

The Maritime Skills Commission

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I am going to talk to you about the Maritime Skills Commission, a new, UK-wide, initiative by the Department for Transport. What does it all mean? Will it be different this time? And why should you take it seriously and get involved?

I spent the first 10 years of my career as a civil servant in a mix of programme management and national policy roles. I remember very clearly one day pondering with my boss the latest Ministerial announcement. "I don't know, Iain", he said, "sometimes it can be really difficult to tell whether the latest announcement will dominate our lives for years, or whether we'll have forgotten it all by Christmas".

As it happens that particular initiative was one we all forgot about by Christmas – but I am confident that the Maritime Skills Commission will be different. I am confident that it will be a game-changer. I want to explain why I think that.

Before I get into the detail, I should recognise that I have been given the much-coveted after-lunch slot, when everyone is refreshed and fully alert after their break, and clearly-focused on the afternoon's business. So I want to grab that opportunity and illustrate one of my themes ... with some statistics! I knew that would appeal to you.

Tell me: what proportion of British seafarers are women?

3% is a figure often quoted; sometimes 2%. How about 21%? The proportion of female seafarers in our Merchant Navy is not 1 in 50, in fact, as is often said, but 1 in 5.

The 3% figure is for women who hold a valid Certificate of Competence as a deck or engineering officer. So that's only officers, not ratings, and it's only the deck and engine side, not all those in hospitality roles on cruise ships and the like. It's also only those who hold valid certificates, not those who actually work at sea.

"Ah yes", some may say, even if only quietly to themselves, "but those in hospitality aren't real seafarers". Which of you wants to say that to John Prescott?

For guests from overseas who may not recognise the name, John Prescott was Deputy Prime Minister under Tony Blair, and at an earlier stage in his career he was a steward at sea – and hugely proud of that fact. And when he was Deputy Prime Minister he famously thumped someone in front of TV cameras during an election campaign. I think we can agree that Prescott was a seafarer.

One reason this matters is that people still say "women don't want to work at sea". That's just not true; it's a smokescreen, an excuse. And if we are all clear that it is not true, we can focus more effectively on what's really going on.

When you look carefully at the detail, you see this:

- 21% of our seafarers overall are female. I'm using the latest published data from the MCA and the UK Chamber of Shipping, published by DfT.

Break that down, and

- 45% of ratings on the hotel side are female
- And 42% of officers on the hotel side. And that's an average of course; in May last year David Dingle, Chairman of Carnival UK and then Chairman of Maritime UK, told a conference we ran that in his 11 cruise ships no fewer than 57% of the officers on the hotel side were women, a clear majority. (And two of his 11 captains).
- Women are 5% of deck officers
- And they're 2% of officers in the engine room
- and there are tiny numbers of female ratings on both deck and engine sides.

Dig a bit deeper still and you see this:

7% of Chief Mates' CoCs are held by women, but only 2% of Master's certificates. These are figures for certificates held, not necessarily for people working at sea, but that's a big drop; what's going on?

I'm certainly not suggesting that a more careful reading of the data tells us that there's no problem to be addressed; of course there is. My point is that data matters. And intelligent analysis of that data matters. If we blithely repeat the mantra that "only 3% of seafarers are women" we are going to go wrong when we try to do something worthwhile about it. In this particular case, the example I've just worked through, we have the data; it's all in statistics published by the Department for Transport. The data needs to be analysed and presented to point up policy options, to shape recommendations and to follow them through – so we can improve the way we manage talent in the sector, the way we lead talented people and thereby boost our success.

That analysis is central to what the Maritime Skills Commission should be doing. Analysis followed by careful framing of recommendations, then follow through to see that effective action follows. In words used yesterday, moving from informing to transforming.

With that introduction, let me double back and set some context. I'll set out the facts about the MSC as they are known today, and also offer you my own interpretation of what it all means, and where I think the opportunity lies. I will be speaking personally rather than necessarily on behalf of the Maritime Skills Alliance; this is all very new.

And in a further word to colleagues from overseas, let me say that though the particular arrangements I am about to outline are designed for the UK, there are some wider points here, applicable to every country. This is a game we can all play.

The Department for Transport announced the creation of the Maritime Skills Commission in its Maritime 2050 strategy, published in January. Without changing anything of substance, DfT has now refined and polished what it said the MSC would do, and set seven success criteria for it. They're the best way into understanding what the MSC will add, so I'll set them all out in turn:

1. **the sector will have a comprehensive understanding of its skills needs, including the areas of recruiting and retention.**
 - This is the heart of it, but set out like that it sounds very techy and dull, the sort of thing that other people ought to worry about. We're not going to get industry leaders interested, committing their time and their budgets, unless we turn this sort of language round.

