

World Maritime University

The Maritime Commons: Digital Repository of the World Maritime University

WMU in the News

6-29-1989

Cover story : Bill O'Neil - better the devil you know

John Guy

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.wmu.se/wmu_news

This News Article is brought to you courtesy of Maritime Commons. Open Access items may be downloaded for non-commercial, fair use academic purposes. No items may be hosted on another server or web site without express written permission from the World Maritime University. For more information, please contact library@wmu.se.

Bill O'Neil — better the devil you know

THE International Maritime Organization is sometimes criticised by shipowners. They think that too many rules come out of it. Not many of them stop to consider what life would be like without IMO. IMO is a uniquely maritime body. It regulates world shipping, and keeps other busybodies out. After ten years as chairman of the council of IMO, Bill O'Neil has been elected as the next secretary general. During the next four years, he will have considerable influence over the way IMO, and the world shipping industry, is run. He is convinced that both will be better off with the devil they know.

"Everybody in shipping wants international standards," says Bill O'Neil, "and we have to make sure that everyone meets them. Shipowners benefit from IMO, but we have to get them into a closer relationship. Owners benefit from having a proper maritime organisation. They would suffer if, for example, pollution control ever got out of IMO hands. We are a part of the industry, it's not us and them."

Bill is strong on the theme of IMO working together with the shipping industry for the good of both. IMO wants safe ships and clean seas. So do owners, but only as long as their competitors are kept up to the mark. Bill O'Neil is well aware of the problem of patchy enforcement, and the damage that does to IMO credibility. He hopes to tackle that by getting closer links with the owners, and using them to put pressure on their flag states. That might sound optimistic. It is, but Bill has a proven record of getting what he wants, and getting owners to want it too.

He has been president of the St Lawrence Seaway since 1980, and has turned around what was a straight head-to-head owner-authority fight into a co-operative venture. He is careful to emphasise that IMO is "not in an adversarial situation". Nor will it get that way. "I'm coming here to do something," he says. "I'm not going to be banging heads for four years."

Bill is the epitome of the iron fist in the velvet glove. Sitting and talking to him is a pleasure. He has strong

ideas, but he puts them so nicely that you tend to come away thinking you thought of them first. That should stand him in good stead as top man of a UN agency, even one as non-political as IMO.

Bill is very aware of the political problems that could afflict IMO, and recognises that, with over 130 member states, he is sitting on potential trouble. But he sees it as a personal



William A O'Neil has been elected to be the next secretary general of the International Maritime Organization, taking over from C P Srivastava in January 1990.

problem. "When we were looking for support for my election," he says, "I told everyone that it wasn't a question of developing nations against the rest. It was a question of getting the right person. I really believe that."

So, obviously, did the council that elected him in June. It was a close-run thing, closer than Bill expected, and it was the personal dimension that swung it his way. He has been chairman of the IMO council for ten years, and has built up a reservoir of goodwill which spans political boundaries. During the election campaign, he had consistent support from the maritime delegations of governments. Foreign affairs departments take a longer view, measuring the post, its influence, the UN as a whole, and international relations. The Canadian government gave Bill full support on

"Shipowners benefit from IMO, we have to get them into a closer relationship."

that front. Canada is proud to have the first head of a UN agency for forty years, and Canadian shipping interests are glad that it is Bill.

That personal dimension hasn't blinded Bill to the practical problems of developing countries. Typically, the first thing he did after the election was to make a trip to the World Maritime University, in Malmö. He knows that developing countries can't implement IMO standards unless they are helped to acquire the means to do it. The WMU is one of those means. He has asked that CP Srivastava stay on as chancellor of the WMU for two years, leaving Bill free to concentrate on IMO. But he is taking a strong interest in what will be the major influence for good in developing states' maritime policy.

Technical co-operation is the other side of the practical help. Bill says, "We have a lot of information in IMO, what we have to do is get it out to where it is needed."

Bill will take over in January, provided his appointment is ratified by the full assembly this autumn. He will have an initial four-year term which is renewable. Sixty-two this year, Bill is physically very fit, and is certainly not looking for a retirement job. He isn't going to be just more of the same, either. He has got his own ideas, and he is going to make them clear. But no compromises. He starts his period of office without any promises, without any chits to call in. He has been elected because he is what he is, not because of what he promised. That's important, and unusual in the UN. He may not have made promises, but he has made some priorities.

His first priority will be to tackle the internal problems. IMO has a funding crisis, and that in turn is leading to problems of staff morale, and a reduced workload. Bill is adamant that IMO must get on with its job. "We mustn't leave a vacuum

COVER STORY

which will allow other organisations into shipping," he says. But IMO can only do its job with staff and money. On the staff side, he will, he says, be doing a little missionary work. He is going to give the right directions and assurances.

