

United Nations Association, Westminster branch

Conference on Climate Change

“Thinking outside the box: borderless strategies to combat climate change”

IMO Headquarters, 30 April 2009

Welcome address by Efthimios E. Mitropoulos

Secretary-General, International Maritime Organization

Excellencies, My Lord, distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you to our headquarters for this well-thought of, timely and appropriate Conference on climate change. I applaud the initiative of the London & SE Region of the United Nations Association in mounting this gathering. They have brought together people from all sectors who have important things to say on a subject of immensely crucial importance; and also those who can influence government and public opinion; diplomats, teachers, academics, climate experts, the business community, local authorities, NGOs, journalists and those like myself and my colleagues serving the international community.

I extend a special welcome to Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Chair, UNA-UK Board of Directors; Mr. Kobeh Gonzáles, President of the ICAO Council and Mr. de Boer, the indefatigable Executive Secretary of UNFCCC.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In a world full of uncertainties, political instability and threats to peace and security, a world facing an unprecedented financial crisis and economic downturn; food and energy problems; environmental degradation; natural disasters; hunger, poverty and diseases; the proliferation of drugs; and the perpetration of unlawful acts of all sorts (including the scourge of piracy), it is to the United Nations that the peoples of the world turn for inspiration, motivation and guidance. In their search for an honest broker to settle disputes and facilitate communities in developing their full potential and, thus, prosper in peace and tranquillity, while maintaining harmonious relationships with their neighbours and the world community at large, the United Nations is destined to be a beacon of stability, unity, conviction and re-assurance.

It behoves all of us of like mind and with similar aspirations to work together and support each other and I am very pleased that we, at IMO, have been given this opportunity to do just that. To place, therefore, our facilities at your disposal, is the least we can do in our endeavours to find common solutions to common, global problems.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If we are serious about tackling, comprehensively and effectively, the complex and multi-faceted subject of your conference and, in particular, the need for universal means to combat the worrying phenomenon of climate change that has been with us for some considerable time, we should indeed, as your conference title suggests, pursue “borderless strategies” and think “outside the box”.

Against the inertia that has characterized our initial reaction to the wake-up calls that we have been receiving for some time, it is encouraging that, even belatedly, we have come to widely acknowledge that increases in global temperatures are altering the complex web of systems that allow life to thrive on earth: cloud cover, rainfall, wind patterns, ocean currents and the distribution of plant and animal species are, to various degrees, all being affected. From the human perspective, difficult issues such as poverty, diseases, slow economic development and population growth are additional factors that serve to exacerbate and complicate the problem. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was, therefore, absolutely right when, in his address to the UN Conference on Climate Change in Bali, in 2007, he branded climate change and our response to the multi-faceted problems it represents as “the defining challenge of our age.”

What cannot be ignored is that climate change will affect everybody. No-one can be immune to it. By the same token, responsibility for finding the solution cannot, realistically, be laid at the door of any particular country or group of countries, any particular region or continent. We are, perhaps as never before, all in this together. Successfully addressing climate change will be far from easy; but the consequences of failing to do so are too dire to contemplate.

If I can introduce a maritime analogy at this point, climate change is a bit like a giant oil tanker, in that, to stop it, or even to alter its course, not only takes a massive force but also a considerable amount of time and distance to run – as a result of past and current emissions of what we now know to be “greenhouse gases” climate change seems to have become inevitable.

The climate does not respond immediately to external changes but, after 150 years of industrialization, global warming now has momentum and it will, I am told, continue to affect the earth's natural systems for hundreds of years even if greenhouse gas emissions are reduced and levels of GHGs in the atmosphere stop rising.

Here at IMO, we are heavily engaged in the fight to protect and preserve our environment. Having, last year, achieved a breakthrough in our efforts to reduce air pollution from ships, we are now energetically pursuing the limitation and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from merchant shipping – indeed, we have adopted **“Climate change – a challenge for IMO too!”** as the theme for our 2009 World Maritime Day, in recognition of the intense focus this topic will receive within the Organization this year.

