

Maritime safety – Policy vs reality

The UK government is making maritime safety a top policy priority, it will need to take a hard line on industry players to ensure proper regulatory implementation

Carl Stephen Patrick Hunter OBE, chairman of Coltraco Ultrasonics

► **Shipping enables the movement of goods** globally and provides 96% of all UK trade. Yet, the UK is largely “sea blind” to its importance. It is an industry populated by men and women who care deeply for its integrity. However, too much of it operates globally at a level that includes tax evasion, certain tax avoidance, a devotion to cheapness, and a disregard for the human condition. This is the very reason why the UK has constructed its first 30-year strategy in its 500 years as a leading maritime nation of the world – the Maritime 2050. In this, the UK has committed to be a leading global maritime nation predicated on safety and the eradication of modern slavery at sea.

Globally, our industry has had more collisions at sea and machinery failures in 2016–18 than we did in 2014–16. We have more vessels at sea today than we have ever had, and yet we have determined that buying the cheapest ships in China is part of our professional way of life. Our seafarers have never been cheaper in relative terms, nor has the cost of shipping itself.

The reason the UK government has determined maritime safety as one of its central policy issues in Maritime 2050 is, I imagine, because it is well aware that the industry is unsafe globally. For 70 years, we have known the dangers of seafarers entering confined spaces and remaining there – dead. So, we crafted technically based regulations and demanded that portable marine safety equipment were available for the crew to use. Still, they perish. This is a failure of implementation, and implementation only occurs in an environment where the wellbeing of those under command is the leader’s first duty and priority.

Although best practice exists, they only exist in our best operators and these are a minority in our industry. Over the last 20 years, the growth of ship management is attributable to the lower cost advantage it gave to the owner, revealing an owner’s interest.

What is a typical and unsafe shipping company’s structure? The owner might be based in London, Hamburg, or Athens. The ship will be registered as a single-purpose company in the most tax-efficient domicile. The ship might be flagged in Panama or

Liberia, the two most common ‘flag states’ globally. It may be ‘classed’ under any number of classification societies, and it is no coincidence that owners appoint high-quality classification societies while being regulated in the lowest-quality domiciles. If they do not, then their cargo owners or charters will not use them.

The officers and crew will be recruited from countries with the lowest labour rate. This is why the industry is manning itself with Filipinos (average GDP per capita USD3,104 per annum), Burmese (average GDP per head USD1,490 per annum), and Nepalese (average GDP per head USD775 per annum). The majority of contracts is won on price alone – the cheapest food, the cheapest water, and the cheapest rope itself.

In the UK, the Maritime Coastguard Agency (MCA) struggles to maintain its establishment of 128 highly qualified former master mariners and former chief engineers to be its inspectors and surveyors. How many of their counterparts exist in Panama or Liberia? While the UK maritime sector constantly concerns itself with the MCA and the Marine Accidental Investigation Branch (which generate some of the finest marine accident reports globally), what conference have you attended at any time, in the last 30 years, where speakers have expressed concern as to Liberia’s or Panama’s equivalent establishment or commented in reverential terms as to the quality of their accident reports?

The International Maritime Organization has the convening authority of the finest multi-lateral organisations globally. However, as a United Nations body, it can only “get better” if our member states make it so. Hence, in this year of Maritime 2050, is it the time for the UK to lead the global maritime industry to being a safe one by being its most strident member state, telling the world that our industry has had enough loss of life, enough of modern slavery, enough crippling and life-changing injuries, enough mental impedance, and that it must all stop.

There can be no higher calling in our industry than eradicating unsafe practices, preserving lives at sea or eradicating the stain of modern slavery from our seas. ☐



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