For educational use only

*614 Pao on and Others Appellants v Lau Yiu Long and Others Respondents

Positive/Neutral Judicial Consideration

Court
Privy Council (Hong Kong)

Judgment Date
9 April 1979

Report Citation
[1979] 3 W.L.R. 435
[1980] A.C. 614

ICLR

Privy Council

Lord Wilberforce , Viscount Dilhorne , Lord Simon of Glaisdale , Lord Salmon and Lord Scarman

1979 Jan. 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 23; April 9

[On Appeal from the Court of Appeal of Hong Kong]

Contract—Consideration—Promise to perform existing duty—Sale to company—Allotment of company's shares as purchase price with condition that vendors defer sale of shares—Vendors seeking indemnity from third parties for possible loss on future sale of shares—Agreement to indemnify on threat of repudiation of contract with company—Whether valid and sufficient consideration for indemnity—Whether agreement contrary to public policy—Economic duress

Contract—Validity—Commercial pressure—Agreement to indemnify on threat of repudiation of contract with third party—Whether consideration for agreement—Whether agreement contrary to public policy—Whether economic duress vitiating consent

The plaintiffs were the owners of the issued share capital of a private company whose principal asset was a building under construction. The defendants were the majority shareholders of a public company which wished to acquire the building. In February 1973 the plaintiffs agreed in writing with the public company (the main agreement) to sell their shares in the private company

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

to the public company. The parties agreed that no money was to pass under the agreement but that the price of the shares was to be satisfied by an issue to the plaintiffs of shares in the public company. So as not to depress the market for the public company's shares the plaintiffs undertook at the defendants' request to retain 60 per cent. of their newly acquired shares until after April 30, 1974. The plaintiffs and the defendants agreed orally that the plaintiffs should be protected against any loss from a possible fall in the value of those shares between the date of acquisition and April 30, 1974, and, accordingly, they entered into a subsidiary agreement by which the plaintiffs agreed to sell and the defendants agreed to buy 60 per cent. of the allotted shares on or before April 30, 1974, at $2.50 a share.

In April 1973 the plaintiffs realised that in protecting themselves by the subsidiary agreement against a possible fall in share prices they had in effect also agreed to forgo any profit from a possible rise in the market in respect of 60 per cent. of their holding. They refused to complete the main agreement with the public company unless the defendants agreed to a cancellation of the subsidiary agreement and its replacement by the defendants' entering into a guarantee by way of indemnity. The defendants, fearing the delays of litigation and that if completion did not take place forthwith the public would lose confidence in the public company, decided to accede to the plaintiffs' demands and signed a written contract ***615** of guarantee which stated that in consideration of the plaintiffs having agreed to sell their shares in the private company the defendants agreed to indemnify the plaintiffs (in the event of the closing market price of the shares on April 30, 1974, falling below $2.50 a share) for any loss in respect of 60 per cent. of their holding. The sale under the main agreement took place and the plaintiffs retained 60 per cent. of their shares in the public company. Before April 30, 1974 the share prices dropped, and the plaintiffs sought to rely on the contract of indemnity. The defendants refused to indemnify them. The plaintiffs successfully brought an action based on the indemnity in the High Court but, on appeal, the decision was reversed. The plaintiffs appealed to the Judicial Committee.

On the questions whether there was consideration for the contract of indemnity and whether the defendants' consent to the agreement was vitiated by duress: -

Held, allowing the appeal,

(1) that an act done before the giving of a promise could be valid consideration for that promise if the act had been done at the promisor's request, the parties had understood that the act was to be remunerated either by payment or conferment of a benefit and the payment or conferment of a benefit would have been enforceable had it been promised in advance that since the written guarantee itself referred to the plaintiffs' antecedent promise not to sell the shares before April 30, 1974, it was not possible to treat the defendants' promise of an indemnity as independent of the plaintiffs' antecedent promise made at the defendants' request; and that, therefore, since

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

the guarantee fixed the benefit on the faith of which the plaintiffs' antecedent promise had been given, it stated a valid consideration for the promise of indemnity (post, pp. 628E, 629F-H, 630G - 631B).

In re Casey's Patents [1892] 1 Ch. 104 , C.A. applied.

(2) That, in the circumstances, extrinsic evidence was admissible to show that the real consideration for the promise of indemnity was the plaintiffs' promise to the defendants to perform their contractual obligations to the public company under the main agreement, which included the undertaking to defer sale of 60 per cent. of the shares; and that, since the plaintiffs' obligation to the defendants to perform their contract with a third party could be sufficient consideration for the promise of indemnity, the defendants were bound by the contract of guarantee unless there were grounds for avoiding the contract (post, pp. 631G - 632D).

New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd. v. A. M. Satterthwaite & Co. Ltd. [1975] A.C. 154 , P.C. applied.

(3) That, although the defendants had been subjected to commercial pressure, the facts disclosed that they had not been coerced into the contract of guarantee and, therefore, the contract was not voidable on the ground of duress, that in the absence of duress, public policy did not require a contract negotiated at arm's length to be invalidated because a party had either threatened to repudiate an existing contractual obligation or had unfairly used his dominant bargaining position in negotiating the agreement and that therefore, the defendants, having failed to show that the contract of guarantee was either invalid or voidable, were bound by its terms (post, pp. 634B-E, 635B-D).

***616**

Per curiam. There is nothing contrary to principle in recognising economic duress as a factor which may render a contract voidable provided always that the basis of such recognition is that it must amount to a coercion of will, which vitiates consent. It must be shown that the payment made or the contract entered into was not a voluntary act (post, p. 636C-D).

Decision of the Court of Appeal of Hong Kong reversed.

The following cases are referred to in the judgment:

Astley v. Reynolds (1731) 2 Str. 915 .
Barton v. Armstrong [1976] A.C. 104; [1975] 2 W.L.R. 1050; [1975] 2 All E.R. 465, P.C.
Casey's Patents, In re [1892] 1 Ch. 104, C.A.
Harris v. Watson (1791) Peake 102 .
Lampleigh v. Brathwait (1615) Hobart 105.

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

Maskell v. Horner [1915] 3 K.B. 106, C.A.
New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd. v. A. M. Satterthwaite & Co. Ltd. [1975] A.C. 154; [1974] 2 W.L.R. 865; [1974] 1 All E.R. 1015, P.C.
North Ocean Shipping Co. Ltd. v. Hyundai Construction Co. Ltd. [1979] Q.B. 705; [1979] 3 W.L.R. 419; [1978] 3 All E.R. 1170; [1979] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 89 .
Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 293 .
Skeate v. Beale (1840) 11 Ad. &; E. 983 .
Stilk v. Meyrick (1809) 6 Esp. 129; 2 Camp. 317 .
Williams v. Williams [1957] 1 W.L.R. 148; [1957] 1 All E.R. 305, C.A.

The following additional cases were cited in argument:

Ashmole v. Wainwright (1842) 2 Q.B. 837 .
Clifford v. Turrell (1845) 14 L.J.Ch. 390 .
D. & C. Builders Ltd. v. Rees [1966] 2 Q.B. 617; [1966] 2 W.L.R. 288; [1965] 3 All E.R. 837, C.A.
Hardie and Lane Ltd. v. Chilton [1928] 2 K.B. 306, C.A.
Harris v. Carter (1854) 3 E1. &; B. 559.
Hooper & Grass' Contract, In re [1949] V.L.R. 269 .
Kaufman v. Gerson [1904] 1 K.B. 591, C.A.
Kennedy v. Broun (1863) 13 C.B.N.S. 677 .
Knutson v. Bourkes Syndicate [1941] 3 D.L.R. 593 .
Nixon v. Furphy (1925) 25 S.R.(N.S.W.) 151 .
Rookes v. Barnard [1964] A.C. 1129; [1964] 2 W.L.R. 269; [1964] 1 All E.R. 367, H.L.(E.) .
Scotson v. Pegg (1861) 6 H. & N. 295 .
Spence v. Crawford [1939] 3 All E.R. 271, H.L.(Sc.) .
Sundell (T. A.) & Sons Pty. Ltd. v. Emm Yannoulatos (Overseas) Pty. Ltd. (1955) 56 S.R.(N.S.W.) 323 .
Wakefield v. Newbon (1844) 6 Q.B. 276 .

