



Putting differences aside

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Being an island nation, coastal shipping is an integral part of our national transportation system. Members of the public expect, quite rightly, that they will be safe on board any passenger transport vessel, be it a water taxi, small car-ferry barge, or the larger Cook Strait ferry. Although the average member of the public might not turn their minds to what is required in order to “be safe”, it includes the expectation that the vessel will be adequately manned by a suitably qualified crew, that the vessel itself will meet the required standards of seaworthiness, and that it is operated in accordance with maritime law and principles of good seamanship.

Those are entirely fair minimum expectations, and ones that are undoubtedly shared by passengers worldwide. Sadly, it is an expectation that has not been met in too many circumstances, as the most recent tragedy of the Korean ferry, the *Sewol*, and in 2012, the *Costa Concordia* demonstrate.

The capsizing of the *Sewol* in April this year resulted in 288 lives lost, with 16 still missing. Many of those lost were children on a school field trip. Understandably, there has been much conjecture about what caused the capsizing on a calm morning, not far from the vessel’s intended port of call. Passengers reported that the vessel made a “sharp turn”, followed by a thump that resonated through the ship, and that the vessel then began to list. There are numerous reports of earlier concerns about the vessel’s lack of stability and routine overloading.

The *Sewol* was 6800gt, and capable of carrying approximately 80 cars and 60 trucks, as well as nearly 1000 passengers and crew. There are reports of recent modifications to the vessel, although the exact nature of those changes are not entirely clear. Some reports suggest significant structural changes, which may or may not have had an impact on the vessel’s stability.

It isn’t yet clear whether the ship made a turn as a result of an incident, or the incident occurred as a result of a turn, but whatever the exact circumstances, it seems that the vessel suffered a catastrophic loss of stability, leading to the capsizing and foundering.

The Korean authorities were extremely quick to arrest key members of the crew, reportedly laying murder charges against senior officers and lesser charges against other crewmembers just a few days after the incident. The chief executive of the company that operates *Sewol* has also been charged and the Korean Coastguard has been disbanded by the President after it was found to have failed in its duty to carry out the rescue operation.

While it is natural to share the dismay and shock of the Korean people at the devastation caused by this incident, there is an element of distance between the circumstances of this disaster and our own maritime operations. Or is there? As most readers


will be well aware, New Zealand has stringent maritime rules, which regulate virtually all aspects of waterborne operations from qualifications and manning requirements, to navigational obligations and construction operating standards.

Because of our strictly regulated system, it is tempting to think that a disaster like the *Sewol* can’t happen here, but can we really afford to rest upon our laurels in that way? In fact, in many ways New Zealand is more vulnerable than other countries – our geographic isolation means we can’t call on any other nation quickly to assist in a maritime rescue. By way of an example, if a Cook Strait ferry were to get into difficulty in the middle of the Strait, what challenges would be faced in evacuating the vessel, especially in rough weather? Even if the crew of the vessel discharged every aspect of their duties with all the skill and dedication that would be expected, many aspects of such an event are beyond human control. How, then, do you prepare for such contingencies?

Maritime rules are clear on the conduct of safety drills, evacuation drills and the like and, while there are many factors that can’t be simulated, they can still be considered. For example – how quickly could other vessels come and assist? How would the very young, elderly, or infirm be evacuated? If the vessel

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listed and restricted access to the lifeboats and rafts to just one side (until the hydrostatic releases were triggered), how would an evacuation be completed?

Despite the current industry angst against Maritime New Zealand, that organisation is critical in upholding safety standards. MNZ walks a fine line between meaningful engagement with, and the regulation of, the industry, but meaningful engagement requires both regulator and industry do their respective parts. The essential point is that the industry cannot sit back and think, “it won’t happen to us”. Heaven forbid, but it could happen here. In order to be ever improving, the industry must not only meet the minimum standards required by law, but aim to exceed them, constantly striving for excellence. Meaningful engagement requires a genuine partnership between industry and regulators, no matter what differences they might have. It shouldn’t take a tragedy to remind people what really matters. 



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