

Maritime Leadership, Malta and the EU

By

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People might be surprised by the statement that Maritime Leadership within Europe and the world is Malta's to lose.

We are one of the smallest countries in the world, and yet we have had a role immeasurably larger than our physical size in the maritime field throughout our history. We can translate this role into one of leadership far easier than many other countries, if the Maltese authorities and the local maritime services industry forge a well-thought out and concerted plan, consistently applied.

Indeed we have a strong tradition of inspiring new ideas in the maritime field, best exemplified in modern times when, soon after independence, Malta became the major architect and inspirer of the concept that all mineral and other natural resources under the World's Oceans, beyond the territorial seas of single countries, were to be considered as the common heritage of mankind, and consequently could not be plundered and exploited by any single powerful "coloniser".

That was 1967, and the forum was the United Nations. It proved an inspiring rallying call that was eventually taken up by the rest of the world and enshrined in what became the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982.

Now, in the globalised 21st Century, Malta is one of the largest maritime flags in the world in absolute terms, and probably the single largest maritime flag with an in situ, locally run flag administration. We should certainly be proud of such an achievement, but we cannot rest on our laurels.

Much needs to be done in the constant updating and improvement of our maritime laws, and it would be a pity if Maltese Maritime Policy planners do not grab our EU membership as an opportunity to ensure that we contribute with all our weight in order to ensure that the EU, also through the aegis of Malta, remains a leading voice in Maritime policy and legal developments. Indeed, the credentials of newly installed EU Commissioner for Fisheries, Dr. Joe Borg are truly impeccable, and he will surely draw on the Maltese Maritime experience in proceeding with his brief. The Maltese Government, spear-headed by the Minister for Competitiveness and Communications, Censu Galea, Marc Bonello, Chairman of the Malta Maritime Authority, the Maltese maritime services industry as a whole, and Richard Cachia Caruana, Malta's permanent representative in Brussels, will certainly wish to contribute to the promotion and development of international maritime policies as a leading voice, rather than as a jurisdiction suspicious of change and development.

For this to happen, Malta should set an example of innovative ideas and consistent action. Various draft amendments to the Merchant Shipping Act, particularly in the corporate and taxation field, have been pending for quite some time, and it is good that there have recently been signs that the MMA will be working on them with renewed vigour for early implementation. The MFSA has also recently indicated an intention of cooperating in all manners possible to help the process along. In proceeding with such amendments, our challenge is to remain consistent with giving the maritime field appropriate importance, even if we may have to persuade our European partners that the EU stands to gain if particular Directives are implemented in a particular manner in the maritime field, as opposed to having a blanket policy without regard to the particular reality of the maritime industry.

Such coordinated action is truly vital if Malta is to stake a credible claim to leadership in the international maritime policy development field. Our island does not have too many other niches it can develop to its fullest potential as a leading international voice. A voice and position of leadership that is truly Malta's to lose.

29.01.2005