APPEAL (No. 13 of 1977) by the plaintiffs, Pao On, Ho Mei Chun and Pao Lap Chung, from a judgment and order (November 5, 1976) of the Court of Appeal of Hong Kong (McMullin and Leonard JJ., Briggs C.J. dissenting) allowing the appeal of the first defendant, Lau ***617** Yiu Long, and the second defendant, Benjamin Lau Kam Ching, from a judgment (February 17, 1976) of Li J. whereby he ordered the defendants to pay the plaintiffs $5,392,800 with interest of 6 per cent. from May 1, 1974, to the date of judgment on the plaintiffs' claim for an indemnity under a contract of guarantee made with the defendants dated May 4, 1973.

The facts are stated in the judgment.

F. P. Neill Q.C., Marion Simmons and *Andrew Li* (of the Hong Kong Bar) for the plaintiffs. The guarantee binds the defendants. The consideration stated in the guarantee is sufficient to support the defendants' promise of an indemnity. The guarantee must be construed in its context. Its form was taken from the Encyclopaedia of Forms and Precedents, 4th ed., vol. 9 (1968), pp. 777-824

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

and founded on established law. For the principles applicable to past consideration, see Chitty on Contracts, 24th ed. (1977), paras 151-154; *Lampleigh v. Brathwait* (1615) Hobart 105; *Kennedy v. Broun (1863) 13 C.B.N.S 677* and *In re Casey's Patents [1892] 1 Ch. 104* , 115-116. The doctrine of consideration was developed to differentiate the commercial obligation from the gratuitous promise. On the facts this guarantee belongs to the commercial field. The consideration is not past. The three conditions outlined by *Chitty on Contracts* in paragraph 154 were present. The grant of an option may constitute consideration.

Extrinsic evidence is admissible to prove consideration. It is common ground that the law is correctly stated in Halsbury's Laws of England, 4th ed., vol. 12 (1975), para. 1487. Extrinsic evidence is not admissible if it would produce a conflict but it follows that where a stated consideration is past and, therefore no consideration, there can be no question of conflict and a party would be free to prove consideration by extrinsic evidence: see *Clifford v. Turrell (1845) 14 L.J. Ch. 390* .

A promise to perform a pre-existing contractual obligation to a third party may amount to a valid consideration. Motive is irrelevant to the existence of consideration. The issue of duress should not be confused with that of the consideration. It is undesirable to introduce a public policy test in connection with the adequacy of consideration: see *Stilk v. Meyrick (1809) 6 Esp. 129; 2 Camp. 317* , 318, *per* Lord Ellenborough C.J. (Campbell's report is to be preferred). If there are vitiating factors such as duress as recognised by existing law, effect can be given to them by the application of existing principles without recourse to an attack on the consideration on the ground that it is contrary to public policy. Such an attack on the consideration if successful would result in the contract being void whereas if it were shown to have been induced by duress it would be voidable. If the Board accepts that the guarantee is voidable for duress then before granting relief it should require the defendants to restore any benefits received under it.

A promisor who contracts with the promisee to fulfil an existing obligation to a third party furnishes good consideration if the promisee will derive some benefit from the performance of the pre-existing obligation: *Scotson v. Pegg (1861) 6 H. & N. 295* and *New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd v. A. M. Satterthwaite & Co. Ltd. [1975] A.C. 154* . Compare ***618** *Chitty on Contracts,* 23rd ed. (1968), para. 132 with the 24th ed. (1977), para. 177. It follows that (leaving aside public policy) where A threatens a breach of his contract with B in which C has an interest and A then contracts with C to withdraw his threat, C derives a benefit from his agreement with A and A has furnished good consideration. There is only the possibility of its being contrary to public policy intervening. *Stilk v. Meyrick, 2 Camp 317* takes public policy factors out of the cases concerning seamen. [Reference was made to Treitel, The Law of Contract, 4th ed. (1975), p. 65.]

In the United States of America this branch of the law is developing (see *Corbin on Contracts,* vol. 1 (1950), para. 171) and at present it appears that each case is to be decided on its merits. To adopt such an approach here would be to invite litigation in every case.

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

If the guarantee is otherwise enforceable it is not void on the ground of economic duress. If the contract of guarantee was voidable there must be restitutio in integrum and the defendants are not entitled to keep the benefit of the subsidiary agreement.

Andrew Leggatt Q.C. and *Christopher Swift* for the defendants. The court must impose some limit to the invention of consideration for an agreement. On the facts the only consideration for the guarantee was the plaintiffs' promise to fulfil the main agreement. That was past consideration and the guarantee was accordingly unenforceable. Alternatively, the guarantee was in any event voidable for duress because on the facts found by the trial judge it was exacted solely by the plaintiffs' threat to continue in breach of and to reject or repudiate the main agreement.

The line of authority based on *Lampleigh v. Brathwait,* Hobart 105, does not establish a general rule that where three parties are involved, a promise to one to perform an existing obligation to a third is always good consideration: see *Chitty on Contracts,* 24th ed., para. 154 and *Halsbury's Laws of England,* 4th ed., vol. 9 (1974), para. 320. Such a promise may amount to good consideration but not invariably so. Where an agreement is subsisting that which is relied on as consideration must have been necessary to give business efficacy to the main agreement and the test of whether a promise amounts to good consideration is whether the promisee could succeed on a claim for quantum meruit. If the parties have agreed appropriate recompense (the subsidiary agreement) that negatives any quantum meruit. For the classical exposition of the law: see *In re Casey's Patents [1892] 1 Ch. 104* , 115-116, *per* Bowen L.J. A natural explanation of the precedents contained in the Encyclopaedia of Forms and Precedents is that in each case they represent the working out of a prior express agreement. That one party gains two advantages from an agreement does not mean that the other party obtains a benefit and that therefore there was consideration. On the facts there must be a separate new bargain and an alternative means of fulfilling an existing voluntary obligation is not enough.

It is accepted that the law is correctly stated in *New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd. v. A. M. Satterthwaite & Co. Ltd. [1975] A.C. 154* . There may be an exception to the general rule as regards three party ***619** cases so that the court may test the consideration according to whether a benefit is conferred on the third party but that is not this case.

As to duress and public policy, it is conceded that it is anomalous that improper pressure short of duress attacks the consideration and will avoid the contract whereas if there is duress the contract will be merely voidable. There is thus a need for relief on the ground of economic duress to be available.

A promisor may rely on public policy to avoid a contract where improper pressure has been applied to him: *Harris v. Watson (1791) Peake 102* . That principle is not confined to two party cases. The defendants adopt *Chitty on Contracts,* 24th ed., para. 176. The examples there given show that where there is a promise of performance there is a fine distinction between non-gratuitous promises which ought to be enforced and those which ought not to be enforced by reason of some improper pressure which has been applied to the promisor. For the factors involved in cases of this

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

kind see: *Halsbury's Laws of England,* 4th ed., vol. 9, para. 326-328; *Corbin on Contracts,* vol. 1, paras. 183, 184 and *Williston on Contracts,* 3rd ed., vol. 13 (1970), section 1617. The removal of a detriment wrongly applied can never constitute good consideration. The threat must have some relation to the end sought to be induced: see *Scotson v. Pegg, 6 H. & N. 295* .