- Why are we interested in skills? They're a means to an end, but not the end itself. We need to talk more about those ends.
- For employers, that end, that goal, is business success, however they define it. In people terms, it means getting the best out of their people.
- For individuals, the end is a good career, a decent job with prospects, and decent pay. Increasingly it also means an employer willing to invest in you as circumstances change, so you can keep your skills up-to-date, and keep contributing to your full potential.
- The MSC mustn't stop at "understanding", of course. I see the biggest challenge, and the biggest opportunity, as turning labour market intelligence, well done, into understanding, and then turning that understanding into recommendations which others will agree and then act on. I want the MSC to be able to say, to heads of department at this college and elsewhere, to employers, and to government, "based on robust research, properly worked through with the right people, we recommend you to do X".
- And DfT means the MSC to do this across the whole of the maritime and marine sector – each of Maritime UK's five broad (very broad) sectors: shipping, and ports, and the leisure marine sector, marine engineering and science, and business services, and all the other parts round about and alongside them. This is how Maritime UK, the increasingly influential representative body, currently sets out its scope – though at the last National Council meeting I encouraged them to add the words "and related sectors"; they should be inclusive, not an exclusive club.
- It's worth looking carefully at this list, not least because the assumption that every other part of the maritime industry ultimately relies on people who have served at sea is no longer valid. Cardiff University and others have looked at how many former seafarers are needed by "Maritime London", the services industry clustered in the City, insurance, finance, broking, P&I clubs, and so on, and despite the continuing strength of that sector the answer keeps getting smaller – because old assumptions are being challenged. Most of these related sectors used to rely on former seafarers, but with far fewer British seafarers to go round, many of these sectors have looked carefully at what they really need rather than what they're used to doing, and concluded that they can take a broader approach.
- I asked someone in one of the financial services companies whether he really needed all his people to be seafarers and he said "no: I need that experience in the team, but certainly not every individual".
- Associated British Ports, the country's largest ports group, has been pushing that approach hard with its apprenticeship programme. Through Amanda Viljoen, ABP has chaired the working group which designed the Marine Pilot apprenticeship, and her group is now well-advanced with the Harbourmaster one. In both cases they are challenging the assumption

that those jobs can only be done by a former Master Mariner with umpteen years at sea. (Amanda herself is a Master Mariner, so she's well-placed to lead the charge).

They are taking people with perhaps a Second Mate's ticket, specifying the skills need for the job, and then training them for those jobs. Some of you will think that ABP is wrong, but they're big beasts and they're doing it anyway because they don't think they can rely on the traditional route any more.

2. the sector will understand the impacts of technological developments and its implications for our maritime workforce

- that's a subset of the first point, of course, but DfT - like so many in the sector - is very exercised by the implications of automation and other technological change, so it's no surprise that it's picked-out for particular attention.

There's obviously a particular issue for seafarers: there's greater change through automation happening all around us, and it certainly goes far wider than the question of unmanned ships, which is getting too much of the attention. But contrast that fast pace of change with the slow-steaming at the IMO. Once they decide to go for a full review of STCW it will be, what, a decade at least before everything is agreed and dates set for implementation. That's far too slow; we need something now.

3. all parts of the sector are up to date in terms of the skills needed.

- This isn't a repeat of the first point; I think it's pointing us towards addressing those problems. In terms of measuring success, I've talked to DfT civil servants about some kind of score-card; the surveyor problem is sorted, let's say, but there's still an issue with key craft skills in the yacht-building sector. Some way of visualising where effort needs to be focused would be very helpful.

4. training offers that match and exceed industry expectations, including the use of the latest technological developments in training.

- There's an interesting implication in the first part; if we as a sector are to know whether the training on offer "matches and exceeds" industry expectations, there really is no escape: we need to ask them. And the second part is about using technology much more in the delivery of training: simulation, virtual reality, and so on. Which is a really good example of where one part of the sector can learn from others.

There's a big surge in demand for Boatmasters on the lower Thames at the moment because Tideway, the people digging the huge new sewer, have promised that more than 95% of the spoil will go out by barge, not by road. And to speed up their training, Tideway

puts everyone through simulator training, learning from experience in the Netherlands, where inland waterways are much bigger business.

