

A fitting farewell for two BIR icons

The recent world recycling convention in Prague brought a standing ovation for two BIR stalwarts on the occasion of their retirement from the global body's activities: immediate past president of the non-ferrous metals division Robert Stein of the USA and Robert Voss CBE of the UK, formerly a non-ferrous metals division board member and also chairman of the International Trade Council. Both took time out from saying their farewells to chat to Recycling International.

'I will miss the camaraderie with so many friends and I hope to maintain the good BIR friendships in the future.'

Robert Voss

'The long-term prospects for our industry are great.'

Robert Stein

What do you consider to be your biggest achievement within BIR?

Stein: 'I was involved in discussions with Chinese government officials when the AQSIQ rules were introduced. This legislation requires mandatory inspection and quality control of a wide range of products, including secondary raw materials. We were able to share with them our concerns. In November 2008, I represented BIR in rather direct discussions with the Chinese about the impact of Chinese companies walking away from contracts. In general, recognition by my peers has given me great satisfaction.'

Voss: 'I think Eurometrec achieved much for non-ferrous metals recycling during my years as president. Eurometrec is BIR 'daughter' organisation which was founded in 1990. In addition, founding BIR's International Trade Council has given me great satisfaction because it took us back to the basics of trading as well as setting up a new and excellent arbitration service. And of course - and I'm sure that Robert (Stein) will agree with me - the fact that I have made many good and long-lasting friendships in the industry through BIR.'

The recycling industry is currently going through rough times. How do you think the markets will develop in the short and mid-term?

Stein: 'There is no reason to believe that short-term markets will show any signs of improvement, especially given seasonal considerations. Clearly, the price driver over the past decades has been China, and continued selling of futures from that country, together with a slowing economy, portends a continuation of short-term poor prices along with a dismal flow of metals into processors yards. For the middle term, we often expect an increase in demand in the spring, especially after the Chinese have their financial books in order for their new year. This year, we might look at these matters as providing stability, and not necessarily providing much strength. The outlook for the scrap industry, so very dependent on high prices to attract metal to the recycling process, is not good in the short-term, but the mid-term may prove better as scrap iron prices may trend higher during the period. Overall, substantial improvement in our sector of the industry, however, may be quite a distance off as this "trough" may end up being one of a few years in all. The demand side

of the market is not what will drive prices higher, it will be curtailments on the supply side that will help to improve prices as we move forward. These cuts take time to have much effect, but they will eventually. Regrettably, we have some time before our business returns to a satisfactory level, and we've not seen the worst of it yet.'

Voss: 'I think we are going through a medium to long term bear market for all commodities at the moment with restricted liquidity restricting the infrastructure development in many countries. This is keeping markets at low levels which most experts seem to agree are unlikely to see significant rises in the short term.'

However, for the longer-term I still believe that the markets will return strongly...but after a number of years. After all the demand for metals and plastics particularly is not going away. There will still be a growing worldwide demand for cars and trucks, white goods, a huge demand for property, as well as power and it's transportation - via cables and pipelines - as well as continuing replacement by utility companies not only in the so called Western World but also in a growing volume in the developing nations. Therefore, demand for "our products" will remain strong in future years. Recycling of our precious secondary raw materials is not going away.'

What have been your biggest disappointments during your years at BIR?

Stein: 'I could never figure out why autumn conventions were always held in cold locations and the late-spring conventions were always somewhere hot. Says a lot for the organisation when that's all I can find that's bad. On a serious note, it is very disappointed that some of BIR's previous leaders don't know when to step aside. This was very evident during the recent nominations process for our very qualified new BIR president. The behaviour of some people was most unfortunate, to say the least.'

Voss: 'For a while, BIR was, in my opinion, far too political. We got entangled in environmental issues and we lost focus on the basics of BIR: trading.'

What has given you the biggest laugh during your BIR years?

Stein: 'Many years ago, Marc Natan (another former BIR non-ferrous metals division president) and I were invited to give a speech at the

very first CMRA meeting in China - a congress organised by the recycling metal branch of the China Nonferrous Metals Industry Association. We were treated like real VIPs. Our Chinese hosts transported us in a van with red flashing lights and a motor escort of policemen with flags. Many people watched us as we passed by and Marc and I had a great time waving at the people, pretending that we were really big shots. That afternoon, there was a banquet in the conference hall and poor Marc had to toast the communist party, which was also good for a laugh. That night, I found out that Marc had been paid Yuan 700, some US\$ 110, for a speech that I had given. Later, we went out for dinner and Marc was gracious enough to use the money or a nice French wine we shared.'

Voss: 'During the BIR convention in Venice in 1986, it was raining cats and dogs for days on end and, as a result, large parts of the city were completely flooded. One evening, a group of us from the convention we were having dinner in a restaurant on Venice's mainland. Around midnight, when we wanted to go back to our hotel on The Lido, the manager told us that it would be impossible to find a boat to take us there. In the end, we managed to bribe a water taxi driver into taking a chance. He dropped us off in front of the casino and refused to go any further. Soaking wet, with socks, shoes and even jackets in our hands, our party made its way to the entrance of the casino. There was a doorman and he spoke the immortal words: "I'm sorry, but you cannot enter. You're not wearing a tie." I really cannot recall what my answer was as we barged through, but I guess you can imagine.'

What do you intend to do with your retirement?

Stein: 'I'm 64 now and will retire (from my company activities) at the end of 2015. I will spend part of my time in so-called At Risk mentoring, persuading high school kids not to drop out of school. Amongst other things, I will be tutoring them. In addition, I will be a business consultant for companies not related to the metals business and perhaps international trade organisations.'

Voss: 'I'm only 62 but I have already gone into retirement. I am currently chairing two companies - one in leather manufacturing and an outdoor gym manufacturer. I am also doing charity work; I work with young entrepreneurs and underprivileged children. I am also a deputy lieutenant, so I sometimes have to stand in for the royal family, taking over some of their duties. In addition, I am involved in arbitration work and am trying to get my golf handicap down.'