

Speech by Commissioner Joe Borg at meeting with Governing Board of BIMCO (Baltic and International Maritime Council), Hong Kong, 4 June 2007

Towards a Future Maritime Policy for the European Union

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

I am pleased to join you at this meeting of your Governing Board and to take this opportunity to inform you of recent developments with respect to a future EU Maritime Policy.

You are surely aware that a formal consultation on a maritime policy for the Union kicked off with the publication of a Green Paper last June. This launched a one-year consultation process that will formally end in a few weeks time. The Green Paper invited stakeholders to reflect and debate whether a maritime policy for Europe is indeed necessary, and if so, what form it should take. It asked those with a stake in the maritime sector to question the manner in which we manage our oceans and seas.

Stakeholders have embraced this consultation wholeheartedly, organising numerous events and making a number of most welcome submissions to the process. The work of other European institutions on this matter has also progressed apace. The Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee both adopted positive opinions on the Green Paper in February and April respectively. And the European Parliament has launched its own process to review the Green Paper, involving five different Committees. We expect their joint opinion in July.

We will look carefully at the messages we have been given. These messages will in fact, be the building blocks of a future maritime policy for the European Union. We are currently planning to take the first step in this direction in October when we will present our plans for the future, in what we like to call a Blue Paper. This Blue Paper, or package of communications, will consist of a report with our conclusions on the consultation process, an outline of what shape and form we see a maritime policy taking and a first set of concrete actions that can be taken. It is these actions that will already indicate the benefits to be had from an integrated policy to deal with maritime affairs.

It would be premature for me to give any definite conclusions before the end of the consultation period, however some preliminary conclusions can already be drawn. Given your particular area of interest, I shall emphasize the relevance of these to the shipping industry.

A future maritime policy will concentrate on four areas: Maximising the economic use of the oceans and seas in a sustainable way; attributing a maritime role for Europe in the world; making the most of knowledge and innovation; and ensuring a high quality of life in coastal regions.

It is not surprising that shipping features prominently in each of these areas.

The EU merchant fleet is by far the world leader, both in terms of tonnage and by flag. Shipping not only plays a pivotal role in the maritime economy, but it has a much broader impact on society at large. Shipping affects the full transport and logistics chain and therefore affects world trade overall. It also plays a key role in ports and in the development of port cities. European shipyards are also leaders in building innovative, efficient and more environment-friendly vessels, such as cruise and passenger ships or small merchant ships. Finally, in Europe we also have a robust marine equipment industry which supplies our own market as well as that of others worldwide.

While the pole position that is occupied by the EU merchant fleet is one to be proud of, we cannot, and must not, allow this to give us any sense of complacency. We have an obligation to protect and indeed, enhance this leading role for Europe.

Europe does not live in a vacuum. Its health and prosperity depend on its relations with the outside world.

In this new era, Europe must face the challenges globalisation poses and exploit its positive aspects. And of these there are many, including the creation of new opportunities for employment, increased choice for consumers, new markets to tap into and in many cases, the saving of billions of euros in cheaper inputs for industry.

This is not to say that globalisation does not bring with it negative consequences too. Increased competition for raw materials has led to depleted sources of natural resources, such as rainforests. This combined with increased transport, energy and communications requirements is also leaving a serious impact on the environment, which in turn is affecting our climate.

It is precisely for these reasons which a both positive and negative that I believe that the way forward is to look for balance in the choices that we make – balance between growth and sustainability, balance between the openings we make and of course, securing a level playing field.

The Green Paper aims to do exactly that: striking the right balance between economic growth on one hand and respecting the environment on the other. We all know that any further deterioration of the marine environment will inevitably affect the oceans and seas' capacity to provide income and jobs for us.

In this context, the EU has made substantial efforts in the right direction. There is the Thematic Strategy for the Marine Environment, a cornerstone of any new way forward, which aim to secure marine biodiversity and, by 2021, restore the ecological health of our seas. In a similar vein, the Third Maritime Safety Package, now under consideration in the European Council of Transport Ministers and also viewed as a component of our Maritime Policy, will contribute to minimizing the risk of accidental pollution of European seas in the future.

It is herein that I see opportunity for the European shipping industry to exploit. The competitiveness of the shipping industry and the protection of the seas are not mutually exclusive. There exists a window of opportunity to increase incomes by offering quality shipping which observes higher safety standards and shows respect for the environment. I am confident that maritime enterprises can channel resources to meet these exacting standards in order to be seen as real partners in the long-term protection and conservation of the marine environment.

