

Doorstop at Fremantle Port

Wednesday 08 November 2023

JOSH WILSON: ... here in Fremantle – or Walyalup on Victoria Quay in Fremantle Port – with my colleague and friend Catherine King, the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, and a number of WA representatives: David Michael, Minister for Ports; Kyle McGinn, who's the Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Development; and Divina D'Anna, who's the Parliamentary Secretary to the WA Minister for Transport. We also have representatives of Fremantle Port, the Maritime Institute of Australia and the mighty Maritime Union of Australia. And we're here to talk about Australian shipping and related maritime workforce.

This is Western Australia's principal cargo port. Needless to say, cargo shipping, freight shipping and maritime operations are absolutely vital to the wellbeing of this nation. Everything we export pretty much and everything we import comes by sea. We are an island nation and our wellbeing and our security depends on our shipping capacity. It should be sovereign, self-sufficient shipping and maritime workforce capacity. Unfortunately in the last couple of decades we've seen the reverse: it's been an area that's been badly neglected.

We have very few Australian flagships, and we've seen consequences so far in the capacity of our maritime workforce in some cases because of a very, very unhelpful ideological obsession with deregulation and, frankly, an obsession with attacking the Maritime Union of Australia. That's something we need to change. It's vital for Australia's wellbeing, and this Government among the many things that it's been doing has undertaken a process of having a taskforce review into Australia's strategic shipping. That's been provided to the minister, who has responded to that report. Very happy to introduce Catherine King to say something about that response.

CATHERINE KING: Thanks very much. Well, what a fabulous place to be today on this glorious day – Fremantle Port is an amazing part of our freight and supply chain network here in Australia. And thank you very much to Josh for having us here today in your part of the world.

To David Michael, the Minister for Ports, it's lovely to have you here. To Kyle and Divina as well, who have been part of the WA shipping taskforce and have got an interest particularly in this area.

Well, back on the 3rd of January 2022 as one of the very first election commitments made by the then Albanese opposition was that we would establish a strategic shipping fleet taskforce to look to establishing a strategic fleet in Australia. What we learnt both through COVID but also through various emergencies, whether it's been bushfires and the terrible scenes we saw with trying to evacuate people out of Mallacoota, or whether it's been up in the Kimberley where we've not been able to get food in either at periods of time when road has gone out or when the freight rail has gone out, we've really started to think about what does it mean in terms of our capacity as a nation to be able – in the case of emergency – to be really able to ensure that we've got that strategic supply chain and the part that shipping crucially plays in that.

In addition to that, we know that we've got an incredibly proud history in this country of the maritime sector. And our workers are sought after worldwide. They are highly skilled, highly trained, but we do not have enough of them. We lose a lot to overseas because they are so highly sought after. But we cannot train enough of them here in Australia, and we don't have the training berths to be able to do that.

And that's really what the strategic fleet is all about. So we had the taskforce that has been chaired by John Mullen, Paddy Crumlin and Angela Gillham has been part of that. I want to thank them very much for the work that they have done. We are releasing that report today and releasing the Government's response to that.

It is a really complex piece of work. It is across government and it does involve various portfolios and various ministers. But in releasing that report and the Government accepting – the vast majority are accepting or agreeing in principle the vast majority of the recommendations with others that will need some further work, we are signalling very clearly that we are in a process now where my department now will start the work of actually procuring four pilot ships next year to really bring this strategic fleet to fruition.

We know how important it is, and I do want to say particularly over here in the west, it's probably most advanced in terms of some of its thinking about what it might mean for its emergency supply chain. I think there's some exciting work that we can do together. We are reliant on states and territories working with us, but we also do want to say as a Government thank you very much to the taskforce, to the Maritime Industry of Australia Ltd – MIA – they've done a terrific piece of work and have been championing Australian shipping for a long time, the Maritime Union of Australia and other unions who have been involved in this process.

This is important. This is really an important piece of work. We know that we are not going to be replacing the thousands of ships who are bringing goods and services here to Australia, but what this really is about is making sure we've got the strategic capacity at times of emergency and also that strategic capacity to train Australians for this very important task and to make sure that we are part of the supply chain into the future and that we get more Australian flag vessels here.

I'm going to hand over to David and then I'm very happy to take some questions.