Our work on this hugely important subject stems from the genuine concerns for the environment of our Member States and the industry organizations that help us to make balanced decisions in the pursuit of our objectives. Moreover, the Organization has a mandate, through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol, to pursue the limitation or reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases from ships. You will learn more about the detail of this work later on from my colleague, Mr. Vagslid.

Suffice it to say, at this stage, that we have established an ambitious but achievable action plan and are now working towards the development of a robust regime that will regulate shipping at the global level and contribute to the slowing down of climate change in a manner commensurate with its degree of care, concern and sensitivity about the marine and atmospheric environments. We are determined to succeed in this so that shipping can make its own contribution to the Copenhagen Conference and thus add value to the efforts of the world community to address the challenge.

To that end, much progress has been made in developing energy efficiencies both for existing and new ships, while continuing our debate on potential market-based approaches. Further progress on all these is expected to be made in July, to enable a comprehensive package of technical and operational measures to be agreed.

Notwithstanding this, the point I want to make, in the context of this conference, is that shipping can serve as an excellent example of why “borderless strategies” and “outside the box” thinking

are so important in the battle to slow down climate change and mitigate its effects. And also that, aside from the regulatory arena (which is IMO's main field of competence and responsibility), the shipping industry itself has made considerable progress, from a technical perspective, to address climate change issues.

Since carbon emissions and fuel efficiency are directly linked – in simple terms, the less fuel burned, the smaller the volume of carbon emissions – efforts have been made to develop propulsion systems and propeller designs that can reduce fuel consumption by about 10 per cent while delivering the same power output as their predecessors installed some ten years ago. At the same time, improvements in hydrodynamics and in vessel hull design have succeeded in reducing fuel consumption by between two and four per cent.

Furthermore, shipping provides an excellent to illustrate just how complex are the choices we face in our relevant efforts for better results. For example, some argue that, reducing a ship's speed by 10 per cent will cut emissions by 30 per cent; however, to then transport the same quantity of cargo in the same timeframe would mean using more ships – and the alternative would have obvious implications for a world accustomed to “just in time” delivery.

Larger ships, while offering undoubted economies of scale, will also have implications for port capacity and facilities, which would need to adjust accordingly – not to mention the knock-on effects of networks of “feeder services”, using smaller ships, which would bring their own environmental concerns. The lesson in all this is that, to understand fully the net environmental benefits of all initiatives and practices aimed at reducing climate change – not just in the shipping arena, but across the board – there should always be a need for a holistic consideration of all the parameters (both positive and negative) of any solution proposed.

Ladies and gentlemen, the international community should aim at realistic, pragmatic, well-balance, workable and cost-effective solutions which should be implemented through clear, transparent, practical, fraud-free and easy to administer mechanisms. I know that these are difficult and complex issues, not just from the technical standpoint but from a political perspective too. There are sensitive connotations, particularly for developing countries, and that is something that ought to be recognized and respected. If the solutions developed are to be

truly effective, they must have universal application – and for this to be achieved, there would be a need for global involvement and endorsement.

I should like to finish as I began, with a quote from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which, I think, very accurately sums up the situation in which we find ourselves. Speaking in February, at a meeting of industry leaders in India, he said, “Industrialized countries bear a great deal of responsibility for the state of the planet today. And they must bear their share of the burden when it comes to paying for solutions. But at the same time, countries, which did not contribute as much to global warming, still have a responsibility to address it. I don't think this is the time for finger pointing.”

The message is clear: we must all play our part and we all must work together if we are to succeed in combating climate change. If the problem pays no heed to man-made borders, then neither can the solution. We all have a responsibility to take bold, comprehensive and coordinated action that not only jump-starts recovery of the planet but also launches a new era of serious and meaningful engagement to prevent a crisis like the one we are facing at present from ever happening again. Working together, with a sense of responsibility for future generations, we can ensure that agreements made in Copenhagen have genuine and lasting value.

I am sure that today's conference will provide a useful insight into these complex issues. May I commend the organizers for their choice of theme; wish you a fruitful and productive debate; and, once again, welcome you to IMO Headquarters.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you.

1789 words
14.3 minutes
27 April 2009