Within the parameters of the 2006 ILO Consolidated Maritime Labour Convention, we now have an international mechanism for avoiding a race to the bottom whereby safety and other standards are put aside in favour of lower standards, reduced wages and poorer working conditions. However, it is only if all the actors involved in shipping matters combine forces to accomplish quality shipping throughout the world that we can succeed in our fight against sub-standard ships and irresponsible ship-owners.

And this is yet another reason why I relish this opportunity to speak with you today. BIMCO has an important role to play in this process given its wide representation of the sector. I urge you to seize this opportunity and to make something of it. Your contribution to the Green Paper has already amply demonstrate the inspirational role you can play, and for that I thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We need to look at globalisation as a positive force – one that brings about change for the better. And for this purpose, we need the EU to exercise its full strength in all international fora, not least in the WTO. For example, I would like to see the ratification, and implementation, of international conventions by all member states. The AFS Convention of IMO – the Convention on the control of harmful anti-fouling systems on ships - is a case in point. This would have entered into force if only all EU member states had ratified it.

The European Commission has already initiated procedures for identifying what are the real obstacles behind the non-ratification of maritime conventions by EU Member States. We intend to boost this process also in the framework of a future EU Maritime Policy. Through these and similar endeavours, we hope to create the level playing field that you have indicated is so essential for the shipping community to flourish.

Besides ensuring that there is fair competition, Europe also needs to maintain its competitive edge. During the maritime policy consultations, many respondents advocated the wider promotion of the cluster concept in the maritime economy. To optimise the competitive strength of individual actors, the ties between them should be tightened. We know some efforts in this direction are already underway, as demonstrated for example, by the recently created European Network of Maritime Clusters. This network demonstrates that not only do we have well-established maritime clusters in a number of European countries, but that the links between these are continually being strengthened.

To offer world-class services, the skills of the people that operate the ships, classify or insure them should also be of the highest standards. The steady decline of Europeans opting to work in one of the maritime sectors calls for renewed efforts on our part to promote maritime careers.

One way to make maritime careers more attractive is to broaden career prospects, both onboard or ashore. I believe also that introducing a "maritime certificate of excellence" could be instrumental in helping to increase job mobility. This would take the form of a qualification that ensures employability beyond the first stage of a maritime career. A precondition for this, however, necessitates the mapping out of an individual's potential

career path. This would have the advantage of offering the prospect of a life-long career to young people is a means to attract and retain highly qualified people over a longer time span for the industry.

Another way for Europe to maintain its leadership in the global market is to bolster its main competitive asset: knowledge. Although European operators enjoy a strong technological lead, we need to continuously update and improve our knowledge to keep ahead of our competitors. In markets that are dictated by a rapid pace of change, we continuously need to question whether our scientific research programmes still respond to demand. We should also provide for effective procedures to ensure a rapid delivery of research results to industry and governments. The EU Waterborne Technology Platform is a good example of science cooperation among researchers, industry and policy-makers.

Marine research is however too complex an area for any individual to grasp its full extent. A broad range of disciplines, from oceanographers and naval architects, to marine biologists or climatologists are involved today in many separate ocean-related research fields. The result of all this is often a compartmentalised picture. Efforts are needed therefore to assemble the different pieces of the puzzle and complete the overall picture, inviting scientists of different disciplines to work together. During our consultation process, Europe's marine scientific community have acknowledged this need and, I am glad to say, they have already taken the first steps towards the creation of a true ocean-related research network.

We will also examine how to provide EU Member States with better vessel identification, tracking and surveillance services in order to better carry out functions on the sea relating to prevention of maritime accidents, illegal activities and law enforcement. A significant step in this direction would include convergence and interoperability between different surveillance systems. This could provide a comprehensive cover of not only European coastal waters, but also of other areas of the globe where European interests are at stake.

Allow me finally to turn to life in coastal regions. Sustainable economic development in maritime areas, especially vis a vis islands and other remote coastal areas, is essential. Maritime transport is a crucial factor in achieving this. I would like to make particular reference to an observation made by BIMCO which noted that international shipping regulation has traditionally focused on ships. Rules have been agreed to, and put into place for, minimum quality standards for ships and their crews and for the quality of safety management. To make further progress in developing the quality of maritime transport, there is a feeling that we need to look beyond the current focus on ships. The idea to look at the role of coastal states and introduce the concept of "Quality Coastal State" stands as one of the most valuable proposals we had so far in our consultation. I think it clearly merits our full attention.

Dear Members of the Board,

I would like to conclude by thanking you for your strong input to the consultation. I trust that this is only the start of a long-term dialogue. A successful maritime policy relies on being developed in partnership with our stakeholders.

I am convinced that such an approach will bring our ambitions to fruition so that our oceans can be safeguarded for the generations to come in much the same way as they are for us today.

Thank you.