5. the sector has access to the appropriate range of high quality apprenticeships and qualifications.

- that's at the heart of what my organisation, the MSA, does now, at least for the "wet" part of the maritime sector. Wearing a Maritime UK hat I have tried to support and encourage the development and use of apprenticeships across the whole sector; this recommendation picks that up and pushes it on to the next level.

6. a workforce that understands the career paths available to it and employers able to fill vacancies.

- there's a lot of emphasis in Maritime 2050 on people across the industry being able to re-train as they progress, and as circumstances change, especially with technological advances, and on them having clear information about the options for getting from here to there.

7. a maritime training offer, recognised world-wide for its quality.

- this last one is a very different sort of ambition. The purpose of the Maritime Growth Study, completed four years ago, was to identify what else the UK's maritime sector needed to do to flourish, world-wide, with a strong emphasis on business growth. This recommendation says to the MSC: the UK's training offer is top class, so let's sell more abroad. Maritime 2050 talks in terms of positioning the UK "at the forefront of this global market".

Again, to be clear, that means across the board, not just with cadet programmes for the Merchant Navy, which dominate what this college and others do, but across the full range of the sector, from British Marine's marina manager courses to the new Executive MBA which the Institute of Chartered Shipbroking has agreed with the University of Hull, and which it certainly intends to promote to its members worldwide. There's quite a challenge here, and quite an opportunity.

Each of the main elements within the Maritime 2050 strategy is getting a "Route Map" which sets out how they will be implemented, and the Route Map for the People chapter was announced at the our Reception during London International Shipping Week. (Let me take the opportunity to thank our sponsors again: IAMI, represented here by Kevin Lund from South Shields, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, strongly committed to the maritime sector and good, responsive, partners to work with, represented by Drew McNeice).

Happily DfT has listened to our advice, and their announcement included two crucial things:

- a commitment that the MSC will build on what already exists. What the MSC will most certainly not be is a wholly-new entity, created from scratch with a big staff team, and a fancy new office with a fountain in the atrium. It will be very slim-line indeed, building on the work which Maritime UK's People and Skills Forum has begun with virtually no resources at its disposal at all. Exactly how that is to be done is still to be agreed.

- DfT is also offering some money. The MSC is not being asked to move mountains with no resources at its disposal. DfT is providing an initial £300,000, and there's a further £250,000 for the sister initiatives around careers. We have yet to see the detail, but I understand that the great bulk of that money, all of which is to be spent this financial year, ie by the end of March, is to pay for a robust baseline: what are the skills issues across the maritime sector, and who should do what about them?

This is very good news. Why is it good news? Let me offer you 5 reasons.

- Reason 1: Because at long last we can do some proper research into the industry's skills needs, right across the board. The 2015 Maritime Growth Study set out some ambitions on skills, but failed to get into any detail about what the issues were and how they might be tackled, and it did not result in the allocation of any funding to enable any real progress to be made towards those ambitions. £300,000 won't last long of course, but if we spend it wisely we set up the opportunity for more, from various sources. And £300,000 is certainly enough to pay for some very good labour market intelligence.

I duly drafted a first stab at a skills strategy for Maritime UK's People and Skills Forum, but I was painfully aware that the evidence base on which we were building was far too thin. Even in the few parts of the industry which had some evidence, often that evidence was not interrogated and challenged the way it needs to be if we are truly to understand what's going on.

- Reason 2: Because the scope of the Commission is a broad one, covering the whole of the marine and maritime sector. That's a challenge of course, but it's also an opportunity. It is very much in line with what Paul Little said yesterday about seeing the big picture, and taking the long view. We need to work together. I think we have also shown in the MSA from 15 years' experience of working together across the wet part of the sector, that we have a lot in common, and a lot we can learn from each other.

It's also the case that increasingly Government listens to us when we speak as the wider maritime sector, rather than for parts of it. There's obviously a need to keep the focus on individual industries on occasion, and fishing is a good example of that. Lots of people, including plenty people in important positions, assume that fishing is a part of this country's past, not its future. So I take the opportunity when I can to say, for example, that the fishing industry in Scotland is bigger than the ports industry, and that across the UK fishing is bigger than the superyacht industry. But there are other occasions when fishing wants to be part of the bigger team.

