

**EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE**  
**Speech by Mr P. Tsakos**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the European Economic and Social Committee for its initiative to organise a Conference on the attractiveness of the seafarer's profession and for inviting me to speak. This topic is particularly dear to me since I happen to be an ex seafarer, a captain, who later became a shipowner, some forty years ago. I am also pleased to speak from my experience of participating in the Greek shipping community, which represents the biggest national fleet in the world and yet comes from a small but very old traditional maritime country.

From the days of my early childhood on the Aegean island of Chios, the dominating elements in our lives were the sea, the ships and the seafarers. The maritime tradition deeply rooted in our homes and families kept us thinking of only one thing as our future: a career at sea. The sea allows us to dream, inspires us to dream and turns our dreams into reality.

My seafaring rota began at 18 years of age. After 10 years at sea, I became a captain, and worked as a Master and Master Superintendent. I have learnt to take responsibility for others. I acquired the capacity to make the most appropriate decisions in a given situation and the capacity to react rapidly, taking into account all factors, technical, physical and human. I have watched how maritime trade and operations were carried out, how ships were bought and sold. I realised the dangers, the problems and the opportunities involved in this fascinating business. At 35 I established my own shipping company and bought my first ship. I would certainly not be with you today in my capacity of founder of the Tsakos Group if I had not been a sea captain. It is on board the ship that I developed qualities, if any, and gained my qualifications, which are vital to create and administrate a company. Any company.

Nowadays the Tsakos Group operates 85 vessels of all kinds (tankers, container ships, bulk carriers, LNG) totalling DWT to 9.000.000 tons. What are the qualities required to pursue such a career? I really don't know. All that I know is that most of my colleagues, well known successful shipowners, are people of the sea, descendants/members of maritime families, 2nd, 3rd and 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> generation seamen, who started out in similar circumstances

and continue to maintain the distinguished/enduring Hellenic maritime tradition. My career cannot be considered an exception, at least not for Greek Maritime standards.

In today's world the seas are seen as an arena of great economic interest and fierce competition. Ships are faster, they are huge and largely impersonal structures, highly technologically advanced with the safest industry standards, capable of carrying much more cargo and accommodating many more people, but they are unable to accommodate the dreams, aspirations and ambitions of our youth.

Nevertheless, I do believe that the traditional methods and thinking are still vital to the operation of ships and the professional development of seafarers, which in turn, are essential for the development of seaborne trade. For this reason, maritime tradition must be preserved as one of the most precious elements in our industry. Recruitment of suitable personnel is not only a matter of manning the ships with properly trained and qualified men, but one which seriously affects the management of shipping and progress of international trade.

Shipping firms have always been manned by experienced officers of the merchant navy. The principals and executives of most shipping companies are former ship's officers. Even when they are not seafarers themselves, many of their top executives are. It is difficult, if not impossible, to run the business from shore based offices without practical knowledge of seaborne trade, without knowledge of the mentality of the seafarers onboard, without respect for those with the greatest seagoing experience, without seamanship.

Seamanship is not an art that can be taught and learned in schools. Seamanship is a complex of physical and mental abilities like cleverness, cunning and other charismas that characterize the whole crew and not only one individual.

Decisions concerning critical matters, especially when the ship is under great danger, are made solely by the Captain. The responsibility and the pressure is enormous because this can influence the lives of everyone onboard.

Whilst academic and technical training is vital, experience in the field is of equal, if not greater, importance. In shipping and seafaring, the greatest reservoir of knowledge and experience is found among those who have served onboard the ships – the men who have sailed many different ships with all kinds of cargoes in all weather and sea conditions to and from hundreds of ports around the world.

The Master's position, like that of Engineers and officers in general, is a highly demanding position and as such, it is of paramount importance to maintain the highest level of quality and skill, corresponding to the demands of the industry and the profession. We must be able to recruit adequate numbers of committed and enthusiastic young people determined to succeed in a career offering challenges, responsibilities and opportunities to advance into management, and other specialised areas. The biggest problem of the shipping industry, now and in the foreseeable future, is that of ensuring an adequate supply of officers and crews, both in quantity, quality and skill, who are capable of manning the entire spectrum of operations and shore based shipping management business.

**But what are the reasons why the younger generation in traditional maritime countries have been gradually distancing themselves from the shipping industry?** The usual explanation for this phenomenon is that the spectacular post war economic development in the western world has provided the younger generations with sufficient, attractive employment opportunities ashore. In order to become a seafarer one of the fundamental needs is for one to "love the sea". The scarcity of seafarers in most developed countries should be mainly attributed to the raising of the standards of living ashore. In Greece for instance, youngsters prefer to working for tourism instead of going to sea. In the past, seafarers enjoyed respect and social recognition. Masters, ships' officers and their families enjoyed a high social status in their home environment. The uncontrollable expansion of the big cities drew large parts of the population from the islands and the villages, where the roots of the shipping tradition were very strong. This development coupled with the spectacular growth of the fleets meant that the shipowners could not anymore rely upon the traditional, professional seamen, and thus had to employ people with less qualifications and commitment to the profession. These newcomers to the profession played an important part in changing the traditional image of the seafarer, and caused a gradual erosion of the status and respect for the professional seafarer. This in turn resulted in a substantial deterioration of the social and economic status of

traditional seafaring communities. There have been other mistakes and omissions made by all parties involved, which have resulted to the present negative status.

