

Speech by E.E Mitropoulos
At the Liberty Congress
On “Enhancing Co-operation and Sharing Responsibility”
(On board the ss “Hellas Liberty”, Piraeus, Greece)

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The year was 1947, the location the port of Corfu and I was 8 years old when, for the first time in my life, I found myself climbing the gangway of a liberty ship, the “KIMON” of the Kouloukoundis family, on which my father was serving as chief engineer.

The ship had just sailed in after a three-week voyage across the Atlantic carrying a shipment of 10,700 tons of grain as part of the Marshall Plan aid to Greece still leaking her wounds from the second world war and haemoraging from the wounds of an even worse civil war, the scars of which have been traumatizing her ever since – 65 odd years later!

That is how I got to know and learn about liberty ships and began to admire and respect them. I was fascinated by the “KIMON”, whose size, large for the standards of the era, dominated the then small provincial port of Corfu, while watching the frantic efforts of crew and dockers to discharge her cargo in bags on barges, in time for her to sail to Kalamata to repeat the same procedure before proceeding to Piraeus to unload the remaining of the much-needed grain to feed the starving population of Athens.

My next experience of a liberty ship was two decades later when, as a cadet with the Hellenic Coast Guard, I and my classmates embarked, at the port of Heraklion in Krete, on the Liberty-ship “Hellenic Wave” of the Hellenic Lines of Pericles Kallimanopoulos to start our annual training trip that saw us visiting all the major sea and river ports of the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico coasts of the United States, from New

York to Galveston, Texas. We were three days off New York, almost abeam the Bermuda islands, when the radio officer broke the news of the assassination of President J. F. Kennedy.

It was against such a background of personal, and emotional I must add, memories of my acquaintance with liberty ships that I received Spyros Polemis' invitation to board this ship – one of the three surviving of its class – and assist in this Congress. I was delighted to be asked and extremely pleased to be with you today.

Another strong reason, for which I cannot hide my feelings in addressing you, while standing on the twin deck of a liberty ship, is because of the beneficial impact liberty ships have had on the revival, first and the dazzling, later, growth of the Greek fleet and Greek shipping at large in my compatriots quest for the summit.

No wonder, therefore, that, as far as Greek shipping is concerned, the liberty ships were branded, among many other names given to them:

- the “yeast” that nurtured the post-war greek miracle in shipping;
- the “platform” and “springboard” that launched greek shipping to the stardom heights it has reached nowadays;
- the “backbone” of Greece's maritime growth at a time when the rest of the country was suffering the consequences of a brutal civil war;
- the “blessed ships” – “lucky” for their owners and “king ships” for those, who served on them, when comparing them with ships of the pre-war era.

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But enough about me and liberty ships and let us focus on the theme of the Congress: “Enhancing co-operation and sharing responsibility amongst stakeholders so as to improve the quality of service and the image of the Shipping Industry”.

Prima facie, it would sound as if the theme states the obvious. Who would disagree that all stakeholders – or as they call themselves “servants” – of the industry should work together in order to improve the quality of service shipping renders and also improve its image among those who know little about it and its indispensable contribution to world trade and economy – people who, because of their ignorance or indifference, tend to overlook the need we all have of ships and shipping while residing on a planet, which, in its great majority, is covered by sea? And that we should do so by, among other things, sharing responsibility amongst ourselves!

But the devil is in the detail and if the answer to the questions I just posed were so simple and so obvious I am sure Spyros would not bother to convene a congress to analyze the matter and seek ways and means to “improve the quality of service and the image of shipping through enhanced co-operation and shared responsibility”. But, as he has stated when launching the meeting, he wants it to provide a unique opportunity to discuss openly how to improve co-operation between the key players and create a better quality working environment.

For him to say so (and he must know a few things about shipping and the world in which it operates after having dedicated his entire professional life in its service, a good part of which as a member of the board of shipping organizations, most notably as President and Chairman of the ICS and ISF – a position in which he excelled as a true leader and a strong advocate, defender and promoter of the interests of the industry), for him to say so, he must have detected a vacuum in the

status quo; a hole in the network; areas where things are not going well and can be done better. And I fully agree with him.

