

Our Global Adventure

Can we afford?...

by Spyros Ranis



A plain fact we very well know about is that, adequate professional expertise, is a prerequisite for a constructive participation in the international sea trade. Security, safety, diligent care for goods carried and the protection of the environment are a steady concern, as hidden risks may always lie in wait. Having that firmly etched in our greek minds, we firmly keep the top slot in the maritime adventure.

Even if a rash picture of shipping one dares to paint, it's a dire attempt. It's a

patently intricate global business. The other fact we also very well know is that, shipping is overregulated, it's steadily getting more so, and the eager desire of everybody honestly involved is, this litany of laws and regulations to be uniform, equable, and internationally adopted and observed. Any aberrant mentality or practice puts on hard test the mental order of those responsibly involved, aboard or ashore.

International competition, on the other hand, for vessel's employment and freight, is hard and the playing field is far from being level, as several countries protect and support their vessels, financially and/or otherwise. This luxury (protectionism) remains always far from our shipping which rests on the wits and pains of the few engaged in the business of owning, managing and manning our fleet, tirelessly proving their mettle round the clock, round the year, round the globe.

Ships are accorded a nationality, like persons or corporations so, though flags on the stern vary, uniform around the world are the duties of seamen, managers, owners, agents, bankers, cargo owners, etc. etc.... and they all need a homogeneous legal ground to trust an work on, and this is a "selfluminous" fact of ... life or death for the global trade and

prosperity. Billions are invested in shipping and its contribution to the world economy increases as consumption of energy, food, industrial products, raw materials etc. steadily expands – 96% of world trade, 6.3 bil. tones per annum go onboard. Only a few, about 1.230.000 seafarers do the job? 30.000 of them Greeks, playing a key part in keeping the top spot at sea for this nation. ("Never before in human history, did so many owe so much to so few").

Those Aboard

A world wide demand for well trained Officers is on the increase, a shortage of about 40.000 is reckoned to be within this decade, and this is a particular concern for the E.U. and OECD countries. These countries very seriously tackle the problem, they roll out often marketing campaigns to inform the young about vessels and the vast opportunities of an international sea career, keeping various routes open for the Officers' profession. Distance Learning and Onboard Training methods are already well tested and well approved by serious maritime nations, with very good outcome. These systems mean less boisterous crowds occupying lecture halls, less teaching staff, and ensure better results with less cost. Students are seating themselves in front of computer keyboards and

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cable TV channels in record numbers, losing no time to endless get-together festivities or protests, politicking, and far from the plague of the said academic asylum. But several strong fringe interests are vested in the educational procedures, where considerable capital is involved, out of the taxpayers' pocket, which capital does not necessarily go as planned – straight to the benefit of the general public, the students and the economy... A large chunk goes astray, viz. to trade guilds with political clout. And shipping people, as few as they are, 0.9% of the electorate or less – and bereaved of a chance to vote aboard, they are ignored in the political game.

As said above, like persons, ships enjoy a nationality, but though a person is born with, and may change his nationality only after a long and toilsome procedure, a ship chooses it and may change it at will. Vessels are world "citizens" seamen too in a way, and

the sound advice on maritime issues is "Think globally, act globally v. think nationally, act nationally". The serious problem is that major decisions on the fate of the trade are taken not by people vested with the mentioned above adequate professional expertise and practical understanding, but by those vested with political power and regional mentality. Voters you know, are a strictly local species and so inevitably politicians are. Shipping people are the result of evolutionary (Darwinian) process – the fittest survive and prosper – incumbent political bosses and auxiliaries are the product of "intelligent design" (of the party) and maritime expertise is conferred to their heads by divine (political) forces.

Colleges Without Walls

In the U.K. and the U.S.A., about 100 years ago, correspondence studies were launched, relied upon a good horseback postal service. Today thousands of colleges / universities around the world (1.900 in the USA), conduct D.L. programs on practically every branch of knowledge, academic or vocational. The results consistently surprise educational experts, students, even teachers. About 1 million students are enrolled in College/ University sponsored D.L. courses in the U.S., the National Center of Education Statistics says. In our era of cyberspace and globalization, light-years far from the horseback postman, our maritime country ignores what any other essentially developed nation very well knows. That D.L / Aboard Training is a powerful tool, that opens new career opportunities to the aspirant cadet or any seaman who cares to make good capital out of the endless off-duty hours at sea. Needless to say that D.L. marine students have a more immediate incentive and career interest, the system may very well accommodate seamen older than 25 and the E.U. suggests:

For fully exploiting the potential national resources for seafarers it is necessary to offer Maritime Education and Training for unlimited certificates of competency to potential students with different qualifications in general education. Whereas certificates of competency + academic degree courses are open to students with the highest general education (of normally 12 years), certificate of competency only courses should be open to students with a lower general education. It is recommended to have both types of courses offered in all the 15 countries – which is not the case today.

There should also be provisions in all 15 countries

to facilitate the entry to officer positions in the merchant marine for persons who are already partly pre-qualified, i.e. officers on fishery vessels and former navy officers. *

The bottom line – or rather lines:

Shipping people's voting power is minimal, they sway no political clout whatsoever and they may be conveniently ignored, no matter their contribution to our national economy – and not only.

Our national registry constantly thins out to the benefit of others, with no concern for the administration.

D.L. – On Board maritime education is patently ignored, as it doesn't suit to various partial interests, alien to those of the students and / or the industry.

Credible international agencies (BIMCO – ISF) reckon that, there is an officers' vacancy of about 20.000 in the world fleet, and this number will climb to 40.000 by the end of the decade. As Greek officers are praised for their professional merits, a chance lies here for our young and unemployed. Maritime labour market is international – "Make the world your work place" is a slogan of the Norwegians – to attract the young, and they keep various routes open to the officer's career.

The general public – and the administration nonetheless – remain apathetic to our epic maritime endeavor? - a near peacetime equivalent to war, I would call it. Our, solely public M.E.T remains hidebound and obsolete, many students aspire to "secure" civil – service jobs rather than a career at sea.

IMO tries very hard to establish a uniform regulatory regime for ships to operate smoothly and efficiently, to the benefit and the interest of the general public. Still, ships have to plow through a variety of regional jurisdictions, law systems and administration idiosyncrasies. Even unlawful practices are possible to the detriment of vessels in several ports, to the connivance of corrupt authorities. The IMO, I suggest, should turn its attention and authority to the uniform and diligent application of the existing international agreements and treaties. – To end with a greek saying: «Οι νόμοι ισχύουν όπως εφαρμόζονται, και όχι όπως ψηφίζονται».

* *Maritime Education and Training Harmonization Report, page 10.– Prepared by the World Maritime University, Malmo, Sweden – June 2000 – Web site: <http://europa.eu.int/>*

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