

London International Shipping Week 2021 gala dinner

Introduction

Thank you and it's wonderful to be here in the glorious, historic setting of the National Maritime Museum on the banks of Thames.

Millennia ago, a man took a fallen tree trunk and noticed that if he pushed it beyond the marshes and into the swell of the tidal River, that it floated. If hollowed, it could take his tools, his hides, and he could sell them to another tribe and bring back gifts and goods from them.

Thousands of years later, the great traders of the age of sail connected the far corners of the world, at speed, and for the first time, ordinary people began to understand a little of the world outside their country.

When I was a boy, I had a poster of the Cutty Sark above my bed, all sails rigged, cresting a wave – the very epitome of maritime dash and flare. You could almost smell the salt.

And so this place has served as this city – and this country's – gateway to the world from dark, mysterious, prehistoric times, through the ceaseless roaring torrent of history, until today, and earned its place in the heart of the nation.

And so we are in the right place, for London International Shipping Week – the premier global maritime event and the UK's second-largest international conference this year, after COP26.

It's been so good to finally meet many of you in person for the first time this week. We saw each other at the London Stock Exchange event on Monday morning and then you saw me again for the second time half an hour later at the FCDO, and again for the third time an hour later at Trinity House.

I think I am probably on my tenth encounter in 4 days with half of you by now, so my sincere apologies for your having to see so much of me.

But on that note, may I start by celebrating one hugely important thing. That we are all here, together, in person. Doesn't it feel good? Renewing friendships, establishing new ones, and reaching hands across the oceans. That alone is something to cheer.

And as I look around me at the wonders of the Museum, I find myself wondering how the Maritime heroes of the past would have coped with the strange world in which we find ourselves. Would the Battle of Trafalgar, for example, have gone differently if Nelson had ordered that the fleet "engage the enemy more closely" if he were then told that it would be against social distancing rules?

And would the signal “England expects that every man will do his duty” have echoed down the ages if, instead of being hoisted above the shot-strewn sails of HMS Victory, it had been posted in the chat function of Microsoft Teams?

I am also conscious, that in this new Zoomified world, we have become accustomed to the use of a fearsome weapon, available to our host Lord Mountevans, that was not available to Lord Nelson.

My friends, I am very aware, that should I keep you for too long from your dinner, that he may consider it to be his solemn duty to reach for the mute button, and condemn me to highly animated silence. And so I shall not trample upon your patience for long.

But I do fervently want to take just a little of your time to celebrate this week – or really, to celebrate what it means. Because what we are marking and celebrating here today – after nearly 2 years of struggle, of suffering and of strife – is that this is a maritime nation, proud in soul and core, in every way as it was when the Cutty Sark raced back from India, white sails billowing, to get the best prices for the tea she carried.

And it matters not that the tea is now in boxes delivered by Amazon, rather than chests delivered by sail. It all crests the waves in just the same way.

And nor is maritime just about imports and exports – critical though they are. It’s about the people, the talents they have and the blessings they bring – from professional services and law to insurance and the digital economy – my friends, maritime is in the very blood and soul of this nation.

And haven’t we celebrated some milestones? The International Chamber of Shipping has celebrated its centenary, whilst the International Marine Pilots Association turned 50 – 2 great international institutions that call the UK home. This alongside the IMO, which hosted this year’s conference, reaffirms that London really is the home of maritime.

And finally, on a personal note, I was delighted to open the new cruise terminal at Southampton, only yesterday, almost a year to the day after my first visit to the same site as maritime minister, when we thought we were in the midst of the COVID storm, but so much still lay before us.

The cruise industry has been hit particularly hard during the pandemic. But supporting over 80,000 jobs and with over £9 billion of economic value at stake – £2.5 million of value to the local area every port call – it is too important to sit idle. Which is why my DfT team and I have worked relentlessly, across government and with industry, to restart international cruise – safely, securely, robustly, to be sure – but a restart all the same.

COVID-19

And now most of our economy is back up and running. Thanks to our world-leading vaccination programme, which has saved lives and allowed us to get back to normality.

But I'm sure we all remember the dark days of last year. I joined the government a year ago, right in the middle of our pandemic response. Quite a baptism of fire to be honest, for my first ministerial gig – I attended the Select Committee to explain the government's handling of the crisis, after a grand total of about 4 hours in the job.

But as soon as I opened my first Red Box, the extent of the damage on lives and livelihoods was clear.

Government rightly stepped in, committing an initial £330 billion to keep the economy moving, providing essential support to industries such as maritime.

But it's important to realise that when many of us could adapt to pandemic life through homeworking, for the maritime sector, business often had to continue as usual. And in the most trying of circumstances.

The sector ensured that our supermarkets remained stocked, medicines flowed into our hospitals and fuel stations had enough to allow essential journeys to continue.

We cannot overstate the role that the maritime industry, from engineers to cargo handlers, pilots to harbour masters, played in helping Britain keep the lights on over the past 18 months.

I would like to pay special tribute to our seafarers, who have felt the effect of the pandemic acutely through the crew change crisis, often unable to get home to their families and loved ones. And I am proud to say that we were the first country to declare seafarers as key workers and our efforts to promote and protect their welfare continue to be a priority.

Importance of maritime

Yet this sector's importance lies in more than just getting the UK through the pandemic.

You're an economic heavyweight, contributing £17 billion to the UK economy, supporting over 1 million jobs, most of them highly-skilled, productive and well paid.