Shipping competes, most successfully – we all know that – with other modes of transport and within itself. He who offers the best quality services at a reasonable cost survives and remains afloat. The others underperform or, in many cases, vanish altogether. So, where do we see room for co-operation when, those who make a living in shipping (and by this I mean all, not only shipowners, as one might think), are forced, because of the nature of the business, to compete with each other? How can they one moment wear the hat of a tough competitor and the next that of a businessman, who joins others in co-operation to achieve the objectives of this Congress? I will tell you how.

Before, however, I share with you my views on this, I will ask you, for the sake of this meeting, to consider the notion of “coordination” as going hand-in-hand with that of “co-operation”, which, of course, is one of the two main components of our theme today.

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Although the aim of this Congress is not to re-invent the wheel, rather, as I see it, to strengthen and improve existing arrangements seeking to maximize benefits through co-operation and minimize losses through shared responsibility, I see no reason not to suggest such an approach. To be more specific:

- While industry partners co-operate on matters of common interest through consultations of, for example, the “round table” organizations involving ICS, BIMCO, Intertanko and Intercargo; and
- shipowners, shipbuilders and classification societies meet regularly to harmonize their respective activities,

I see no reason schemes such as these not to proliferate within the industry to expand the benefits they bring about.

The outcome of the co-operation of the two groups I just mentioned is usually brought forward to the temple of all temples of shipping, IMO, for consideration and, most of the times, is included in the industry's international regulatory regime.

In the case of co-operation among governmental and non-governmental organizations to enhance safety at sea, one has to look, for example, into the harmonious co-operation among IMO, ITU, ILO, WMO, Immarsat, IHO, ICS, ICFTU and others that paved the way for the introduction of the Global Maritime Distress and Safety (GMDSS) System, which, while making the Marconi radiotelegraphy system redundant, enhanced considerably the efficiency of the global search and rescue system.

The same co-operation is to be found in the domain of governmental consideration of items on the world maritime agenda. Whilst this governmental undertaking should be reserved for IMO, there are, however, recent indications of Governments getting together to agree on common positions before the IMO debate even threatening regional or unilateral measures if, as they say, "IMO does not act". I do not favour this development, which has seen the light of the day in Europe, in particular, with so-called "coordination meetings" taking place before IMO meets. On the contrary, I support a pluralistic approach to IMO issues and am concerned that this group attitude will deprive the Organization of the valuable views of **all** its members.

At national level, this kind of co-operation is expressed through consultations, involving representatives of Governments and shipowner and seafarer organizations, before a policy is agreed for presentation at the respective international fora.

The issue of co-operation at the technical level to help developing countries raise their safety and pollution prevention standards to those required by IMO Conventions is enshrined in almost all the technical instruments adopted by the Organization, while a recently approved, by the MEPC, draft Assembly resolution recommends co-operation also in the transfer of energy efficient technologies to developing countries, in particular to enable them reduce their carbon footprint.

On this latter issue, would you not agree that, now that the overwhelming majority of studies point to a man-made climate change, Governments and all others concerned should stop dithering and, instead, join forces to stem the further deterioration of the situation and reverse the trend?

Think of the massive coordination/co-operation exercise that is needed if we are to benefit from the use of the new shipping routes (the Northern Sea Route, the North West Passage and the Arctic Bridge), which, by shortening dramatically existing routes, will herald a new era in shipping. To be able to brand such routes safe and environment friendly, a lot of work will have to be done under the coordination of IMO, who is already working to put the finishing touches on the so-called Polar Code. For the Organization to be successful on this new venture, the co-operation will be needed of WMO, IHO, IALA, the UN Division on the Law of the Sea, ICS, Intertanko, Intercargo, IACS and several Governments (with Canada, the US, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland leading the effort). If Governments, individually and through international organizations, do not work together to ensure the safe passage of ships using the Arctic Ocean, we may live to regret any error, omission, oversight, weaknesses or shortcomings that may come to light in the wake of an accident in the pristine waters adjacent to the North Pole. The same could be argued with respect to the Antarctica.

