

“It drives on with a courage which is stronger than the storm. It drives on with a mercy which does not quail in the presence of death. It drives on as a proof, a symbol, a testimony that man is created in the image of God and that valour and virtue have not perished in the British race.”

Winston Churchill, RNLI Centenary 1924

BUT HOW WOULD YOU ..?

When it comes to promoting a libertarian society, one of the challenges likely to be thrown at us, even from those who have grudgingly accepted that there might be something in our moral argument, is to the plausi-

bility that much of the intensely complex organisational structures which we see around us and take for granted would continue if no-one was obliged to pay for them through coercively expropriated taxation. This certainly applies, if not exclusively, to those or-

Economic Notes No. 86

ISSN 0267-7164 ISBN 1 85637 451 3


An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

ganisations that currently provide large-scale, hi-tech welfare and emergency services.

Of course, we cannot guarantee that *anything* would continue in its present form were its funding to be made wholly voluntary. Nonetheless, we can point out that such voluntary emergency services already *do* exist, and to do so I want to offer a picture of one of these services, one of the premier contemporary examples operating anywhere today: the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).

DISCLAIMER

Whilst I believe that the RNLI is an excellent example of the plausibility of emergency services under libertarianism, I must state quite clearly that I am making no claims whatsoever about any ideological motivation on the part of the RNLI, its voluntary or paid staff, its Governors (of which I am one), or its ordinary members and supporters. This is an entirely personal essay and I am merely putting the RNLI forward as an example of ‘actually existing voluntarism’.

Moreover, it is worth taking this opportunity to note — and it is something that cannot be said too often — that libertarianism is not some form of extreme, parody yuppieism: lots of young men in stripy shirts shouting into mobile phones doing something incomprehensible in the City. Under libertarianism people will be able to try to live as they choose, and whilst many will indeed follow lives devoted to material enrichment (thus unintentionally producing wealth for us all), it is equally likely that others will want to lead altruistic lives partly or wholly devoted to service to others, supported by those who think that what they do is worthwhile.

THE FOUNDING OF THE RNLI

The RNLI was founded in 1824 — and is thus celebrating its 175th anniversary this year and is the oldest *national* lifeboat service in the world — as the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck by Sir William Hillary who was himself a lifeboatman. He noted that, whilst there were already in existence a number of independent lifeboat organisations, there was no co-ordinating body and that in this case this was detrimental to the general effectiveness of their ability to save lives.

Over the years since then, the RNLI has grown into one of the largest, most proficient, and most renowned humanitarian organisations of its type in the world.

WHAT THE RNLI DOES

The RNLI provides a day-and-night, 24-hour service, and is designed to operate up to 50 miles from the coast of the British isles. It often works in close cooperation with government agencies such as the

Marine and Coastguard Agency, the Royal Air Force (especially with the latter’s air-sea rescue helicopters), and the Irish Marine Emergency Service. There are on average of 15 to 20 launches each day, and each day an average of four lives are saved (those who would have almost certainly died but for rescue), another three are landed (those who were at risk), and a further eleven are brought ashore (those brought ashore before the situation deteriorated to the point of risk). Since its inception, the RNLI estimates that it has saved the life of — i.e. of those who would almost certainly have died had they not been rescued — some 131,400 individuals.

Although launches occur year-round, there is a pattern for there to be more of them in the ‘holiday months’ of May to September, and in particular *relatively* few in the winter months of December to March. Unsurprisingly, then, well over half of the launches are to pleasure craft: *pace* the folk-wisdom, the British do not appear to be a naturally gifted seafaring people!

A less ‘romantic’, and therefore less well-known, activity of the RNLI is preventative such as the Sea Safety Initiative and the distribution of safety literature. The RNLI also publishes a regular magazine for its members, *The Lifeboat*, which features behind-the-scenes stories about various aspects of the RNLI such as fundraising, as well as descriptions of particularly notable rescues, news about boats and equipment, photographs, etc.