- Reason 3: Because the structure of the commissioning and the reporting process will keep up the momentum. There will be an annual opportunity to say what's what, both to the Minister and to Maritime UK, with a high-stakes 5-yearly "State of the nation"-style report on top.
- Reason 4: Because there is a dual reporting line, both to the Minister and to Maritime UK, to government and to industry. That may not quite fit with what the management theorists would recommend, but this is unquestionably a complex business: making progress will

mean exercising influence right across the board, and this “promise to listen”, which is effectively what the reporting structures mean, is invaluable.

- Reason 5: Because DfT has called it a “Commission”, not a “Task Force”. They’re looking long-term, not for a one-off hit. I’m not naïve; even commissions come and go. My first job on graduation was for a different MSC, the Manpower Services Commission, and that’s long gone. But as a statement of intent by the Government, this is very welcome.

So we have an excellent new framework shaping up. Frameworks don’t solve problems, but they do open up new opportunities to solve those problems. To get the right people to ask and answer the right questions, and to get the right people to listen to the recommendations which result.

How will the MSC be created?

Let me say a word now on the practicalities, on next steps. The first step is that the Department for Transport will appoint someone to chair the Commission. They haven’t announced anything yet, but I think we might expect to hear something soon, probably this month.

The Maritime Minister, Nusrat Ghani, will then write to the Chairman with what the civil servants call a “tasking letter”. This is the formal “commission”. In that letter, she will set out what she wants the Commission to do. In line with normal practice, I would expect that tasking letter to be agreed in advance with Maritime UK as co-sponsor and with the Commission’s chairman.

In the short term, the Minister will ask the person she appoints to chair the MSC to work with a small group of others to come back to her, before the end of December, with their advice on how the Commission should go about its business.

The Route Map says who the members of that small group are. The chair of the MSC is to work with the Chairman of the Maritime Skills Alliance and the Chairman of Maritime UK’s People and Skills Forum (who happen to be the same person, Bill Walworth), with the Chair of the new Single Industry Body for careers, which also flows from the Maritime 2050 strategy, the chair of Maritime UK’s Careers Promotion Forum, now Catherine Spencer, the new Chief Executive of Seafarers UK, and the Chair of Maritime UK’s Women in Maritime Task Force, Sue Terpilowski. There’s no surprises there; it’s all very reassuring.

I have no doubt that this small group will be talking to many others, through existing forums and directly, about the best way for the MSC to go about its business. To my mind there’s an exact parallel with the session yesterday with Shay McConnon; the MSC will need to exercise leadership in order to tap the expertise and understanding of existing groups, sectoral, geographical, you name it, seeking that magical $2 + 2 = 5$ result which I love to see.

Reassuringly, too, and encouragingly, DfT is being very careful not to tell us, the industry, how to go about it; they want us, the industry, to say what we want. No doubt there will be some debate, and there’s a balance to be struck, but that’s the right way round.

What will success look like?

Let me end with some thoughts on what success might look like. When the MSC celebrates its fifth birthday, what should it be able to say it has done?

DfT set out its answer in conventional terms in the Route Map. Let me offer you my own answer in less conventional terms.

I will nod to one convention, however; consultants like to have a theme to their lists. So my four points all hang on the letter “A”.

The MSC must be recognised as **AUTHORITATIVE**. What it says should be treated with real respect – and of course respect needs to be earned, by hard work and by careful communications.

The MSC must be recognised as **ARTICULATE**, able to set out clearly what the issues are, and what might be done about them, by whom. Clarity is vital, in communication as much as in the research and the thinking.

The MSC must be recognised as a strong **ADVOCATE**, for the maritime industry and to it. I don’t want the MSC to be neutral. It should be unambiguously on the side of employers who want to invest in their people, and unambiguously on the side of people who want good careers in the industry. If an obstacle needs to be tackled, the MSC should say so, and not stop at the stage of careful analysis.

And fourth, the MSC must be recognised for its focus on **ACTION**. I have lots of fat reports on my shelves which may or may not have struck a chord when they were published, but which certainly didn’t end up making any real difference. Often the action will be for others, but - adopting words from yesterday - the MSC must be clearly in the transforming business, not just the informing one.

Let me close with a couple of links which I hope are helpful. First, the MSA has published two more briefings in our series of two-page introductions to topics of the day; they’re on the Briefings page on our website.

Second, when the Maritime 2050 strategy was first announced I did a slightly longer briefing for my own board, four pages, listing all the commitments which DfT made in that paper for the Maritime Skills Commission, and on related matters in the People chapter. Many months later it’s still valid and still useful, so I’ve put a copy on the Policy & Research page of our website.

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