A person who takes advantage of his economic strength to exact a hard bargain from another is liable to have it set aside if he has caused the other party to submit to his demands by duress. Duress is the commission or threatened commission of a wrongful act. It includes a threatened breach of contract. It may render the contract voidable: see *Barton v. Armstrong [1976] A.C. 104* ; *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] Lloyd's Rep. 293* , 334-335 and *North Ocean Shipping Co. Ltd. v. Hyundai Construction Co. Ltd. [1979] Q.B. 705* . A person who is compelled by a threatened breach of contract to do some act whereby loss accrues to him can sue the person who threatens him for damages for intimidation: *Rookes v. Barnard [1964] A.C. 1129* , 1206, 1209. Money paid under a threat of breach of contract is recoverable by an action for money had and received: *Nixon v. Furphy (1925) 25 S.R.(N.S.W.) 151* ; *Knutson v. Bourkes Syndicate [1941] 3 D.L.R. 593* and *In re Hooper & Grass' Contract [1949] V.L.R. 269* . If it is wrong to impugn this kind of transaction by reference to the consideration (i.e., alleging that it is vitiated) then it can still be impugned by the application of the doctrine of duress: *Chitty on Contracts,* 24th ed., para. 177.

On an action on a promise which has been exacted by the threat of a breach of a contract between promisor and promisee a defendant may resist not only on the ground that the promise was unsupported by consideration but also on the ground that no person can insist on a settlement procured by intimidation (compulsion): *D. & C. Builders Ltd. v. Rees [1966] 2 Q.B. 617* , 625. Where a transaction has been freely entered into as a result of a threatened breach of contract consent has not been freely given, it is vitiated by the threat and the transaction is voidable: *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] Lloyd's Rep. 293* ; *North Ocean Shipping Co. Ltd. v.* ****620*** *Hyundai Construction Co. Ltd. [1979] Q.B. 705* and *T. A. Sundell & Sons Pty. Ltd. v. Emm Yannoulatos (Overseas) Pty. Ltd. (1955) 56 S.R. (N.S.W.) 323* . This principle applies notwithstanding that the person threatened is not a party to the contract if the threat is to cause injury to him by means of the breach. A promisor's urgent need of the performance of a contract, the making or failure to make a protest and the availability of other adequate legal remedies are only relevant in determining whether or not a promisor acted voluntarily: *Astley v. Reynolds (1731) 2 Str. 915* ; *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 293* , 336 and *Maskell v. Horner [1915] 3 K.B. 106* , 118, 123. A promisee must normally make restitution of benefits received under a cancelled transaction but not where there has been mutual consideration for the cancellation or the cancellation has been at the promisor's behest. See also Goff and *Jones, The Law of Restitution,* 2nd ed. (1978), pp. 161-164, 176-185.

Neill Q.C. in reply. The defendants' submissions on the development of the doctrine of duress are contrary to authority. Since the 13th century a party has been able to avoid a contract for duress only in a case of duress to the person: *Coke, Institutes of the Laws of England* part 2 (1797) c.

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

48 para. 483; *Bracton, Laws and Customs of England* Vol. 2 (1968 translation by Samuel Thorne, Harvard University Press) p. 64; *Holdsworth, A History of English Law* , 2nd ed., vol. 8 (1937), p. 51; *Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England* , (1841 reprint), vol. 1, pp. 130-131; *Skeate v. Beale (1840) 11 Ad. & E. 983* ; *Ashmole v. Wainwright (1842) 2 Q.B. 837* ; *Wakefield v. Newbon (1844) 6 Q.B. 276* ; *Maskell v. Horner [1915] 3 K.B. 106* ; *Hardie and Lane Ltd. v. Chilton [1928] 2 K.B. 306* and *Halsbury's Laws of England* , 4th ed., vol. 9, paras. 296, 297. The family cases are cases of terror and are distinguishable from those concerning commercial contracts. *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 293* and *North Ocean Shipping Co. Ltd. v. Hyundai Construction Co. Ltd. [1979] Q.B. 705* are the only two authorities to the contrary and were wrongly decided. Approval of them would lead towards the approach adopted in the United States of America and to its attendant difficulties.

A document which recites that a guarantee is given 'at the promisor's request' discloses a good consideration for the guarantee where the transaction was still moving at the time the guarantee was given. On the facts and applying well-established principles of contract law the guarantee is a good contract. Alternatively, it is binding because of the recital that it was made at the promisor's request. [Reference was made to *Chitty on Contracts,* 22nd ed. (1961), para. 130; 23rd ed. (1968), para. 129 and *Cheshire and Fifoot, Law of Contract,* 9th ed. (1976), pp. 98-101.] See *Harris v. Carter* (1854) 3 E1. & B. 559 for further light on *Stilk v. Meyrick, 6 Esp. 129; 2 Camp. 317* and the sixth interim report of the Law Revision Committee (1937) Cmd. 5449, on promises to perform existing obligations.

Nixon v. Furphy, 25 S.R.(N.S.W.) 151 ; *In re Hooper & Grass' Contract [1949] V.L.R. 269* and *T. A. Sundell & Sons Pty. Ltd. v. Emm Yannoulatos (Overseas) Pty. Ltd., 56 S.R.(N.S.W.) 323* were all money had and received cases. *D. & C. Builders Ltd. v. Rees [1966] 2 Q.B. 617* was not a case of duress. In *Kaufman v. Gerson [1904] 1 K.B. 591* the contract failed on the grounds of public policy. Duress to goods has never been a ground for avoiding a contract and is entirely different from duress to the person notwithstanding that that may have been extended to include mental duress.

As to restitutio in integrum, see *Chitty on Contracts,* 24th ed., para. 299 and *Spence v. Crawford [1939] 3 All E.R. 271* .

As to the doctrine of duress in the United States of America, see chapter 47 of *Williston on Contracts,* 3rd ed. That shows that there has been a major development of duress which has been extended to cover economic duress. The decisions are conflicting and the resemblance to the old law is slight but there appears to be a three-fold test: that one side involuntarily accepted the terms of another; that circumstances permitted no other alternative; and that such circumstances were the result of coercive acts of the opposite party. Any legal remedy which might have been available must be shown to be 'inadequate' or 'meaningless' in the circumstances in which the party finds himself and there must be no other means of immediate relief available; compare *Astley v. Reynolds, 2 Str. 915* . The presence of a profit motive may show that the agreement was voluntary. Absence of protest is relevant. Silence, he taking of the benefit of the agreement or delay may

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

preclude the remedy. The threat of a lawful act can amount to duress. The doctrine may extend into the field of industrial disputes where a strike is wrongful.

Leggatt Q.C. Harris v. Carter, 3 E1. & B. 559 supports the defendants because it reinstates public policy as a factor in vitiation. As to *Skeate v. Beale, 11 Ad. & E. 983* , the defendants adopt Kerr J. in *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 293* , 335. *Ashmole v. Wainwright, 2 Q.B. 837* and *Wakefield v. Newbon, 6 Q.B. 276* also support the defendants' view of *Skeate v. Beale. Hardie and Lane Ltd. v. Chilton [1928] 2 K.B. 306* is not relevant in the present context. In *Kaufman v. Gerson [1904] 1 K.B. 591* there was a step towards an extension of the doctrine of duress to include economic duress. As to the plaintiffs' reliance on Halsbury's Laws of England, 4th ed., vol. 9, para. 296: see *Goff and jones, The Law of Restitution* , 2nd ed., pp. 168-170. It is necessary to consider both the recovery of the money and the setting aside of the contract. Compare *Astley v. Reynolds, 2 Str. 915* with *Skeate v. Beale, 11 Ad. & E. 983* .