DIVISIONAL ORGANISATION AND GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD

The 220+ Lifeboat stations are distributed around the entire coast of the British isles. The stations are organised into six divisions:

- East, which runs clock-wise southwards from Lincolnshire and then East Anglia, past the Thames Estuary and then round Kent and East Sussex, finishing just short of Portsmouth.
- South, which runs clock-wise from Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, all along Devon, Cornwall, and finally Somerset. It also includes the Scilly Isles and the more distant Channel Islands off the French coast.
- West, which includes Avon at its southernmost part, but primarily covers the coast of Wales.
- North, which covers both the Irish Sea (including the Isle of Man) and North Sea coasts of England, in both cases up to the Scottish border, north of the West and East divisions respectively.
- Scotland, which covers all of the Scottish coast, including the Western, Orkney, and Shetland Islands.

— Ireland, which covers fully the entirety of the island of Ireland, i.e. it includes the Republic of Ireland as a fully integrated part of the RNLI.

PERSONNEL

Each lifeboat station is the centre of activity for a large number of people. The boats themselves have nominal crews of up to six for the larger offshore craft but this is boosted by the need to always have a greater number than that 'on call'. Many stations have more than one boat, e.g. both an offshore and inshore vessel. In addition, each station has a large number of shore-based personnel such as launchers and tractor drivers (for getting the boat into the water since only some lifeboats are kept permanently moored afloat), plus associated personnel such as honorary medical advisors, treasurers, etc.

There are over 4,400 crew members (of which over 170 are women), and almost all crew members are volunteers with regular jobs (necessarily very close to their home stations since they need to be able to drop everything and rapidly get to the station when called out) who receive only a few pounds per launch to cover expenses. There is also a full-time mechanic in each all-weather lifeboat crew. Additionally, there is one completely full-time crew on an isolated peninsula on the Yorkshire coast. Despite the largely voluntary nature of the crews, they maintain the highest standards of professionalism, and indeed the RNLI has been a model for many lifeboat organisations world-wide.

Although the vast majority of lifeboat crews are neither paid nor receive any special insurance, there are schemes to provide for loss of earnings if injured whilst on lifeboat duties, and also to provide for dependants of those who lose their lives on service. Over 400 crew members have died whilst on lifeboat duties since the inception of the RNLI.

In theory, if an RNLI crew saves a vessel they are entitled to claim salvage. In practice, however, out of the many hundreds of times that this could happen it only does so on average less than once per year. When it does, the RNLI requires that the crew pay for all the fuel and stores used! The RNLI itself does not make salvage claims.

The RNLI is run by a Committee of Management under a chairman, and this body too is comprised of volunteers. However, for understandable reasons, there is also a paid staff dealing with day-to-day administration and other duties such as fundraising. In such esteem is the RNLI held world-wide that it acts as the permanent secretariat of the International Lifeboat Federation (which includes state-funded organisations as members as well).

The RNLI is adamant that its personnel, whether the lifeboat crews or management, would resist any attempt to change their status as public-funded volunteers.

EQUIPMENT AND COSTS

The boats themselves, the heart of the RNLI, come in two distinct types: the larger, all-weather vessels, and the smaller, semi-rigid, inshore craft powered by outboard motors. There are currently over a dozen different classes within these two types, although some of them are now rather venerable — such as the offshore Waveney class lifeboat introduced in 1964 — and are in the process of being, or may actually have been, retired.

By contrast, two of the most modern of the two types are the Severn and Atlantic 75 respectively. For the landlubbers amongst you who think that a lifeboat is a small wooden thing with a couple of paddles, some of the more obvious technical details of these two classes are:

- Severn (all-weather): constructed of fibre reinforced composite, crew of six, length just under 56 feet, speed 25 knots, range 250 nautical miles, first introduced in as a prototype in 1992/93.
- Atlantic 75 (inshore): glass reinforced plastic hull with hypalon-coated nylon inflatable tube, crew of three, length 24 feet, speed 34 knots, endurance three hours at maximum speed, first introduced in 1993.

Not only are some of the larger boats physically impressive, they are also correspondingly expensive, being equipped with radio, radar, satellite navigation systems, etc. Even the rigid-inflatable inshore Atlantic 75s cost well over £65,000 each, and the all-weather Severns cost approximately £1.75 million each! There is an active fleet of over 300 boats of all classes, plus a reserve fleet of just over 130 lifeboats.

As well as the seagoing hardware, the complete set of gear for a lifeboat crewmember, e.g. boots, jacket, life-jacket, drysuit etc., costs upwards of £300.

