



**MARITIME LABOUR CONVENTION
SEMINAR
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OPENING ADDRESS

Good morning, it is a genuine pleasure to be here today.

My congratulations go to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, the Chamber of Shipping and Nautilus for jointly arranging the event. Such co-operation fittingly reflects the tripartite efforts of shipowners, seafarers and governments in achieving this significant maritime convention.

Over the next two days you - and an impressive array of experts from governments, industry and other interested bodies - will be covering a wide range of important issues surrounding the implementation of the International Labour Organisation's Maritime Labour Convention.

Without the great willingness of all parties to work together, the Convention would never have come into being. Nor would it have come into existence without the unstinting commitment of the ILO itself in facilitating proceedings.

And I am especially pleased that Cleopatra Dombia-Henry, Director of the ILO's International Labour Standards Department is here today. You have presided over the negotiations from beginning to end with endless patience and understanding.

The MLC is a much needed and long overdue convention. All the different aspects of living and working conditions at sea were formerly governed by a disparate collection of instruments that had been developed piecemeal over a long period of time.

Although many were valuable, they were never able to constitute a universally implemented body of rules across the international maritime community.

Now, we have a modern, all-embracing and pragmatic convention. Thanks to the painstaking work by all involved, the standards set are both achievable and acceptable. And I hope the global maritime community will now embrace them wholeheartedly.

A great strength of the convention is that all those involved cannot pick and choose which parts of the convention to support. It must be ratified and implemented as a whole. There is no ducking the deal. So what impact will it have?

There are around hundred thousand ships engaged in ocean going merchant shipping. Half of these carry the bulk of the world's cargo. Over a million

seafarers serve on them, whether it's on relatively short journeys or the great trans-oceanic voyages.

But it should be remembered that the MLC applies standards not just to seafarers in the traditional sense but to all persons working on ships at sea. This includes all those additional staff on passenger ships such as waiting and bar staff, croupiers, cabaret entertainers, shop assistants – and many others.

Each and every one is entitled to the standards required by the provisions of the convention. So the numbers who benefit from it will be even greater than 1.2 million or so trained seafarers.

And let's not forget the enormous economic importance of what those seafarers do. They move 90% of the world's international trade. In 2008, it's estimated that the industry moved over 7½ thousand million tonnes of cargo. That's equivalent to over 30 thousand billion tonne-miles. In the UK alone, the shipping industry earns over £1 million every hour of every day – some £9 billion a year.

When you think of all that cargo and what it is worth, not to mention millions of seagoing passengers, all in the hands of our seafarers, it makes sense to ensure that they are properly supported in their tasks.

Achieving improved conditions for seafarers is of course a worthy end in itself – seafarers must be treated in the workplace with the dignity they deserve. But better conditions also make for better business. If you value the people working on board ships as the assets they truly are, then you improve both morale and performance from ratings to officers. In other words, by investing in seafarers you are investing in more efficient, more effective and safer ship operations.

That is the ideal. Now for the hard work – which I know is already under way in earnest.

The ILO is to be congratulated for encouraging this programme of seminars around the world to raise awareness of the MLC and to help people prepare for its coming into force.

Much has been achieved, but there is no time to sit and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done. Everybody involved must knuckle down to business. And indeed, the Department for Transport and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency – the MCA - is doing just that.

On the administrative and legal side, work is well in hand on making the legislative amendments needed to enable the UK to implement the convention. Fourteen amending regulations are now being prepared.

On the practical side, the MCA will be responsible for the inspection and certification of over 800 UK-registered ships of over 500 gross tonnage to

ensure that they comply with the requirements of the convention, as well as some 300 or so smaller merchant vessels.

The MCA fully supports the development of the Guidelines for flag-state and port-state control officers carrying out inspections under the MLC, and the development of the ILO's "training for trainers" package.

With the co-operation of ship owners, the MCA is already carrying out a programme of "dummy run" inspections on different types of ship so that it is ready for implementation day when it comes.

I also understand that the major classification societies, who will almost certainly be carrying out inspections on behalf of flag-states, are making similar preparations.

The MLC is a big beast and administrations will take its requirements seriously. So ship owners need to be alive to these developments. Many are, of course, but for those that are not we must reiterate this message as often as we can.

I know that the current world economic climate means there are great pressures to keep costs down wherever possible. However, owners who delay addressing compliance with the convention, waiting to see how things develop in practice, would be making a big mistake. Procrastination now will lessen a ship owner's ability to meet the requirements effectively.

And non-compliant ship owners will find their ships detained under port state control regimes, which will cost them money. So it will pay to make sure that their shipping operations comply fully with the requirements of the convention.

Indeed, the Convention will become a reality far sooner than many might think. There are two criteria for its coming into force. The first is that the fleets of ratifying states collectively add up to at least thirty-three per cent of the world's gross tonnage. The second is that 30 countries in all must ratify.

The first criterion has already been met. Liberia, the Marshall Islands, Bahamas, Panama and Norway have already ratified, so the tonnage threshold has been reached.

The Member States of the European Union are collectively aiming to ratify by the end of 2010, which alone might be enough to ensure that the 30 signatories target is reached.

This all points to a 'coming into force' date in 2011. So, the onus is on all of us to ensure smooth implementation across the board within that timescale.

This Convention has been called several things. It has been called a "Super Convention". It is certainly that.

It has been called a "Bill of Rights for Seafarers". It is certainly that, too.

It has also been called the “fourth pillar” of the international regulatory regime for quality shipping. It is most certainly that too, complementing as it does, the key Conventions of the International Maritime Organization – SOLAS, MARPOL and STCW.

But however we think of it, and however we refer to it, one thing is certain. It will make the world’s seas and oceans a better place to work upon, with all the attendant benefits this has for safety and environmental protections across the globe.

And I very much hope that the Convention will help to make the sea a desirable career aspiration for generations to come.

Suffice it to say, the UK Government welcomes the Convention and the continuing efforts being made towards its success in practice and we will take its obligations very seriously.

Thank you.