DAVID MICHAEL: Thank you, Minister. And thank you for coming to the great Port of Fremantle today. I'm really pleased to see that yourself and the Albanese Government has released the report today and also great to see the recommendations, many of which have either been supported or supported in principle by the Federal Government and your undertaking to continue to work with states and territories on tragic shipping matters.

We also in Western Australia recently released our shipping taskforce report, which was chaired by Kyle McGinn, the Honourable Kyle McGinn, and also Jess Stojkovski, the Member for Kingsley. That report talked about a review of the regulatory environment to improve the outlook for Australian shipping, training initiatives to support maritime workers and their career paths – and as Minister King said, we want more young people, more people to

do work in the maritime industry and get on Australian ships – and further research into partnership opportunities with states, defence and the private sector.

Here in WA we see a lot of potential for shipping to take up a more significant role in our domestic freight trains. We're a very big state and especially with our susceptibility to cyclones and floods and bushfires – a lot of which we've seen especially in the Kimberley over the last couple of years – strategic shipping and having the shipping calling in to Australian ports and bringing supplies in a time of emergency is incredibly important.

I also know as Minister for Ports that in some of these areas of our state the economic development opportunities about having more ships call into these ports where they can't at the moment is incredibly important to bring some of those components for renewable projects, for the resources and mining industry, but also the horticultural sector up in the Kimberley and making sure they can get fertilisers and things like that in and get their product out. So having strategic shipping where you don't have to truck everything to Port Hedland or, even worse, down here to Fremantle, a long way away, would help those supply chains.

We're looking forward to working with our federal colleagues and we see the potential to grow trade and provide opportunity for a greater presence for Australian flagged and Australian crewed ships in our waters. And a week ago I was up at Lumsden Point in Port Hedland and looking at the development there which will be a game changer in this regard.

The more cargo we can deliver directly to the Pilbara and Kimberley by ship, the less, as I said, that has to travel by truck from Fremantle. We've also signalled our keenness to work with our federal colleagues on the necessary infrastructure, especially around biosecurity, to continue to ensure we have that import capacity in the north of our state.

And around the corner here at South Metropolitan TAFE, which is where we have maritime workers train for careers at sea and to complete their regular refresher courses, that's a great program which we'd look to continue, but we also need a strong maritime employment cohort here in the state to support our five port authorities, port service providers and shippers. And I look forward to developing some of the training ideas, which is in the report and also in our report, with Minister King and her agencies.

So, again, I want to congratulate the Federal Government on this report. Something we've done as a state is actually deploy some dedicate resources in the Department of Transport to start looking at these issues. They've already been doing it with our report and now they have the Federal Government's report to continue on. And our taskforce will continue with Kyle and we've got Divina D'Anna, the Member for Kimberley, who will continue the work in that space. Thank you.

CATHERINE KING: Questions?

JOURNALIST: I'll actually get you to move the microphone a little that way so you're not half in the sun and half in the shade.

CATHERINE KING: Yeah, that's okay. Is that enough for you?

JOURNALIST: That's perfect. Can you tell us a bit about those recommendations, those key recommendations?

CATHERINE KING: Sure. Well, they're from a range. So what we know is, and what the taskforce has identified is that one of the issues that we've got in terms of getting more Australian flagged vessels is that we've got really fantastic working conditions here in Australia that we don't want to see a compromise on. But that has often meant that there is a cost differential between foreign flagged vessels and Australian flagged vessels and that that is acting as a barrier to some fleets being flagged in Australia.

We don't want to compromise in any way, shape or form on those hard-fought conditions of employment, so we've got to deal with the cost differential. So partly what the taskforce suggests is a range of taxation measures which we need to have a look at, a range of levies but also a really important part of training more Australians into the maritime sector.

So that work, we're having agreed or agreed in principle, with some of those – or the vast majority of those recommendations. My department will now start the work to actually implement those, to look at how they can work and then actually look towards the pilot program of procuring four ships, up to four ships, next year.

JOURNALIST: I'm sure one of you guys have probably answered this question, but why is it so important that we build the vessels here?

CATHERINE KING: So, in terms of actual manufacture, it's always incredibly important. And I think WA particularly is very well placed. There's obviously a very big piece of defence work being undertaken at the moment in relation to the Defence Strategic Review as well as making sure that we are able to [indistinct]. And so that sees a lot of investment in maritime, and I think WA is very well placed for that. Thank you.

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