Cur. adv. vult.

April 9. The judgment of their Lordships was delivered by LORD SCARMAN.

The litigation

By a judgment dated and entered February 17, 1976, Li J. ordered the defendants, Lau Yiu Long and his younger brother Benjamin, to pay the plaintiffs, Pao On, his wife, and son $5,392,800 with interest as from May 1, 1974, to the date of judgment. The judge found the money to be due under a written agreement dated May 4, 1973. It is ***622** convenient to refer to this agreement as 'the guarantee.' It was, in fact, an indemnity. The defendants appealed. The Court of Appeal, by a majority (Briggs C.J. dissenting), allowed their appeal. The plaintiffs now appeal to Her Majesty in Council.

Two issues are fundamental. Was there consideration for the contract of guarantee? If there was, was the consent of the defendants vitiated by duress? All the judges below regarded the consideration appearing on the face of the document of May 4, 1973, as a past consideration, which, by itself, could not in law support the defendants' promise to indemnify the plaintiffs against their loss. The trial judge, however, ruled that extrinsic oral evidence was admissible to prove an additional, but not contradictory, consideration, found that the evidence did establish the existence of good additional consideration, and rejected on the facts the defendants' case of duress.

In the Court of Appeal McMullin J. was of the opinion that extrinsic evidence to prove the existence of an additional consideration was in the circumstances of this case inadmissible, and so was for allowing the appeal. He expressed the opinion that such consideration as the extrinsic evidence, if admitted, would reveal was bad in law because it showed the plaintiffs to have obtained the guarantee by dishonest means. 'The consideration,' he declared, 'might be good in a technical or legalistic sense and yet the bargain based upon it be found voidable.' He also 'inclined to the view that the doctrine [of economic duress] is not appropriate to the circumstances of the parties in

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

the present case.' Leonard J. thought the extrinsic evidence admitted by the trial judge was not contradictory of the written instrument containing the guarantee, and was, therefore admissible to prove an additional consideration. But he held that to regard as valuable consideration the promise given by the plaintiffs not to break their contract with a third party was in the circumstances of this case 'contrary to public policy and contrary to ordinary justice.' Accordingly he also was for allowing the appeal. He was 'unconvinced' that there was any evidence of economic duress. Briggs C.J. agreed that there was no evidence of duress. He held that the extrinsic evidence revealed an additional consideration consistent with that stated in the guarantee. He found the additional consideration in the 'whole arrangement' to which the parties came on May 4, 1973, the date of the guarantee. He was for dismissing the appeal.

There are three significant features in these judgments. First, all four judges are agreed that the consideration expressed in the written guarantee of May 4, 1973, was a past consideration not, by itself, capable of supporting the defendants' promise of indemnity. This, being a question of construction of a written contract, is a decision upon a point of law. It is the subject of a vigorous challenge mounted for the first time in the appeal to this Board. Secondly, three of the four judges held the extrinsic evidence admissible, expressing the opinion that the additional consideration revealed by it was not inconsistent with the terms of the written guarantee. Two judges, however, held that it would be contrary to public policy to recognise as valid the consideration ***623** revealed by the extrinsic evidence. Finally, all the judges negatived on the facts the defendants' case of economic duress.

The questions for the Board

Three questions call for decision by their Lordships' Board. (1) Does the guarantee upon its proper construction state a valid consideration for the defendants' promise of indemnity? (2) Does the extrinsic evidence as to the circumstances in which the guarantee was given establish the existence of a valid consideration additional to the consideration, if any, stated in the agreement? (3) If there be consideration for the promise of indemnity, is the guarantee nevertheless unenforceable, the consent of the defendants having been induced by duress? Upon the third question there are concurrent findings of fact. It would have to be shown, therefore, that the judges below had misconceived the relevant law before the Board could reverse their unanimous rejection of the defendants' case based on economic duress.

The facts

In February 1973 the plaintiffs owned the issued share capital of the Tsuen Wan Shing On Estate Co. Ltd. (the Shing On company), a private company incorporated in Hong Kong. The defendants were at that time the majority shareholders in the Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. Fu Chip had been incorporated in January 1973 and 'went public' on February 9, 1973, when permission to deal in its shares was granted by the Far East Exchange. The principal asset of the Shing On company was a 21 -storey building under construction - the Wing On building. The plaintiffs were keen to

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

realise the value of the building by selling the shares of the company. The defendants were keen to extend the property-holding of Fu Chip, an investment company. There were discussions between the plaintiffs and the defendants on or about February 21. On Tuesday, February 27, all was settled and two written agreements were signed. The first (known as 'the main agreement') was a contract for the sale by the plaintiffs of their shares in the Shing On company to Fu Chip. The parties to the agreement were the plaintiffs as vendors, Fu Chip as purchasers, and the Shing On company. whose total issued share capital was to be transferred to Fu Chip. The price payable by Fu Chip was $10.5 m., and was to be met by the allotment to the plaintiffs of 4.2m. ordinary shares of $1 each in Fu Chip. It was provided that the market value of a Fu Chip share for the purpose of the agreement was to be deemed to be $2.50 for each $1 share. Completion was to be on or before March 31, 1973. It was stipulated that time should 'in every respect be the essence of this agreement.' The parties did, however, agree on March 28, to defer the date for completion to April 30, 1973.

These provisions had the effect that no cash was to pass under the agreement. The whole of the price was to be satisfied by the issue of shares. The plaintiffs gave Fu Chip an undertaking as to the way they would deal with the shares to be allotted to them. They undertook, by clause 4 (k) of the agreement: ***624**

> 'Each of the [plaintiffs] shall retain in his own right in Fu Chip 60 per cent. of the shares allotted to him under this agreement and shall not sell or transfer the same on or before the end of April 1974.'

In other words, the plaintiffs gave an undertaking to Fu Chip that they would not sell or transfer before the end of April 1974 2.5m. of the 4.2m. shares to be issued to them in satisfaction of the price of $10.5m. The restriction was of great importance to the defendants, as majority shareholders in Fu Chip. As the first defendant said in evidence, the plaintiffs must support the Fu Chip shares. He feared that heavy selling by the plaintiffs could depress the market, and so the value of his shareholding in Fu Chip. Not unreasonably the plaintiffs wanted a measure of protection before agreeing to the restriction. They wanted from the man, for whose benefit the undertaking was given, a guarantee 'against a fall in value of the shares during the year in which they could not sell.' When the second plaintiff asked the first defendant 'what happened if shares dropped below $2.50,' the first defendant offered to sign an agreement to buy back the shares at $2.50 after one year. The trial judge said he was

> 'inclined to believe that the first defendant's account is accurate to the extent that in the course of the discussion the plaintiffs did not object to the first defendant's offer to purchase their retained shares *as a sufficient form of guarantee* ' (emphasis supplied).

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

This finding is important because of the stress laid by McMullin and Leonard JJ. on the dishonesty of the second plaintiff who gave evidence that the parties had orally agreed upon a guarantee. The trial judge found that she was genuinely seeking 'a guarantee.' While he rejected her evidence as to the nature of the agreement reached, he did find that the plaintiffs and the first defendant saw the first defendant's offer to buy back the shares as a form of guarantee. Indeed, when the first defendant came to give evidence, he described his offer as 'my guarantee.'

