But there is no leadership when it comes to government - in terms of developing infrastructure and training. There is a real need for that."

Derek Potter, chairman of The Potter Group, said one of the difficulties had been that UK transport ministers rarely stayed in the post long enough to master their brief, which meant the DfT was, effectively, run by civil servants. What was needed, he added, was sufficient stability and continuity to create a clear strategy for freight transport, and to deliver promised aims.

Speakers questioned whether Valencia Port Authority, one of the few major European ports to grow in 2009 and lauded by GIL as its "best in class port cluster", could have created its successful model if it was privately owned, rather than supported by its regional government. Valencia Port chairman Rafael Aznar said: "I think you have to take the best things from the public and private models - the long-term planning in the public sector and the commercial awareness of the private sector."

But even in a state supported system, it was the private sector that initiated change, he added. Dirk Binkhorst, e4e's Netherlands representative, said the board of the port of Rotterdam reflected the mix of experience from the public and private sectors.