

Media Release

Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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Investment in Australia's maritime workforce vital for continued prosperity

OPINION PIECE:

Australian Maritime College Professor of Maritime Training John Lloyd believes the continued decline in seafaring staff affects not only those employed aboard our dwindling maritime fleet, but the whole of the maritime sector and wider supply chain.

Public interest has been drawn to the continued decline of the Australian merchant shipping fleet with the events surrounding the Alexander Spirit and its delayed departure from Devonport as it heads for trades overseas and the engagement of new, apparently more internationally competitive, crew.

The impact on the current seafarers and their families faced with redundancies, a job market struggling with the downturn in shipping and falling oil prices affecting domestic oil production is hard to imagine. Like any workers facing bleak job prospects, questions will always be raised about what can be done.

Yet to many the maritime sector is either unimportant, or worse, unseen. The previous government's attempt at a comprehensive maritime reform agenda did not realise the benefits many had anticipated. More recently, the signs are that the domestic shipping trade will be further liberalised and overseas ships will continue to be allowed to carry domestic goods around the coast of Australia at the expense of Australian jobs.

The Australian seafarer is something of an endangered species, and for an island nation dependent on shipping for its international trade, this should be ringing warning bells loud and clear. There will undoubtedly be much hand-wringing and pointing the finger of blame, but the decline will inevitably continue without a fresh perspective and a willingness for constructive dialogue.

Experienced seafarers have for generations provided the pool of expertise drawn upon to service our ports, harbours and a host of related industries. These positions include harbour masters, marine pilots, port managers, ships' agents, maritime lawyers, national and state regulators, and education and training providers. The ability to supply the manpower required from domestic resources has been all but exhausted. Many, if not

most, senior positions are filled by applicants from overseas and there is little evidence of the situation improving without significant intervention.

The solutions are by no means simple but they are well recognised by unions, industry peak bodies and skills councils across the country. As an island nation there can be no greater imperative than protecting our trade both domestically and internationally. Our sensitive coastal regions deserve the highest calibre of supervision from those who understand the environment from a national and international perspective.

We have a responsibility to ensure the skills and knowledge exist in perpetuity as a national capability in our own workforce, and recognise that maritime expertise is not one to be purchased or bartered for on the international stage in times of critical shortage. Many of our developed nation trading partners have recognised this issue and have policies in place to ensure their maritime expertise is not lost.

The crew of the Alexander Spirit has shown how important it is we set narrow political agendas to one side; that we work to create a highly-skilled maritime workforce that is competitive economically with its key rivals internationally and that sacrifices short-term gain for long-term sustainability.

To move forward we have to understand the reasons behind the decline in the Australian shipping fleet and why shipowners have deserted the Australian flag. A fresh evaluation of what kind of shipping tax regime can help level the playing field for owner-operators versus their regional counterparts is required. We need to talk about how we can encourage our highly professional seafaring community to achieve productivity and efficiency gains in a collaborative manner that fosters investment and commitment to a long-term sustainable future.

To achieve this will require flexibility on the part of government, unions and employers and an open mind to both opportunity and challenge. But if we can do this, we can ensure the long-term success and prosperity of the seafaring and the wider maritime sector today and into the future.

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