Accordingly, the second agreement ('the subsidiary agreement'), signed also on February 27, 1973, was a contract under which the plaintiffs agreed to sell and the first defendant agreed to buy on or before April 30, 1974, at a price of $2.50 a share 2.5m. shares in Fu Chip (being 60 per cent. of the total allotment made by Fu Chip in satisfaction of the price to be paid for its acquisition from the plaintiffs of the issued share capital of the Shing On company). The commercial effect of these two agreements was remarkable. The first defendant had got very much the better bargain - as he himself recognised. No cash was required of him or Fu Chip on completion. If Fu Chip shares fell below $2.50 on April 30, 1974, the plaintiffs would, however, be protected by the obligation upon the first defendant to buy back 60 per cent. of the shares at $2.50 a share. They secured, therefore, their 'guarantee' against a fall in the share price. But if the rice on that date was higher, the plaintiffs still remained bound to sell back the shares at $2.50. The plaintiffs had elected shares as their price ***625** for the issued capital of the Shing On company because shares could go up in value whereas cash could not, and they expected - as everyone else (including the defendants) did in February 1973 - that share values would rise. Yet by the form of guarantee against a fall in the value of the shares which they accepted they deprived themselves, so far as 60 per cent. of their holding was concerned, of the very advantage which by taking their price in shares they hoped to gain - and without receiving any other benefit for having to wait a year before they could realise cash on 60 per cent. of their price. It is not surprising either that the first defendant thought he had the better of the bargain or that the second plaintiff became indignant when she appreciated what she and her family had given away by the subsidiary agreement. She and her husband, therefore, made up their minds that they would not complete the main agreement unless they could substitute a guarantee by way of indemnity for the subsidiary agreement.

On April 25, 1973, solicitors, describing themselves as acting for the Shing On company, wrote a letter to the solicitors for Fu Chip asking them

> '... to send us on behalf of our clients a guarantee from your clients that the intended allotment of 4.2 m. ordinary shares of your clients would be of the value of the sum $10.5m.'

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

The confusions of the letter are remarkable, but irrelevant. It was well understood that the solicitors who wrote the letter also acted for the plaintiffs, that the solicitors who received it also acted for the defendants and that the guarantee was sought in respect of 60 per cent. only of the 4.2m. shares allotted in satisfaction of the purchase price under the main agreement. The reply was a denial of any agreement of guarantee - correct, no doubt, according to the card but not really consistent with the first defendant's view of the subsidiary agreement as his guarantee of 60 per cent. of the price.

The plaintiffs now made clear that they would not complete the main agreement with Fu Chip unless the subsidiary agreement was cancelled and a true guarantee (by way of indemnity) substituted for it. The first plaintiff disappeared on a business trip to Taiwan, while the second plaintiff remained in Hong Kong, saying there would be no completion until he had returned and considered the position. The first plaintiff returned to Hong Kong on April 29 and immediately made plain to the first defendant that, as Li J. put it:

> '... unless a guarantee and indemnity for the price of the 2.5m. Fu Chip shares was given by the defendants the plaintiffs would not complete the main agreement with the Fu Chip.'

This was serious for the first defendant. Fu Chip had only recently gone public. A public announcement had been made of Fu Chip's acquisition of the Wing On building by its take-over of the share capital of the Shing On company. If the deal fell through, the public would, the first defendant thought, lose confidence in Fu Chip shares. The first defendant had, therefore, to decide whether to yield to the plaintiffs' demand for the cancellation of the subsidiary agreement and ***626** for a guarantee in its place or to stand by the two agreements of February 27, and have Fu Chip sue for specific performance of the main agreement. The first course would enable completion to take place on or very soon after April 30; the second course would entail the delays of legal action, though the first defendant was well aware that there was no defence. The first defendant's problem is best described in the words of the trial judge. After quoting the first defendant's evidence that he would lose a lot if Fu Chip failed to take over the Shing On company, the judge said:

> 'These words reflect the optimism and hope of the first defendant when he yielded to the plaintiffs' demand for a guarantee. At the time the demand was made the first defendant placed the matter in the hands of his solicitors. He had proper legal advice. He knew very well whether he gave the guarantee or not the main agreement between the Fu Chip and the plaintiffs was still valid as a separate document. The Fu Chip could have sued the plaintiffs for specific performance or for damages. Out of the original issued and paid up capital of 12,600,000 shares in the Fu Chip the first defendant owned 6,531,000 shares. In addition he had purchased more since the listing of such shares. His brother,

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

the second defendant, owned 1,500,000 shares. Between the two of them they owned the controlling interests of the Fu Chip. By then the first defendant had already set himself about in manipulating the price of the Fu Chip shares by buying and selling. If the defendants refused to give the guarantee on the Fu Chip shares, then the Fu Chip shares might drop a few 10 cents in price only if the general condition of the market remained bullish. It would be possible for the first defendant to push the price up again with his manipulation. The Fu Chip, after all, is an investment company. All its assets consist of landed property. So long as the properties in the Fu Chip have been quoted in their true value the success or failure in the taking over of the Shing On could not have affected the true value of the Fu Chip shares. Whatever set back in the market price of the Fu Chip shares could not have sent them below their true value. Even if it did, the defendants might have suffered a temporary paper loss of profit but would not have suffered a financial ruin. The first defendant did threaten that the Fu Chip would sue the plaintiffs on the main agreement. However, in the end he chose to avoid litigation and yielded to the plaintiffs' demand. The first defendant must have considered the matter thoroughly in the light of the then marketing condition and formed the opinion that the risk in giving the guarantee was more apparent than real. As I have said earlier on, neither party at the time could have foreseen the stock market subsequently slumping in such manner. Had the plaintiffs realised that the prices in general in the stock market would fall to the extent as we now know then they would not even bother to demand for the guarantee. They would be quite satisfied with the subsidiary agreement. Therefore I find as a fact that when the defendants agreed to sign the guarantee neither they nor the plaintiffs envisaged ***627** a drastic fall of the market and that the defendants never expected that on the guarantee they might be required to compensate the plaintiffs in terms of millions of dollars. This was an error of judgment in a business deal. The defendants were reluctant to be deprived of a good bargain - the subsidiary agreement. But I find that they were quite prepared to take a calculated risk (which at the time appeared to be very little) in order to pacify the plaintiffs who were adamant. It was in such circumstances that the guarantee was given.'

In the light of these findings it is surprising that the trial judge also found that the cancellation of the subsidiary agreement formed no part of the consideration for the giving of the guarantee on May 4. The judge found - no doubt, correctly - that the plaintiffs wanted the subsidiary agreement cancelled in any event. But the existence of their desire is perfectly consistent with its cancellation and the substitution for it of a guarantee as part and parcel of a comprehensive settlement accepted

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

by the first defendant as the best and most effective way of securing early completion of the main agreement - which was his objective throughout the negotiations of May 4.

Their Lordships agree with Briggs C.J.'s analysis of those negotiations. He said:

> 'However, the cancellation was part of the agreement for the completion of the main agreement. It was cancelled by mutual agreement as part and parcel of this: it does not stand alone. The consideration for the guarantee was the whole arrangement for the completion of the main agreement of which the cancellation of the subsidiary agreement formed part. The judge found that the plaintiffs wanted the subsidiary agreement to be cancelled in any event. But there is no evidence that this was what the defendants wanted. The defendants agreed to the cancellation only as part of the whole arrangement. The cancellation cannot be considered in vacuo.'

