

Opening speech for Mr Karamitsos
Conference on
"Enhancing the attractiveness of the maritime professions"

11 March 2010
EESC- (8.30 a.m. - 4.30 p.m.)

Speech for introductory panel

Dear Chairman, Dear Vice-President, Honourable members, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Appreciation-Role of the EESC

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in the opening of this Conference focusing on ways to enhance the attractiveness of the maritime professions. This event is all the more important since it takes place in the EESC, an EU Institution that not only represents the European civil society, but indeed has major expertise in the maritime field and in particular as regards seafaring professions and especially in such a period of crisis with so many unemployed young people.

I would like to thank the organisers of this Conference for taking prompt action for a joint reflexion on the human capital of the maritime sector, following-up to the opinion of EESC on the Strategy for the EU Maritime Transport Policy until 2018 that the Commission presented last year.

This event bringing together key players as regards the social dimension of the maritime sector is an excellent opportunity to identify potential solutions for bringing young people to the sea. We hope that we will get good ideas for concrete initiatives in this direction, which will help us in our plans to propose measures for a "Social Agenda" in the course of next year, a priority for VP Kallas.

Scene setter

This Seminar is indeed very timely. I believe that today seafarers and their professions are at the crossroads. On the one hand, there is an ever-growing conviction that the human factor is absolutely crucial not only for safe and efficient maritime operations, but indeed an asset for the maritime clusters' activities, many of which depend on seafaring expertise. On the other hand, we are faced with the lack of interest for the sea, which results in increasing shortages of seafarers that affect many countries in the world.

Particularly, Europe is not unharmed from this situation. The downward trend in the numbers of seafarers in most European countries since the 80s has not come to a halt, while predictions suggest that shortages are expected to grow in many countries.

Consequences

The current shortfall of professionals and the ensuing declining maritime know-how not only threaten the efficiency of the shipping industries in

Europe, but may well affect the land based associated activities that depend on seafaring experience. These deficits present a real danger for the European maritime cluster.

Need for action

In spite of the current reduction in the demand for shipping, we have to keep up our efforts not only to attract and retain people in the maritime professions, but indeed to ensure appropriate training and quality of aptitudes to be in a position to respond to future increased demand and the new prerequisites of the industry. After all, shipping is a cyclical business and upturn will bring new needs for skills.

I believe that the starting point of any action is to be realistic and fully realise the drawbacks of these professions and strive to find the right means to overcome them.

Employment at sea is very demanding in skills, while seafarers are confronted with several hazards and difficulties, such as inherent risks of the sea, isolation, abandonment, inadequate living conditions...to name just a few ... Recently pirate attacks are an additional hurdle.

These challenges have been the guiding principles for the actions of the European Commission in three main directions:

The first is to try to

Boost employment

The Commission launched several initiatives to promote the maritime professions and enhance their attractiveness. In addition, the Council of Ministers twice -during the UK and EL Presidencies- proposed a number of initiatives. I would in particular mention awareness campaigns launched by the Commission and some Member States to inform about maritime professions and the post sea career paths, as well as some projects that the Commission embarked on for the development of a post-sea career.

Yet, we all know that seafaring is an arduous profession and given the numerous job alternatives on land, people -particularly young people- are reluctant to stay long at sea.

I strongly believe therefore that it is necessary to promote careers embracing and even alternating both sea service and employment ashore. Such enrichment of the career would motivate young people to join, while benefiting the overall industry. Also, mobility of European seafarers should be promoted so that national shortages are reduced by other Member States' labour surpluses.

Moreover, the sector of intra-EU regular ferry services needs particular attention. The labour intensive character of this sector makes it a valuable source of employment for European seafarers. However,

competition conditions between operators are strongly influenced by manning costs. This resulted in some cases of replacement of European seafarers by cheaper labour.

Finally, there is a need to strike the right balance between employment conditions and competitiveness of the European fleets. The particularities of the sector, including its global character, are to be fully taken into consideration.

The second area of action relates to keeping up

Maritime skills

The current manning crisis coincides as well with a growing awareness of the importance of seafarers for safeguarding safety and security at sea as well as the protection of the environment.

I believe that our focus shall be above all to ensure that both EU and third parties' ships calling at our ports are manned with proficient crews. Human errors due to inadequate skills must be avoided at any cost.

The extensive Community legislation in place should be fully exploited to secure that seafarers of any origin are trained at least up to the STCW standards. The Commission bears an important responsibility in enforcing compliance of these rules not only in the Member States but also in third countries.

The maritime world evolving rapidly, there is a need to adapt training to the new skills emerging today and the new needs of the maritime industry. The ongoing revision of the IMO STCW Convention that will be concluded by the adoption of the new Convention next June in Manila is crucial in this respect. The Commission contributes substantially to this exercise.

The third area of action relates to the
Social conditions

Above and beyond, let's not forget that seafaring is a profession of tough living and working conditions, whilst the ship is both the place of work and partly home for seafarers.

Therefore, any attempt to attract people would be in vain without adequate labour conditions. Decent social conditions are absolutely crucial for job satisfaction, as well as the performance of seafarers.

The ILO Maritime Labour Convention 2006 is a major step in this regard. This universal Bill of Rights for seafarers is crucial not only for ensuring appropriate social conditions but indeed as a plain and constructive contribution for a level playing field for shipowners at World level.

The Commission triggered the implementation of this Convention in the EU by encouraging the Social Partners to enter into negotiations in accordance with the Treaty.

The ensuing Agreement signed between the Social Partners in May 2008 was therefore transposed into EU legislation by a specific Directive put forward by the Commission. With the adoption of this Directive in 2009 the MLC will be thus applicable throughout the EU.

To complement this legislation, we have launched the preparation of a legislative proposal to enforce the MLC requirements on ships calling at Community ports. This proposal will be part of the "Social Agenda" I mentioned earlier.

Closing remarks and conclusions

These achievements are going to the right direction. But what more?

The Commission will continue its efforts for proficient crews and rewarding maritime professions by building up its action in particular on the basis of the objectives announced in its Strategy for Maritime Transport.

Among these actions is the creation of a specific Task Force of independent high level experts, which is meant to identify ways to

strike the right balance between employment conditions and the competitiveness of the European fleet.

Under the chairmanship of the former Director General Sir Robert Coleman, this Task Force will bring a valuable input to the Commission's reflections on further concrete action in the social area and in particular as regards a specific set of initiatives that the Commission intends to present.

We will have the pleasure to welcome Mr Coleman later today under the discussions in panel 3.

To conclude, I would emphasize that it is essential that any actions tone with a change of attitude towards social matters in the sector. There is a need to restore the social prestige once found in the seafaring professions. The human face of the industry has undoubtedly an enormous effect on its future.

I consider this seminar as the starting point for a co-operative effort that should bring about practical results, in the form of concrete proposals, to address the challenges concerning the maritime professions and shape further action in this field. It is very timely during this year, which the IMO declared "**The year of the seafarer**".

Thank you for your attention.