In fact, shipping is responsible for carrying 95% of UK trade by volume, yet it is largely invisible to the public who rely on it – until, of course, something goes wrong. That's why a thriving UK economy will always have maritime at its core. Because if we are to create and attract the highly-skilled jobs of the future, we need to position Britain at the forefront of autonomous shipping. And if we are to achieve our ambitious domestic net zero target, we need to accelerate progress on cleaner fuels and green shipbuilding.

For me, the key takeaway from London Shipping Week is that whilst the UK is a world leader in maritime, especially in the areas of environmental innovation and business services, that status is not guaranteed. In an increasingly competitive global industry, we must invest in and support the industry – so

it can grow and meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Crucially, that means continuing to secure the UK's competitive advantages across a range of fields, including maritime law, finance and insurance.

We need to protect and promote our maritime clusters of excellence across the UK, whether that's leisure marine in Cornwall or ship design in Scotland.

And we know the UK flag has a global reputation for trust and excellence, so we will ensure it remains one of the top performers on the Paris and Tokyo white lists. Throughout, we will reinforce that the UK is the best place to do business – constantly improving our offer to customers.

For example, this week we launched the UK's new Shipping Concierge Service. It provides a 24/7 one-stop shop for international maritime organisations looking to invest and operate in the UK. They will have access to a streamlined service which connects them to the experts in government, industry and academia.

But a thriving maritime sector isn't just good news for London. As an island nation, this sector can play an important role in levelling up. That's the thinking behind our ambition to invest in 8 new freeports, which will serve as national hubs for international trade by simplifying import procedures and suspending customs duties. They will attract investment, regenerate local areas, and create jobs – from the Humber to the South East.

And finally, we know that to capitalise on our hard-won independent status outside the EU, maritime will be key to fulfilling our new global trade links. That's why we should all be encouraged by Lord Frost's words earlier this week. He set out a range of opportunities to reduce regulatory burdens or adapt them to UK circumstances.

This includes a particular priority for me – the revocation of the port services regulation – which we will start as soon as the legislative programme allows. This is a prime example of legislation aimed largely at continental member states yet ill-suited to the highly decentralised, efficient and competitive sector here.

Future technology

Now, throughout this week there has been considerable emphasis on innovation. On ensuring maritime can rise to meet the challenges of the future. And with maritime trade expected to double over the next decade, the industry must consider how it can meet that demand efficiently and sustainably.

One way is by being ahead of the technological curve, using technology to make shipping smarter. By doing so, more vessels and equipment can operate autonomously, safely and at lower cost.

Take big data, used in a maritime context it could allow for autonomous in-voyage maintenance, avoiding costly stops in dry dock. Or artificial intelligence, which will give seafarers information to make better decisions

on the environmental performance of vessels whilst enabling more dangerous jobs to be done remotely.

And these developments represent a huge economic opportunity. The UK could secure a 10% market share in a global maritime autonomy market worth \$136 billion within the next 12 years. And government is providing support by first consulting, and then legislating, for the regulation of autonomous vessels.

But let me be clear, technological developments don't spell the end for crewed vessels. We'll still require crews, but they will be even more highly skilled teams specialising in IT and electrical engineering. And to ensure a steady pipeline of talent, we're increasing funding for new cadet training and will continue to use the apprenticeship levy to recruit into the 20 maritime-specific apprenticeships available.

Net zero

But I can't talk about the future without mentioning decarbonisation. In July, the UK launched its most comprehensive plan ever for cleaning up our transport network.

The [Transport decarbonisation plan](#) set out our ambition to accelerate our transition to green shipping. However, as vessels are long-lived assets, we must work with industry to make the right decisions and avoid potentially costly long-term mistakes. That is why we're looking to establish UK SHORE, a dedicated unit in my department to lead this work. And why we will consult on ending the sale of new non-zero domestic vessels.

Shipping may not get the attention planes and cars get in the decarbonisation debate, yet we know that shipping pollutes more than rail and buses combined. That's why the Secretary of State has this week announced that we will join other nations in supporting a world-leading absolute zero target for international shipping emissions by 2050. It's ambitious, yes, but given what I have seen this week, it's within reach.

A case in point is the Clean Maritime Demonstration Competition. It has brought scientists, academics and industry together to develop a range of projects from hydrogen-powered vessels to e-chargepoints at ports. It's been a huge success so far, with more bids than we had originally planned for.

The [winning projects were announced yesterday](#), receiving a total investment of £23 million – including a somewhat psychedelic-sounding “green submarine” – don't worry, I won't sing. If successful, these projects will then be rolled out to the mass market. Accelerating our progress to reducing maritime emissions as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

And so I want to leave you to think about what maritime is. Not what ships are – steel, wood, power-trains and props – that is what maritime needs.

What maritime is, is freedom. The freedom to stretch hands across the ocean, to greet an old friend and to sample their culture and their food, the spices of the East, the richness of Europe, to see the dynamism of America, to celebrate the brotherhood of the Commonwealth – to share our talents and in sharing grow them all.

And so forgive me if I do, for a moment, dwell upon the glories of the past, because they are also the glories of the present. The urge that spurred the man in the canoe, Lord Nelson, the Cutty Sark and all of you – is the same. To pursue the ever-receding horizon, to push the boat beyond the reef, to feel the first rock of waves on the hull, to explore, to seek, to find.

Maritime will thrive because maritime is mankind. And I am proud to sail on that voyage, with you.