

Oslo faces stormy future

Norway's tanker sector is going through a major upheaval that is reshaping a core tenet of the country's maritime heritage, said Terje Andersen, president of the Norwegian Shipowners Association, speaking at the recent Norshipping conference and exhibition

Multi-million dollar deals in Norway's tanker sector have shaken a country that regards itself as one of the world's leading maritime nations.

Terje Andersen, president of the Norwegian Shipowners Association (NSA), says that the "forces of globalisation are taking an effect on our economy with high labour and social costs."

Noting that Norway has had a dramatic downscaling of its export business over the past decade, Mr Andersen said, speaking at the NSA headquarters in Oslo during the Norshipping event in early June: "Shipyards are struggling and the welding of steel has no future in Norway. Unemployment is rising and to historically high levels for the country."

Figures from the Norwegian Shipowners Association (NSA) show that the world's largest fleet reported the most dramatic decline in fleet numbers in a decade. Last year, tonnage fell by 48 ships and 2.8m gross tonnes to a new total of 1,670 vessels and 45.9 gt.

Commenting on the widely reported sale of tanker giant Bergesen to Hong Kong-based World-Wide and last year's takeover of Navion by Vancouver-based Teekay, Mr Andersen says: "It is a fact the two largest members of the NSA are foreign-owned.

"It is important that we do what we can to improve conditions for owners and make sure we keep head offices in Oslo."

The NSA takes a hardline against the incumbent government in Oslo, complaining bitterly about the Storting imposing an unnecessarily tough tax system weighted against seafarers. Regional rivals such as Denmark, Finland and Sweden can all point to having better net wage systems for seafarers and a kinder tonnage tax policy, noted other concerned industry players.

Casting his eyes further south and into the European Union, Mr Andersen says: "Norway has the poorest tax system for shipping companies and the lowest degree of political predictability."

Mr Andersen said that the EU had become a maritime superpower and a fearsome local competitor. "While Norway complies with EU policy in virtually all areas, we choose an entirely different line for shipping.

"This systematic inequality is about to undermine the whole Norwegian maritime community."

Alive to the NSA's concerns, Norway's trade and industry minister Ansgar Gabrielsen, speaking at the opening of the exhibition, suggested that the country might offer an olive branch to the country's depressed service and supply sector in next year's White Paper on the industry, although he offered no immediate support for the country's troubled ship owning community.