Simply launching a lifeboat costs money. And if all the other costs of just maintaining a lifeboat station and its boats are taken into account — i.e. *not* considering the actual costs of the boats nor depreciation — it averages out at just under £6,000 for an all-weather-class launch, and over £2,000 for an inshore-class launch.

Adding all of this up, one can see why the estimated running cost for 1998 was around £72 million, or just under £200,000 per day. It is only because the lifeboat crews are mainly volunteers, and that therefore wage bills relative to the number of people involved are so low, that these costs can be met.

RAISING THE MONEY

The RNLI is a registered charity which relies almost exclusively on voluntary donations from the public. Only in three ways has it or does it accept money from the government:

- Historically, it accepted some money from the government between 1854 and 1869. However, this source ended by mutual agreement and has never been sought again.
- As noted above, the RNLI operates a full service in the Republic of Ireland (the RNLI being founded before the Republic gained its independence), and the Irish government has *partly* subsidised the RNLI's operations *off the Republic* since 1970. This does not apply to Britain.
- As a registered charity, the RNLI does receive a form of negative subsidy by way of the tax concessions that such organisations enjoy.

Nonetheless, not in any real sense is the modern RNLI, operating from British shores, anything other than a voluntarily-funded organisation.

The money itself is raised through a variety of sources such as subscriptions from members (of various grades including one for children; it currently has approximately 225,000 members of all types), additional donations, legacies in wills, Flag Days, sale of goods, fundraising events organised by the network of 1,600 volunteer fundraising branches, and a regular Lifeboat Lottery. Of the above, legacies are of crucial importance. The RNLI organises a wide range of exhibitions, and produces a great many videos, books, and other materials. Like all such groups it is not adverse to (hopefully!) good publicity via the mass media such as the fictional and docusoap television series that have featured it over the years, or recently being the 'starring' organisation on BBC1's *Songs of Praise* programme on the 7th March 1999.

The RNLI is proud of its efficiency. For each £1 spent, only 3p goes on administration and, although like all large charities nowadays it is obliged to spend a good deal — a further 1.5p — on fundraising, 81p is spent directly on the fleet and stations. The RNLI now has about three years running expenses in hand. This may seem excessive, but it allows the RNLI to plan for the future with some confidence, and acts as a safety net against any repeat of the problems it experienced during the 1970s when, amongst other factors, high inflation devalued much of its reserves.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS: FREEDOM WORKS, BUT IT TAKES TIME

This has been an almost entirely descriptive piece, but I hope that the facts themselves have been sufficient to deliver the message. However, it would be naive to

think that, and positively dangerous to claim that, if all state funding to the emergency services were to end tomorrow, equivalents of the RNLI would *immediately* spring up to replace them. Other than just inertia and the huge organisational problems, the psychology of collectivism — that individual humans are no longer responsible for anything, but rather it is all in the hands of the de-personalised state — will take some time to be erased from the minds of men and woman.

Being able to persuade people that there could be a reasonably smooth transition period between what we have now and what we want in the future is surely one of the most difficult elements of the libertarian endeavour. We are not helped by the folly of any Year Zero enthusiasts who seem unable to recognise that, if we could suddenly wish away the state, we would most likely get, not a libertarian society, but social collapse. But equally, libertarianism is rarely advanced by those who work within the system 'reforming' it. The political gravity of the state is much the stronger and, I suspect, they tend to find themselves the ones being pulled in a statist direction, not the other way around.

Nonetheless, as libertarians, we *do* believe that in time a mixture of commercial, not-for-profit, and charitable institutions will arise to take the place of their state equivalents. Meanwhile, we can point to organisations such as the RNLI as very real evidence that 'we' have been fooled into believing that the emergency services can only be provided by the 'beneficence' of the state, something that is patently untrue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Rather than offer a regular reference section, I have instead provided a bibliography since all of the information noted above is published by the RNLI and can be found on its website; this includes the nominally separate Factsheet series.

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RNLI website: <http://www.rnli.org.uk>

Many RNLI lifeboat stations now have their own websites too. John Gruson provides links to many of these on his website:

<http://www.jgruson.demon.co.uk/rnlilinks.htm>