This analysis is supported by the evidence of the first defendant himself. When asked whether the subsidiary agreement was cancelled on the basis that a written guarantee would be executed and would be effective he replied 'Yes,' saying that he was 'forced' to regard the guarantee as a substitute for the subsidiary agreement. He went on to add the significant observation that once he had signed the guarantee he regarded it as binding.

The events of May 4 can be very shortly stated. The first defendant's legal advisers produced the first draft of a contract of guarantee. It was revised by both parties, and an option inserted to enable the first defendant to buy back the shares, if they dropped below $2.50, and he chose to do so. According to the first defendant, the cancellation of the subsidiary agreement was immediately followed by the signing of the guarantee. The judge made no finding as to the sequence of events, but was satisfied that the guarantee was signed to induce the plaintiffs to complete the main agreement. A somewhat angry discussion then ***628*** ensued in which the first defendant was seeking some effective safeguard (e.g. retention of the scrip or share certificates) against the plaintiffs defaulting on their obligation (of great importance to the first defendant) not to sell before April 30, 1974. The issue was settled by the plaintiffs giving the first defendant and his brother an indemnity in the event of any breach of their obligation not to sell the shares. The parties then went to the offices of Fu Chip's accountants, where they completed the transaction under the main agreement. There is no suggestion that the first defendant signed the contract of guarantee under protest. On the contrary, he had present his own legal advisers and, as the trial judge put it, was 'quite prepared to take a calculated risk (which at the time appeared to be very little) ...'

During the period May 4, 1973, to April 30, 1974, share prices slumped. By April 30 Fu Chip shares had fallen to 36 cents a share. Yet the first defendant allowed the plaintiffs to continue in the belief that they had their price of $2.50 a share guaranteed by him. Nor has the first defendant at any time

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

offered to restore the plaintiffs to the 'status quo ante' - i.e. to their position under the subsidiary agreement. Indeed it is his (remarkable) contention that neither the subsidiary agreement nor the guarantee of May 4 has legal effect. The plaintiffs, therefore, having accepted a year's restriction on dealing in 60 per cent. of the shares allotted to them, were left, according to his case, by the events of May 4 without any safeguard against a fall in the market, the damaging effects of which they were powerless to forestall or diminish. If the law really compels such a conclusion, one may be forgiven for thinking that the time has come to re-consider it.

The first question

The first question is whether upon its true construction the written guarantee of May 4, 1973, states a consideration sufficient in law to support the defendants' promise of indemnity against a fall in value of the Fu Chip shares. The instrument is, so far as relevant, in these terms:

> 'Re: Tsuen Wan Shing On Estate Co. Ltd.
>
> 'In consideration of your having at our request agreed to sell all of your shares of and in the above mentioned company whose registered office is situate at 274 Sha Tsui Road Ground Floor, Tsuen Wan New Territories in the colony of Hong Kong for the consideration of $10,500,000: by the allotment of 4,200,000 ordinary shares of $1.00 each in Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. whose registered office is situate at no. 33 Wing Lok Street Victoria in the said colony of Hong Kong and that the market value for the said ordinary shares of the said Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. shall be deemed as $2.50 for each of $1.00 share under an agreement for sale and purchase made between the parties thereto and dated February 27, 1973, we Lau Yiu Long ( ) of no. 152 Tin Hau Temple Road, Flat C1, Summit Court, 14th floor in the colony of Hong Kong merchant and Benjamin Lau Kam Ching ( ) of no. 31 Ming Yuen Street West, basement in the ***629** said colony of Hong Kong merchant the directors of the said Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. hereby agree and guarantee the closing market value for 2,520,000 shares (being 60 per cent. of the said 4,200,000 ordinary shares) of the said Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. shall be at $2.50 per share and that the total value of 2,520,000 shares shall be of the sum of HK$6,300,000 on the following marketing date immediately after April 30, 1974, and we further agree to indemnify and keep you indemnified against any damages, losses and other expenses which you may incur or sustain in the event of the closing market price for the shares of Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. according to the Far East Exchange Ltd., shall fall short of the sum of $2.50 during the said following marketing date immediately after April 30, 1974, provided always that if we were called upon to indemnify you for the discrepancy between the market value and the said total value of HK

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

> $6,300,000 we shall have the option of buying from you the said 2,520,000 shares of Fu Chip Investment Co. Ltd. at the price of HK$6,300,000....'

Mr. Neill, counsel for the plaintiffs before their Lordships' Board D but not below, contends that the consideration stated in the agreement is not in reality a past one. It is to be noted that the consideration was not on May 4, 1973, a matter of history only. The instrument by its reference to the main agreement with Fu Chip incorporates as part of the stated consideration the plaintiffs' three promises to Fu Chip: to complete the sale of Shing On, to accept shares as the price for the sale, and not to sell 60 per cent. of the shares so accepted before April 30, 1974. Thus, on May 4, 1973, the performance of the main agreement still lay in the future. Performance of these promises was of great importance to the defendants, and it is undeniable that, as the instrument declares, the promises were made to Fu Chip at the request of the defendants. It is equally clear that the instrument also includes a promise by the plaintiffs to the defendants to fulfil their earlier promises given to Fu Chip.

The Board agrees with Mr. Neill's submission that the consideration expressly stated in the written guarantee is sufficient in law to support the defendants' promise of indemnity. An act done before the giving of a promise to make a payment or to confer some other benefit can sometimes be consideration for the promise. The act must have been done at the promisors' request: the parties must have understood that the act was to be remunerated either by a payment or the conferment of some other benefit: and payment, or the conferment of a benefit, must have been legally enforceable had it been promised in advance. All three features are present in this case. The promise given to Fu Chip under the main agreement not to sell the shares for a year was at the first defendant's request. The parties understood at the time of the main agreement that the restriction on selling must be compensated for by the benefit of a guarantee against a drop in price: and such a guarantee would be legally enforceable. The agreed cancellation of the subsidiary ***630** agreement left, as the parties knew, the plaintiffs unprotected in a respect in which at the time of the main agreement all were agreed they should be protected.

Mr. Neill's submission is based on *Lampleigh v. Brathwait* (1615) Hobart 105. In that case the judges said, at p. 106:

> 'First.... a meer voluntary courtesie will not have a consideration to uphold an assumpsit. But if that courtesie were moved by a suit or request of the party that gives the assumpsit, it will bind, for the promise, though it follows, yet it is not naked, but couples it self with the suit before, and the merits of the party procured by that suit. which is the difference.'

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

The modern statement of the law is in the judgment of Bowen L.J. in *In re Casey's Patents [1892] 1 Ch. 104* , 115-116; Bowen L.J. said:

> 'Even if it were true, as some scientific students of law believe, that a past service cannot support a future promise, you must look at the document and see if the promise cannot receive a proper effect in some other way. Now, the fact of a past service raises an implication that at the time it was rendered it was to be paid for, and, if it was a service which was to be paid for, when you get in the subsequent document a promise to pay, that promise may be treated either as an admission which evidences or as a positive bargain which fixes the amount of that reasonable remuneration on the faith of which the service was originally rendered. So that here for past services there is ample justification for the promise to give the third share.'

Conferring a benefit is, of course, an equivalent to payment: see Chitty on Contracts, 24th ed. (1977), vol. 1, para. 154.