An area where good co-ordination, through co-operation, could bear fruit is the widely-recognized but little progressed need to lessen the burden on shipmasters and officers created by the multi-inspections their ships are subjected to on arrival and during their short stay in ports and offshore terminals nowadays. This is the time when, after a tiresome and much demanding time on the bridge or in the engine-room, while in the approaches of their ship's destination, they are called to entertain all sorts of inspectors: from flag and port States, class, insurance, charterers, ITF, not to mention the SIRE system or oil companies' vetting, if they serve on tankers of any type.

And who in this room would not agree that, only through co-operation, the much-heralded Maritime Labour Convention, which is due to enter into force in the coming August, will achieve its multiple objectives to the benefit of seafarers and the uninterrupted flow of maritime traffic? If port and flag State inspectors are poised to enforce it, during its initial stage of implementation, in a strict manner sticking to the letter rather than the spirit of the law, without proper and due consultation with shipping companies, managers and operators as well as with seafarers themselves, aren't we all to be the losers? That is why the conclusion reached at the Seminar on the implementation of the MLC, organized here in Greece three weeks ago by the "Maria Tsakos" Foundation, that the Convention should, during the first twelve months after its entry into force, be implemented in a flexible and pragmatic fashion, was unanimously endorsed.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Our host did me the courtesy of sending me a copy of his meaningful and thought-provoking speech and there is a single point of all he has made I cannot agree with. At the risk of being repetitive of

what he said, I would summarize my comments on his speech as follows:

- Yes, we have done well in our efforts to create a quality industry: owners, charterers, class, shipyards, port and flag States and the regulators have joined forces to enhance quality in shipping operations and, by so doing, eliminate sub-standard ships and thus improve the image of shipping as a whole; and yet:
- Yes, there is much left to be done. To borrow Spyro's words: "old problems remain, claims and disputes proliferate, bad publicity is rampant, bias against shipping continues, unjust accusations damage the image of shipping and the bedrock motto of the Baltic Exchange "my word, my bond" is in danger".

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And as to working together to improve the **image of our industry**, I will beg your forgiveness in taking for granted that my feelings about the way shipping is perceived by the general public nowadays are your feelings too.

It is a pity that, of all the sectors that make up the global transport infrastructure, shipping probably has the lowest public profile and the least representative public image. And it is a pity too, although perhaps inevitable in a world where good news is no news, that it is accidents that tend to make the headlines and inform public opinion – not the very positive story that shipping has to tell: that, in terms of efficiency, safety, the environment and its contribution to global trade, shipping is unmatched by any other transport sector. Neither that 60% of the annual world oil consumption of around 4 billion tonnes is transported by sea and, of this, 99.9997% is delivered safely. As Lord Kinnock said, when he visited IMO in 2005: "...much of the world community, particularly its elected representatives, in most cases, most of the time, appear to be

blissfully unaware of the significance of sea transport to the civilization, consumption and production of the world.”

That is why I am a strong advocate of the service we owe to our industry to go out and tell the good story – especially now that the safety and security record of shipping is improving and the pollution of the marine environment is on the decline. We should not miss a single opportunity to doing so.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know that if I keep praising Spyros for his speech and his initiative to convene this Congress, you may say that I am prejudiced in his favour. But I sincerely believe that his speech (which should rightfully be the Congress’ “keynote” speech, not mine) is of great value and that he and all those, who have come here to share with us their expert knowledge and views on all the interesting topics on the agenda, are praiseworthy and deserve our appreciation and thanks. They will, I am sure, shed light on present and real issues that concern our industry nowadays and which will find their solution only through consultations, dialogue and a willingness to share responsibility, if we truly and genuinely want good things to become better and bad things to eclipse.

So, thank you to the speakers and thank you and congratulations to Spyro, for his initiative – and also for his persistent efforts to bring this ship to Greece and supervise its renovation. None of these would have materialized without the vision, determination and generosity of Captain Vassilis Constantakopoulos, whose memory we should never cease to honour. We miss him dearly!

Thank you.