

Speech - Mr Bill Shorten, Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Minister for Government Services

Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers Annual Dinner
7 June 2023

Introduction

Thanks to Michael inviting me to the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers your annual dinner.

And I acknowledge we meet on the traditional lands of the Gadigal and Wangal peoples.

Family ties

Like most Australians, seafaring and life beyond the low tide marks of the Australian continent does not factor significantly in our day to day lives but I am really pleased that I'm here tonight.

You work in a world to which I have a strong sense of belonging.

That, of course, is because of my family's ties with marine engineering and the maritime union movement.

My father, Bill, was a Geordie from Tyneside. Born at the start of the Great Depression in 1929, his early years weren't easy.

At the height of the Battle of the Atlantic in 1943, he tried to join – like so many of his fellow Geordies – in the service of the merchant marine convoys of the Second World War.

He was sent home when he tried to enlist – not sure why, maybe because he was only 14, but that'd just a guess.

Two years later he was indentured to a trade. Apprenticed as a fitter and turner at the storied Swan Hunter Shipyard, where the keels of more

than 1600 vessels were laid across the decades, and he subsequently went to sea.

My mum, Ann, met dad on a holiday cruise to Guam in 1965 where Dad was working as an engineer on the ship.

They married, and when my twin brother Rob and I came along, dad decided to come ashore and work at the Duke and Orr Dry Dock in Port Melbourne.

That was back when Melbourne and Australia had a commercial ship-repair industry which, like too many others, unfortunately died of neglect, short-sighted government policy and economic rationalism. Dad was smart but he left school at 15, too impatient to go to university.

But my mum, who understood the power of education and qualifications, insisted he get his chief engineer's certificate before he came ashore.

I just remember feeling like I was going to Disneyland when Dad took us to the dock.

I loved climbing over it. I enjoyed the feel of the place. I was captivated by the colourful people – and the matching language; the myriad intersecting tasks; and the very obvious mateship.

My parents' marriage didn't survive but they shared a real love of ships and they passed it on to me, and at one stage I looked at enrolling in the Australian Maritime College in Launceston to follow in my father's footsteps.

His fascination with the sea came with a twist of fate after the premature death – in 1939 – of his own father, my grandfather, Robert, who was a cinematographer.

That saw dad raised by his grandfather, William 'Bill' Menzies Cameron, a Scotsman from Dundee, a Dundonian, born in 1880.

Bill Cameron joined the Royal Naval Reserve and served as a stoker in the North Sea during the Great War. He told my father about being able

to hear exploding ships sinking during battles while he was below decks feeding the boilers— knowing he would have died instantly if his ship had been struck.

Stokers were tough but that would have tested the toughest.

By 1936, Billy was a Jarrow Marcher – one of the unemployed coal and shipyard workers who marched from Jarrow and Southshields in Newcastle upon Tyne to London...

...to protest against the devastating unemployment and poverty endured by working-class communities in the aftermath of the Depression.

He served as an independent Labour councillor – and old fashioned maverick – secretary of the Engineer's Union, and chairman of the dockyard shop stewards.

I remember my father telling me about him.

Bill Cameron took him down and joined him to the union at 16, before he went to work.

And when Bill Cameron died in the 1950s dad remembered a long line of men queued up outside his house to pay their respects – a tribute to a man who had found his calling in looking after people and speaking up for those with no voice. This was the man who influenced my father's upbringing.

And to keep the familial balance, my great uncle on my mum's side was Burt Nolan, and Aussie seafarer from WW2 on and the 20 year Secretary of the Seamans' Union of Australia, Victorian Branch.

And quite obviously my path in the union movement, which is well documented.

AIMPE – a combination of seafaring and union

So I am taken by the work of AIMPE which marries two of my greatest interests – seafaring and strong union representation.

Your motto "Non Sibi Sed Omnibus" says it all – not for one but for all.

Marine and power engineer is a specialist role and that can sometimes make representation difficult when few understand it. You are not just seagoing metal workers.

It is evident in AIMPE's description of the role.

Technical to a fault and often perfectionist, task oriented, and motivated by work that is tangible, the marine engineer works in the worst shipboard environment, but there is order and structure in an engine room and satisfaction to be gained from work well done. Because that is what it takes to maintain the 'steady revolutions' that keep an engine working at its best.

There is a reason why people refer to the most able, talented and indispensable members of a team as the engine room.

It is a profession with a rich history. A tale of those who wanted to explore the sea.

We've been determined to see what lies in the depths of the ocean from the 15th century when the first diving suit was believed to be designed by renowned military engineer Konrad Kyeser...

...to the 17th century when Franz Kessler built his Diving Bell...

...and French physicist Denis Papin designed what would be one of the first submarines, that was little more than a metal box but with a pump to raise the air pressure inside the vessel.

But from 1807, when Robert Fulton successfully used a steam engine to propel a vessel through the water, it's meant we've also made the ocean's surface an avenue of progress.

And as domestic and international shipping grew and changed, marine engineers have adapted and thrived.

You may be aware that as Labor leader, I announced our commitment to an Australian merchant marine if we formed government in 2019.

I'm really pleased the Albanese Government has kept his policy which recognised the crucial role of your industry when it committed to establishing a Maritime Strategic Fleet.

My Parliamentary colleague and Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon Catherine King appointed a taskforce to guide the establishment of Australia's Maritime Strategic Fleet, and I applaud her leadership on this.

The goal is to strengthen our economic sovereignty and support national security through a fleet of 12 Australian flagged and crewed ships.

I'm sure you're pleased that it will also look at the legislative or regulatory reforms necessary to support the Strategic Fleet and Australian shipping.

We need a good framework if we are going to optimise the fleet's potential.

It speaks to the importance of a merchant fleet to Australia's economic and security success. That became clear during Covid and the strain it put on global supply chains.

With more than 98 per cent of the nation's imports and exports carried by sea, merchant shipping kept the nation going.

And in recent times of natural disaster, merchant ships have come to the rescue – whether it was delivering supplies to Fitzroy Crossing, or evacuating people from Mallacoota during Black summer.

These workhorses and their crews offered their services with little fuss but were given heroes welcomes.

And we must never forget more than 800 Australian merchant mariners died during the first and second world wars...

...while maintaining supplies of goods and materials vital for the war effort.

The skills and expertise, the commitment to a job that straddled the world of civilian and soldier – says much about the seafarer's heart.

Today, we have fewer trading ships fly our red ensign, and as an island nation, we need less reliance on foreign-owned 'flag of convenience' vessels.....whose loyalty would lie elsewhere in a time of disruption.

We need a Strategic Fleet. It's overdue.

The Strategic Fleet Taskforce is made up of eminent Australians with significant expertise in the transport and maritime industries...

...they have invited stakeholders to provide proposals or ideas on the fleet, and how it might best be operationalised.

They particularly want your views on things like:

- the mix of ship types and trades where strategic fleet ships could operate commercially

- types and levels of government assistance that might be required to drive the transition to Australian ships and crewing, and

- whether, or to what extent, the Coastal Trading Act or any other legislation might need amending to support the fleet.

But the Taskforce has said it does not want stakeholders restricted to those topics and I urge you to have your say.

This is your chance to help shape the future of the maritime industry for many years to come.