

Reacting to Rena

21 October 2011

The grounding of the Rena has naturally and quite rightly attracted a huge amount of media attention. Everybody wants to know what went wrong and who is responsible. That too, is natural but the search for the answers often brings its own set of problems. For example the media has been flooded with opinions. Some of these are expressed by experts who know what they are talking about but many are advanced by people who have little or no knowledge to support those opinions. As a result the landscape becomes awash with half-baked opinion often based more on prejudice than on informed insight. The interested bystander becomes confused as it is difficult to differentiate between sound and dubious information.

So, what do we know? A very serious, once in a generation event has occurred. Significant damage has been done to the marine ecology and beaches in the Bay of Plenty.

What do we not know? We don't yet know why the ship hit the reef. We don't know the true cause of the accident. We don't know if there were underlying factors that may have contributed to the cause of the accident. We don't know if the response could have been quicker. We don't know if the response so far has been the best it could have been. We don't know what the weather will do. We don't know if more damage is yet to be done. In short we don't know a great deal.

It is common when a serious event becomes shrouded in a thick fog of confusion for people to hit the 'blame' button. This is not a good thing to do and it is important that we don't rush into the 'blame game' here. Blame the government, blame the officials, blame the crew, blame the regulatory environment, blame the rescue attempt, blame the owners, blame the shipping company, blame foreigners, blame the media. The list of suspects is endless.

A large container ship has hit a reef. Damage has been done. Salvage work is underway. When that and the clean-up is complete there will be time to consider the causes of the accident (both immediate and underlying), as well as the effectiveness of the response to the event. It is imperative that the focus of that work is kept on what can be learned from the experience rather than looking for someone to blame. If we focus too much on the blame aspect we run the risk of learning very little from the experience. In any event there are legal processes in place which are designed to establish culpability.

Despite the obvious damage done by the Rena grounding, the fact remains that such events are extremely rare and shipping remains the cleanest and most cost-effective mode of transport for freight. We would do well to remember that.

In the meantime we should concentrate our minds on (a) what can be learned from this disaster and establish what can be done to reduce the possibility of a similar event occurring and (b) how we can improve our responses when something like this happens again.

The New Shipping Federation looks forward to participating in that process. In the meantime there exists within the membership of the Federation a wide range of expertise and capability which is available to assist.

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