

# Lack of fleet 'risks sleepwalk to chaos'

**EXCLUSIVE**

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Scott Morrison is facing demands to develop an Australian-flagged merchant fleet of up to 12 ships, with Liberal MP Russell Broadbent warning that the nation risks "sleepwalking to chaos and further vulnerability."

"I am writing to the Prime Minister," he said.

"I will be saying we need 12 but we will accept 6."

Mr Broadbent's letter was sent last week out of concern that Australia's reliance on foreign ships to undertake the vast bulk of its coastal trade undermined its independence and left the nation exposed in times of crisis.

He said this vulnerability had been demonstrated when the Norwegian-flagged supply vessel *Far Saracen* was the first to respond to an SOS call and deliver supplies – including food, water and diesel for power generators – to help Australians stranded on the beach in Mallacoota in eastern Victoria during the Black Summer bushfires, arriving before the navy.

Mr Broadbent said it was imperative to have secure supply chains in place around the country to move goods and services, especially food and fuel. Failure to take action to secure greater sovereign control over coastal shipping could mean "going without food or energy in parts of Australia".

"A government's first role is to look after our citizens," he said.

Former Labor leader Bill Shorten – whose father was a marine engineer – said he went to the last election with a plan to build an Australian fleet and that the case for change had only strengthened.

"More ships got sunk on the Australian station in World War Two than we have now regis-

tered to Australia. Not all those ships were Australian. But you can take my point," he said.

"In times of war, we will have to pay amazingly higher tariffs to bring cargoes to Australia or indeed we won't be able to source material. What if the Suez Canal gets blocked and the cost of shipping goes up? What if China asserts control of the South China Sea? What if we need to move people quickly from another country like Lebanon in 2006 – we chartered ships in the Mediterranean then ... What if the roads get blocked and we have to carry cement or fertiliser?"

The Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers have been leading the charge for an Australian "security fleet" to underpin fuel supplies through the establishment of a group of tanker ships to be owned and operated by Australian companies.

The union is pushing for the ships to be registered in Australia and given a general licence to trade on the coast, to be crewed by local workers.

Infrastructure and Transport Minister Michael McCormack said the government was consulting on a "coastal trading reform following feedback from a number of stakeholders about business impediments within the current system."