Those assurances will ring true when he gets a handle on the revenue problems. He doesn't intend to sit around wringing his hands about that. He sees it quite clearly as a problem of income, not expenditure. IMO is not a wasteful organisation, not a high budget outfit. But it needs money to function. Cutting back on the technical meetings is not the answer. That reduces the budget, and the governments who pay, pay their share of that. The shortfall is still there, but the work isn't. There are some countries that haven't paid for ten years. It's about time they did.

Effective pressure

Bill sees two ways out. The first is to lean on the non-payers. You can't do that by threatening to withdraw a vote. If they are not interested, then it is no sanction. "It's not even a tap on the wrist," says Bill. So he wants some organisational and diplomatic pressure. Then he wants some effective pressure, commercial pressure. He wants to get shipowners leaning on governments. That doesn't mean he wants shipowners to pay themselves. He thinks that is a barmy idea. What he wants is to get shipowners to realise that, unless IMO is properly funded and supported, then some other agency will step in, and owners will suffer. So he wants to mobilise the owners to pressure government into paying up. "We have got to make that link with the owners," he says.

Getting revenue sorted out and the staff working happily is a management problem. Bill is a manager. That is the main strength he brings to IMO. But that internal management is directed to getting the external work done. Here, his priority is to take a close look at what IMO is doing on the technical committees, then reach a clear understanding on what is urgent and what isn't.

He uses the word "focus" a lot. He wants to focus on the human problem.

He doesn't want IMO to forget that it is a safety organisation. "We must remain focused on the ships," he says, "not lose sight of our work because of short-term internal problems." He finds it just a little ironic that, just when shipping is picking up, IMO is running into money problems. "That shouldn't make us lose sight of what we are here for," he smiles.

Where he will be is in London. The

William A O'Neil was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in June 1927. He is a graduate in civil engineering from Toronto University. Married with three children, he has served as Commissioner of the Canadian Coast Guard, President of the St Lawrence Seaway Authority, and Chairman of the council of IMO. He is director of the Canartic Shipping Company, and has served as the Canadian representative on the Permanent International Association of Navigation Congresses. Since 1987 he has been chairman of the Canadian committee of Lloyd's Register of Shipping. He takes up the post of secretary general of the International Maritime Organization in January 1990.

last time I talked to him, he was fighting the election campaign. He hadn't asked what the salary was then. He still hasn't. He has discovered that there is no housing allowance, though. He has got the Canadian High Commission out looking for a flat for him, somewhere close to the office. His wife is pleased to come, but both of them are sad to leave their two-year-old grandchild behind in Canada. He is the sort of man you wish you had as your grandad.

Taking over an institution that has been run by one man for fifteen years is never simple. Bill has been on the inside during that time. He has been accused of just being a continuation of that regime. He isn't. "CP was the man for his time," says Bill, "now it's time for someone else." He is going to use his four-year stint to look ahead and put things in place for the next century. He has to face the

problems of how ships and technology will change over the next decade, and how that will affect IMO. There is a strong green swell in politics that he has to take account of. And there is a strong feeling amongst shipowners that some stability is needed on international standards.

Bill sees these problems as reconcilable, as long as IMO and the industry work together. "We have to listen," he says. "Owners don't like retro-fits, they don't like being the only ones with high standards." But if he can bear that in mind, he hopes to convince them that everyone can have high standards. "We have to be a part of the industry," he says, "otherwise we are going no place."

Safe hands

Bill doesn't know the heads of other UN agencies. He is going to sit down and talk to them. ILO and UNCTAD are two with strong shipping interests. Other international organisations, such as ISO, also have a finger in the pie. Bill wants to keep safe ships in safe hands. He quotes the case of a shipowner who complained that IMO should not be getting involved in controlling air pollution. "I told him he was better off with IMO looking at it than if some other organisation who didn't understand ships got involved," he points out. He conjures up the picture of a vast shore-orientated bureaucracy imposing requirements on defenceless shipowners. He thinks IMO has to tackle the problem of hazardous chemicals soon, otherwise someone else will, and the roof will fall in. That's crisis management, not Bill's style.

His style is a nice one. It's a focused one. It's one that sees the best advantages for everyone in keeping maritime affairs in maritime hands. That which is in the mandate of IMO must stay in the mandate of IMO. Shipowners have to be protected as well as policed. So when he talks to the other UN leaders, he will be telling them that there is enough work to go around. They must each stay within their own parish. That doesn't sound like a bad old devil.

John Guy