Mr. Leggatt, for the defendants, does not dispute the existence of the rule but challenges its application to the facts of this case. He submits that it is not a necessary inference or implication from the terms of the written guarantee that any benefit or protection was to be given to the plaintiffs for their acceptance of the restriction on selling their shares. Their Lordships agree that the mere existence or recital of a prior request is not sufficient in itself to convert what is prima facie past consideration into sufficient consideration in law to support a promise: as they have indicated, it is only the first of three necessary preconditions. As for the second of those preconditions, whether the act done at the request of the promisor raises an implication of promised remuneration or other return is simply one of the construction of the words of the contract in the circumstances of its making. Once it is recognised, as the Board considers it inevitably must be, that the expressed consideration includes a reference to the plaintiffs' promise not to sell the shares before April 30, 1974 - a promise to be performed in the future, though given in the past - it is not possible to treat the defendants' promise of indemnity as independent of the plaintiffs' antecedent promise, ***631** given at the first defendant's request, not to sell. The promise of indemnity was given because at the time of the main agreement the parties intended that the first defendant should confer upon the plaintiffs the benefit of his protection against a fall in price. When the subsidiary agreement was cancelled, all were well aware that the plaintiffs were still to have the benefit of his protection as consideration for the restriction on selling. It matters not whether the indemnity thus given be regarded as the best evidence of the benefit intended to be conferred in return for the promise not to sell, or as the positive bargain which fixes the benefit on the faith of which the promise was

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

given - though where, as here, the subject is a written contract, the better analysis is probably that of the 'positive bargain.' Their Lordships, therefore, accept the submission that the contract itself states a valid consideration for the promise of indemnity.

This being their Lordships' conclusion, it is necessary to consider Mr. Neill's further submission (also raised for the first time before the Board) that the option given the defendants, if called upon to fulfil their indemnity, to buy back the shares at $2.50 a share was itself a sufficient consideration for the promise of indemnity. But their Lordships see great force in the contention. The defendants promised to indemnify he plaintiffs if the market price of Fu Chip shares fell below $2.50. However, in the event of the defendants being called on to implement this promise they were given an option to take up the shares themselves at $2.50. This on the face of it imposes on the plaintiffs in the circumstances envisaged an obligation to transfer the shares to the defendants at the price of $2.50 if called on to do so. The concomitant benefit to he defendants could be a real one - for example, if they thought that the market, after a temporary set-back, would recover to a price above $2.50. The fact that the option is stated in the form of a proviso does not preclude it being a contractual term or one under which consideration moves.

The second question

There is no doubt - and it was not challenged - that extrinsic evidence is admissible to prove the real consideration where (a) no consideration, or a nominal consideration, is expressed in the instrument, or (b) the expressed consideration is in general terms or ambiguously stated, or (c) a substantial consideration is stated, but an additional consideration exists. The additional consideration must not, however, be inconsistent with the terms of the written instrument. Extrinsic evidence is also admissible to prove the illegality of the consideration. In their Lordships' opinion the law is correctly stated in *Halsbury's Laws of England,* 4th ed., vol. 12 (1975), para. 1487. The extrinsic evidence in this case shows that the consideration for the promise of indemnity, while it included the cancellation of the subsidiary agreement, was primarily the promise given by the plaintiffs to the defendants, to perform their contract with Fu Chip, which included the undertaking not to sell 60 per cent. of the shares allotted to them before April 30, 1974. Thus the real consideration for ***632** the indemnity was the promise to perform, or the performance of, the plaintiffs' pre-existing contractual obligations to Fu Chip. This promise was perfectly consistent with the consideration stated in the guarantee. Indeed, it reinforces it by imposing upon the plaintiffs an obligation now owed to the defendants to do what, at the first defendant's request, they had agreed with Fu Chip to do.

Their Lordships do not doubt that a promise to perform, or the performance of, a pre-existing contractual obligation to a third party can be valid consideration. In *New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd. v. A. M. Satterthwaite & Co. Ltd. (The Eurymedon) [1975] A.C. 154* , 168 the rule and the reason for the rule were stated:

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

> 'An agreement to do an act which the promisor is under an existing obligation to a third party to do, may quite well amount to valid consideration ... the promisee obtains the benefit of a direct obligation.... This proposition is illustrated and supported by *Scotson v. Pegg (1861) 6 H. & N. 295* which their Lordships consider to be good law.'

Unless, therefore, the guarantee was void as having been made for an illegal consideration or voidable on the ground of economic duress, the extrinsic evidence establishes that it was supported by valid consideration.

Mr. Leggatt for the defendants submits that the consideration is illegal as being against public policy. He submits that to secure a party's promise by a threat of repudiation of a pre-existing contractual obligation owed to another can be, and in the circumstances of this case was, an abuse of a dominant bargaining position and so contrary to public policy. This, he submits, is so even though economic duress cannot be proved. This submission found favour with the majority in the Court of Appeal. Their Lordships, however, consider it misconceived. Reliance was placed on the old 'seaman' cases of *Harris v. Watson (1791) Peake 102* and *Stilk v. Meyrick (1809) 6 Esp. 129; 2 Camp. 317* . Counsel also referred to certain developments in American law, which are to be found described in two leading works, Corbin on Contracts (1950) and *Williston on Contracts,* 3rd ed. (1975). The relevant passages are Corbin, vol. 1, ch. 7 and *Williston,* vol. 1, ch. 47. Their Lordships would make one general observation on what is revealed by these two distinguished American works. Where some judges speak of public policy, others speak of economic duress. No clear line of distinction between the two concepts emerges as settled in the American law.

In the seaman cases there were only two parties - the seaman and the captain (representing the owner). In *Harris v. Watson,* Peake 102, the captain during the voyage, for which the plaintiff had contracted to serve as a seaman, promised him five guineas over and above his common wages if he would perform some extra work. Lord Kenyon thought (p. 103) that if the seaman's claim to be paid five guineas was supported 'it would materially affect the navigation of this kingdom.' He feared the prospect of seamen in times of danger insisting 'on an extra charge on such a promise,' and non-suited the plaintiff. In *Stilk v.* ***633*** *Meyrick, 6 Esp. 129; 2 Camp. 317* Lord Ellenborough C.J. also non-suited the seaman. According to the report in *2 Camp. 317* . 319 he said:

> 'I think *Harris v. Watson* was rightly decided; but I doubt whether the ground of public policy, upon which Lord Kenyon is stated to have proceeded, be the true principle on which the decision is to be supported. Here, I say the agreement is void for want of consideration.'

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

Espinasse, who appeared as junior counsel for the unsuccessful plaintiff in the case, reports the case somewhat differently. He reports (*6 Esp. 129* , 130) Lord Ellenborough C.J. as saying that ' ... he recognised the principle of the case of *Harris v. Watson* as founded on just and proper policy.' But the report continues: 'When the defendant [sic - but surely the plaintiff is meant?] entered on board the ship, he stipulated to do all the work his situation called upon him to do.' These cases, explicable as they are upon the basis of an absence of fresh consideration for the captain's promise, are an unsure foundation for a rule of public policy invalidating contracts where, save for the rule, there would be valid consideration.

When one turns to consider cases where a pre-existing duty imposed D by law is alleged to be valid consideration for a promise, one finds cases in which public policy has been held to invalidate the consideration. A promise to pay a sheriff in consideration of his performing his legal duty, a promise to pay for discharge from illegal arrest, are to be found in the books as promises which the law will not enforce: see the cases cited in paragraph 326, footnote 2 of *Halsbury's Laws of England* , 4th ed., vol. 9 (1974). Yet such cases are also explicable upon the ground that a person who promises to perform, or performs, a duty imposed by law provides no consideration. In cases where the discharge of a duty imposed by law has been treated as valid consideration, the courts have usually (but not invariably) found an act over and above, but consistent with, the duty imposed by law: see *Williams v. Williams [1957] 1 W.L.R. 148* . It must be conceded that different judges have adopted differing approaches to such cases: contrast, for example, Denning L.J. at p. 149 et seq. with the view of the majority in *Williams's* case. But, where the pre-existing obligation is a contractual duty owed to a third party, some other ground of public policy must be relied on to invalidate the consideration (if otherwise legal); the defendants submit that the ground can be extortion by the abuse of a dominant bargaining position to threaten the repudiation of a contractual obligation. It is this application of public policy which Mr. Leggatt submits has been developed in the American cases. Beginning with the general rule that 'neither the performance of duty nor the promise to render a performance already required by duty is a sufficient consideration' the courts have (according to *Corbin on Contracts,* vol. 1, s. 171) advanced to the view

> 'that the moral and economic elements in any case that involves the rule should be weighed by the court, and that the fact of preexisting legal duty should not be in itself decisive.'