**What are the future prospects of this trend?** According to the consensus of opinion the shipping industry will eventually be controlled by those countries which can produce their own ratings and officers and adequate numbers of executives, for the management of their vessels. I personally feel that we should not allow one of Europe's leading sectors to simply pass to other continents without a strong reaction from our side.

We must **react** now and we must do so with determination and imagination. The image and reputation of our industry, promoted largely by the media, is that ships are staffed with people who are incompetent and managed by people who are irresponsible. Nothing could be further from the truth. We must take the necessary steps to correct this false impression. We must find ways to attract youngsters who are prepared to undertake physical effort and endure hardship in order to realise their cherished ambitions of seeing the world, meeting different people and gaining the respect and recognition they deserve.

We must **ensure** that the industry and the seafarers regain respect and support appropriate to one of the most skilled, dynamic and vital industries, an industry which offers to young people challenges, responsibilities and innovation.

We must **impress** upon potential recruits the opportunities available in our industry to escape the confines and limitations of shore based careers and to widen their horizons by a career at sea. Such opportunities, if properly promoted, will surely assist us in bridging the gap between supply and demand in a world in which unemployment is fast becoming one of the most serious problems.

**"Why should a young European nowadays go to sea?"** For a variety of reasons: he will be able to pursue a career ashore as chief captain in the office, as ship manager, ship surveyor, as ship owner etc. The seamanship, practical experience and education are invaluable tools for working ashore. Salaries onboard and ashore are very satisfactory and employment perspectives are excellent. Living conditions on board ships have considerably improved with

automation, modern air conditioned spaces, cinema, video, TV, use of Internet communications, swimming pools in tankers and healthy food. Living and working conditions on board ships is unparalleled with those some fifty years ago. Communications with families are very easy and handy by electronic means. The duration of working on board the ship is usually 5-7 months at a time. The great speeds of modern ships allow frequent calls in ports.

With regards to salaries, the comparison of salaries at sea with salaries ashore is overwhelming in favour of the former. Unemployment at sea does not exist, even in periods of crisis like the one we are currently going through.

Being a Greek sailor, still seeking new horizons, and by nature an optimist, I visualise shipping in our century as an international, self regulated and respected industry with rationalised and standardised types of vessels and equipment, operating largely on a joint venture basis by shipyards, owners, charterers, and cargo interests, managed and crewed by highly motivated, well qualified, well trained and experienced personnel with high standards of education and high morale, who are accorded due respect and proper recognition.

These are the men and women the sea is calling for!" These are the men and women that we are telling: The sea is waiting for you!", so Go to Sea!! as per the IMO's campaign in association with ILO (International Labour Organisation) the Round Table of Shipping Industry Organisations and the International Transport Workers Federation, launched in November 2008 aimed at promoting seafaring as an attractive option for people of the right calibre and a viable career option, one which can provide them with rewarding, stimulating and long term prospects, not only at sea but also in the wider maritime industry.

Seafarers are an important part of shipping and international sea transport system and remain an integral part of our industry and society. We fully support IMO's consistent initiatives, endorsing a proposal from Secretary General Mr. Efthymios Mitropoulos to announce 2010 as "The Year of the Seafarer" and give the international maritime community the opportunity to pay tribute to the world's seafarers for their unique contribution to society and recognise the high risks and hazards they are confronted with, in the execution of their duties in an often hostile environment such as piracy.

The combined European fleet is by far the largest and youngest fleet in the world, representing 40% of the global fleet with an average age of 9.3 years. It

contributes immensely not only to the economic development of the member states and their people but equally to the spreading of the European social and cultural values.

If we really intend to retain shipping in Europe we need European seafarers. We need to attract fresh, young, enthusiastic and ambitious recruits from Europe, preferably from traditional maritime nations, and other countries. The only way to be able to bring young Europeans back to the sea is to convince the international community, including the Media, to change their attitude and treatment towards the seafarers and instead of treating them as scapegoats to afford them the deepest respect and the highest degree of recognition, they deserve.

Shipping as global business needs a global solution. IMO should therefore be allowed to lead the International Shipping Community and avoid independent national or regional regimes which simply complicate matters.

In this way we will be able to pass on to younger generations of European recruits, our maritime heritage, so that they will continue to live and experience the magnificence of the enchanting sea that my generation has experienced, and is expressed so marvellously by our Poet of the Aegean Sea and Nobel Prize Winner, Odysseas Elytis:

“Πουθενά αλλού δεν ένιωσα την ζωή μου τόσο δικαιωμένη, όσο στη γέφυρα ενός πλοίου. Στη θέση τους τη σωστή, τα πάντα. Οι βίδες, οι λαμαρίνες, οι σωλήνες, τα συρματόσχοινα, οι αεραγωγοί, τα όργανα πλεύσεως και ο ίδιος εγώ που εγγράφω την αέναη μεταβολή παραμένοντας στο ίδιο σημείο. Ένας πλήρης,αυτάρκης και συγκροτημένος κόσμος που μου ανταποκρίνεται και του ανταποκρίνομαι και εισχωρούμε μαζί σαν ένα σώμα στον κίνδυνο και στο θάύμα.

Πλοίο διαρκείας η χώρα μου.”

Nowhere else have I felt my life so justified as on a ship's bridge. Everything in its correct place. Screws, sheet-iron, pipes, wire cords, exhaust tubes, navigation equipment and I, myself, record the continuous change, remaining steady. A complete self-sufficient and organized world that responds to me and to which I respond, and we enter together as one body into the danger and the miracle.

My country, an enduring ship.

*The Little Seafarer, Odysseas Elytis* 1970-1974