



Photo: AAPMA

Oz's Don Quixote tilts at IMO

John Hirst fights for Australian ports, which he believes demonstrate a greater appreciation of environmental protection than most. And he wishes the IMO would get a move on in this area



By Andrew Lansdale
Markets Editor

As executive director of the Association of Australian Ports and Marine Authorities, John Hirst acts as a spokesman for most Australian harbours.

In that AAPMA role, he takes a typically direct Australian view in blasting the International Maritime Organization's slide away from effective co-operation – and toward political pat-a-cake. “There seems to us to be an increasing focus [at the IMO] away from timely outcomes,” Hirst declares.

“With the ever-increasing number of permanent representatives being diplomats rather than people with genuine maritime expertise, there is a growing emphasis on show and process, rather than achieving the necessary outcomes,” he tells *Fairplay*.

As for Australia's role in key maritime issues, Hirst, 64, is also candid: “We are fortunate that the approach taken towards the IMO in Australia is one where our representative to the organisation, AMSA, constantly discusses with our maritime industry the issues that are being debated within the IMO and invites us to work with them in developing an Australian position.

“Also, AMSA is active in discussing these issues with international industry-

based organisations. Unfortunately, this model has not been adopted as effectively, or even at all, in many other countries.

“Australia is proud of its reputation as being proactive and pragmatic in the IMO forum,” he tells *Fairplay*.

Australia has more than 60 ports in all. Only a handful of them are outside the AAPMA circle and privately owned. These are generally one-company, one-commodity outlets such as Gove in the Northern Territories for bauxite and Whyalla in South Australia, which is re-emerging as an iron-ore port.

Hirst spends nearly a third of his time travelling to every port in AAPMA's portfolio around the Australian coast, in addition to his meetings with the federal government in Canberra.



Photo: Southern Cross Maritime

NAME: John K Hirst

DATE/PLACE OF BIRTH: 1941, Sydney

MARITAL STATUS: Wife Barbara, married for 36 years; two children, Victoria and Christopher; five grandchildren. Lives in North Sydney

CAREER: Background is in international commodity marketing of Australian coal and sugar. He worked for CSR's marketing, including handling the logistics of getting products to ports. Also became involved in chartering and port operations. This brought him face to face with the port business and was a stepping stone to his current position

INTERESTS: Sailing, previously racing but now social; tennis (less and less), walking and (as a spectator) rugby and cricket

AMBITIONS: To remain as healthy as possible; to continue to travel internationally, with Antarctica planned for next year; and to spend more time with his family

Brisbane's port and Hirst: 'Australia is proud of its reputation as being proactive and pragmatic in the IMO forum'

On port visits, he listens to their problems, makes a note of their development and generally takes on board as much information as possible. This ammunition enables Hirst to represent his ports domestically and internationally in a collective way.

The federal government prefers a hands-off approach to ports and port operations. It sees ports as state government responsibilities, even though Australia is a major trading nation.

Security: cost of doing business

So Canberra gives no financial assistance to ports. The federal government even sees security as a cost of doing business that the ports should pay.

Thus, there has always been a distinct reluctance on the part of Canberra to accept that seaports are any different from airports. Airports have always had perimeter fences, tight immigration and custom controls and a distinct 'land-side' and 'air-side'.

Seaports not only have a commercial operation, they are also hosts to leisure pursuits and other water-specific activities, such as ship repairing and

shipbuilding. They also support domestic offshore oil exploration and production.

Hirst is also chairman of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority's advisory committee, and he shares many of his concerns and challenges with AMSA.

If Australia is going to continue its growth in mineral exports, facilities will have to expand. This can take place only by developing the ports and expanding shoreside infrastructure between port and mine.

But such developments must pay deference to the environment impact, something that is a major part of Hirst's agenda. He strongly believes there has to be a more balanced approach from environmentalists and an understanding of the national and regional significance of ports.

That is why he finds the IMO so exasperating. "The IMO is regarded as one of the highest-performing bodies of the United Nations," he tells *Fairplay*.

"Yet, we are becoming increasingly concerned at what appear to be unduly long processes to discuss issues that may affect the safety of human life, as

well as having environmental impacts. These include the discussions on mooring lines, mooring and anchoring equipment, gangways and lifeboats etc, all of which have been raised as matters of concern which affect all in the maritime industry.

"We consider that often narrow perspectives have been taken on these matters within possibly vested interests within IMO," he declares.

IMO can turn inside out

Still, the IMO can make things work when so inspired, he concedes: "This criticism includes the bureaucracy within the IMO. But, when there is genuine pressure, such as the development of the ISPS Code, the IMO is able to turn itself inside out to achieve an important outcome in a short period."

Finally, Hirst expresses these hopes for the future: "We are concerned at the perception of the diminishing effectiveness of the IMO. We want the IMO to be strong and viable.

"This can only be achieved through the IMO having an 'outcomes' focus, rather than what we see as a bias towards 'process'," he emphasises.

In highlighting the preponderance of diplomats at the IMO rather than seafarers, Hirst identifies why he thinks progress is slow. But by identifying the swift introduction of the ISPS Code as an example of where things can be done quickly, he throws open a question: "Why cannot this be done all the time?" **F**

'We are becoming increasingly concerned at what appear to be unduly long processes [at the IMO] to discuss issues'