***634**

The American Law Institute in its *Restatement of the Law, Contracts* , Chapter 3, section 84 (d), has declared that performance (or promise of performance) of a contractual duty owed to a third

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

person is sufficient consideration. This view (which accords with the statement of our law in *New Zealand Shipping Co. Ltd. v. A. M. Satterthwaite & Co. Ltd. [1975] A.C. 154*) appears to be generally accepted but only in cases where there is no suggestion of unfair economic pressure exerted to induce the making of what *Corbin on Contracts* calls 'the return promise.'

Their Lordships' knowledge of this developing branch of American law is necessarily limited. In their judgment it would be carrying audacity to the point of foolhardiness for them to attempt to extract from the American case law a principle to provide an answer to the question now under consideration. That question, their Lordships repeat is whether, in a case where duress is not established, public policy may nevertheless invalidate the consideration if there has been a threat to repudiate a pre-existing contractual obligation or an unfair use of a dominating bargaining position. Their Lordships' conclusion is that where businessmen are negotiating at arm's length it is unnecessary for the achievement of justice, and unhelpful in the development of the law, to invoke such a rule of public policy. It would also create unacceptable anomaly. It is unnecessary because justice requires that men, who have negotiated at arm's length, be held to their bargains unless it can be shown that their consent was vitiated by fraud, mistake or duress. If a promise is induced by coercion of a man's will, the doctrine of duress suffices to do justice. The party coerced, if he chooses and acts in time, can avoid the contract. If there is no coercion, there can be no reason for avoiding the contract where there is shown to be a real consideration which is otherwise legal.

Such a rule of public policy as is now being considered would be unhelpful because it would render the law uncertain. It would become a question of fact and degree to determine in each case whether there had been, short of duress, an unfair use of a strong bargaining position. It would create anomaly because, if public policy invalidates the consideration, the effect is to make the contract void. But unless the facts are such as to support a plea of 'non est factum,' which is not suggested in this case, duress does no more than confer upon the victim the opportunity, if taken in time, to avoid the contract. It would be strange if conduct less than duress could render a contract void, whereas duress does no more than render a contract voidable. Indeed, it is the defendants' case in this appeal that such an anomaly is the correct result. Their case is that the plaintiffs, having lost by cancellation the safeguard of the subsidiary agreement, are without the safeguard of the guarantee because its consideration is contrary to public policy, and that they are debarred from restoration to their position under the subsidiary agreement because the guarantee is void, not voidable. The logical consequence of Mr. Leggatt's submission is that the safeguard which all were at all times agreed the plaintiffs should have - the safeguard against fall in value of the shares - has been lost by the application of a rule of ****635*** public policy. The law is not, in their Lordships' judgment, reduced to countenancing such stark injustice: nor is it necessary, when one bears in mind the protection offered otherwise by the law to one who contracts in ignorance of what he is doing or under duress. Accordingly, the submission that the additional consideration established by the extrinsic evidence is invalid on the ground of public policy is rejected.

The third question

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

Duress, whatever form it takes, is a coercion of the will so as to vitiate consent. Their Lordships agree with the observation of Kerr J. in *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 293* , 336 that in a contractual situation commercial pressure is not enough. There must be present some factor 'which could in law be regarded as a coercion of his will so as to vitiate his consent.' This conception is in line with what was said in this Board's decision in *Barton v. Armstrong [1976] A.C. 104* , 121 by Lord Wilberforce and Lord Simon of Glaisdale - observations with which the majority judgment appears to be in agreement. In determining whether there was a coercion of will such that there was no true consent, it is material to inquire whether the person alleged to have been coerced did or did not protest; whether, at the time he was allegedly coerced into making the contract, he did or did not have an alternative course open to him such as an adequate legal remedy; whether he was independently advised; and whether after entering the contract he took steps to avoid it. All these matters are, as was recognised in *Maskell v. Horner [1915] 3 K.B. 106* , relevant in determining whether he acted voluntarily or not.

In the present case there is unanimity amongst the judges below that there was no coercion of the first defendant's will. In the Court of Appeal the trial judge's finding (already quoted) that the first defendant considered the matter thoroughly, chose to avoid litigation, and formed the opinion that the risk in giving the guarantee was more apparent than real was upheld. In short, there was commercial pressure, but no coercion. Even if this Board was disposed, which it is not, to take a different view, it would not substitute its opinion for that of the judges below on this question of fact.

It is, therefore, unnecessary for the Board to embark upon an inquiry into the question whether English law recognises a category of duress known as 'economic duress.' But, since the question has been fully argued in this appeal, their Lordships will indicate very briefly the view which they have formed. At common law money paid under economic compulsion could be recovered in an action for money had and received *Astley v. Reynolds (1731) 2 Str. 915* . The compulsion had to be such that the party was deprived of 'his freedom of exercising his will' (see p. 916). It is doubtful, however, whether at common law any duress other than duress to the person sufficed to render a contract voidable: sec *Blackstone's Commentaries* , Book 1, 12th ed. pp. 130-131 and *Skeate v. Beale (1841) 11 Ad. & E. 983* . American law (Williston on Contracts, 3rd ed.) now recognises that a contract may be avoided on the ***636*** ground of economic duress. The commercial pressure alleged to constitute such duress must, however, be such that the victim must have entered the contract against his will, must have had no alternative course open to him, and must have been confronted with coercive acts by the party exerting the pressure: *Williston on Contracts* , 3rd ed., vol. 13 (1970), section 1603. American judges pay great attention to such evidential matters as the effectiveness of the alternative remedy available, the fact or absence of protest, the availability of independent advice, the benefit received, and the speed with which the victim has sought to avoid the contract. Recently two English judges have recognised that commercial pressure may constitute duress the pressure of which can render a contract voidable: Kerr J. in *Occidental Worldwide Investment Corporation v. Skibs A/S Avanti [1976] 1 Lloyd's Rep. 293* and Mocatta J. in *North Ocean Shipping Co. Ltd. v. Hyundai Construction Co. Ltd. [1979] Q.B. 705* . Both stressed that the pressure must be such that the C victim's consent to the contract was not a voluntary act on

© 2023 Thomson Reuters.

his part. In their Lordships' view, there is nothing contrary to principle in recognising economic duress as a factor which may render a contract voidable, provided always that the basis of such recognition is that it must amount to a coercion of will, which vitiates consent. It must be shown that the payment made or the contract entered into was not a voluntary act.

For these reasons their Lordships will humbly advise Her Majesty that the appeal be allowed and that the judgment of the trial judge be restored with interest up to date of Her Majesty's Order in Council disposing of this appeal. The defendants must pay the plaintiffs' costs here and below.

Representation

Solicitors: Stephenson, Harwood Bower, Cotton & Bower .

(T. J. M.)

(c) Incorporated Council of Law Reporting for England & Wales