

David Parsons, Retirement Speech at Trinity House reception 19th July 2017

Well here I am a few days away from the end of an era. When I left P&O Ferries in 1993 to come to the Merchant Navy Welfare Board, I never realised that nearly 24 years later I would still be here and all I can say is what a huge privilege it has been.

All those years ago the Board owned and operated the last MN Hotel in London's West End – an asset that was losing serious sums of money, to the point when it was obvious to me that, without some serious TLC, this was going to be a very short-term position. Within a few months, Peter McEwen, the then Deputy General Secretary of NUMAST, who is here today and who most of you know, became the chairman. My first vote of thanks must go to him, firstly for his guidance to Jolly Jack in his first shore job and secondly for supporting me in getting the hotel onto an even keel. At that time I also took the opportunity to start meeting our constituent members and attending, regularly, all the Port Welfare Committees – something that the head office had never before done.

Even today I am still in awe of the work of our Constituent charities and am proud to have helped bring the PWCs from something of a talking shop to, I would argue, our jewel in the crown. I would also like to pay tribute to the shipowners, via the Chamber of Shipping, and the two trade unions, Nautilus International and RMT. Indeed it was Peter McEwen who put matters into perspective for me, at a very early stage, when he reminded me that that most shipowners, or managers, provide the most important element of welfare – salaries and conditions and it is the unions that help to ensure these are in place and look to improve them. This, of course, in no way denigrates the importance of the charity sector.

When Peter stood down, Captain Tom Crookall took on the reins of chairman and once again was hugely supportive of the Board, especially me and all we set out to do. It was he that helped see us through the eventual sale of the hotel, which was in many ways a huge sadness but most, including me, saw it as an opportunity to do so much more for seafarers. Tom - thank you.

Briefly Tom was succeeded by Liz Richardson again from Nautilus. Liz was the first female chairman of a maritime charity, other than the WRNS Association and for too shorter time, until illness prevented her from doing so, proved to a really excellent chair. Liz sadly “crossed the bar” after all too short a time in office – a great loss, at too young an age, above all to her family but also the maritime charities to whom she still had so much to give. Whilst she was ill

Tom took back the reins and ultimately Bob Jones took on the role, where he is today.

Bob too has steered us through some interesting times and no one would envy him with the current challenges of leading a sub-committee to look at whether we could work more closely with SFUK. Bob thank you for continuing hard work and support.

As I take my leave of the Board, I am proud to have been part of where it is today. In my time I believe we have come from a position of near obscurity to a leading national maritime charity that is increasingly well known here and around the globe. We continue to undertake numerous projects and work programmes on behalf of our members, many of which are ground-breaking. Twenty years ago there was no training for our charities to make home visits to those in need of help. We brokered an arrangement with SSAFA to utilise their training. Shortly after that the port based welfare societies approached us for a training course for ship visitors – that has been a huge success and recently gone on line as a global programme, managed by us. Seven years ago most of the fleet of port based welfare vehicles was around 10 years old and many were clapped out. We brokered an equal partnership between us, Seafarers UK, Trinity House and ITF seafarers Trust to set up a fund that ensures that all vehicles are replaced after 5 years – gone are the regular breakdowns and bone shakers of the past. Our own grants programme allows many of our Constituent charities to undertake small capital projects, now with minimal time delays. There is much more I could add.

Many of these initiatives come through our working groups, which bring together like minded members to look at whether the needs of today and tomorrow are being addressed and if not what we can jointly do to bring about change.

It is a matter of huge pride, I think for us all, that the International Labour Organisation has seen fit to use us for a model for seafarers' welfare boards and PWCs within the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006.

When I say we have increasing global recognition, this is not only through the ship visitor training programme but the International Port Welfare Partnership programme. We started this as pilot project, on behalf of ISWAN, some two years ago and in 18 months had helped secure 10 boards and committees in most continents. Mostly Peter Tomlin, but also to a small extent me, have been to some really interesting places, met some great people and helped them through some real challenges. I must thank Roger Harris, of ISWAN and the funders, for having enough faith in us to morph this into a three year programme and, who

knows perhaps beyond that – *the World is a big place*. In fact last week Peter returned from China – a really interesting challenge but one that already seems to be bearing fruit.

I would like to conclude by thanking all the trustees past and present for their time, support and understanding. A Council made up of shipowners, unions and charities might seem an unholy alliance but there is seldom discord and, most importantly, always overall support for helping to improve the lives of seafarers and their dependents.

Above all else is the loyalty, hard work and dedication of the staff, some of whom are here today. They are our ambassadors and boy what a wonderful job they do. I am proud to have you as colleagues. Perhaps the others will forgive me if I just mention just two, Peter Tomlin, who will succeed me next week and Sharon Coveney who is succeeding him as his deputy. I am often overwhelmed by the amount of extra they both do and I worry that Peter's wife Dawn and Sharon's partner Jamie feel I'm a slave driver! Peter, who has worked alongside me for 15 years (when we both had a full head of hair) has done so much to lead many excellent projects and programmes and Sharon will ably take on much of this work over the next few months. Without wishing to make this sound like an OSCAR's award ceremony I would like to thank my wife, Nancy, who often has seen very little of me and when she does I'm usually immersed in emails! Times are about to change for us at home!

In conclusion, we have an organisation in which we should all take pride. It is self-financing, sustainable and does all it says on the tin and more. To use the old adage it ain't broke and doesn't need fixing – what more could we ask. Peter (Tomlin), I wish you every success and all the happiness that I have enjoyed in your new role – no one could be more pleased than me that I can pass the mantle to you.

Joining us today are some excellent colleagues, many of whom have become good friends of the Board and me. Thank you all for coming.

So in conclusion – wow what a ride – thank you!