

Canadian

SHIPBUILDING AND REPAIR

West Coast builders fight for

Pacific Coast Shipbuilders' Association new voice for industry in B.C.

BRITISH COLUMBIA PREMIER GORDON CAMPBELL RECENTLY WROTE TO PRIME MINISTER STEPHEN HARPER AND SOON AFTERWARDS STOCKWELL DAY, PRESIDENT OF THE TREASURY BOARD AND MINISTER FOR THE ASIA-PACIFIC GATEWAY, PAID A VISIT TO VANCOUVER SHIPYARDS CO. LTD. THE TWO ARE LINKED.

Mr. Campbell was expressing his support for the West Coast shipbuilding industry in an effort to influence an expected federal government announcement affecting the future of all major yards.

Mr. Day was showing that he understands the worries of shipbuilders in his adopted province. They have a virtually blank order book for new construction and need federal contracts to underpin jobs and job training. Current employment is below 2,000 and the average age of workers is closing on 50. A dearth of work has caused many younger welders and fitters who underwent apprenticeship training in Vancouver or Victoria yards to migrate to Alberta.

George MacPherson, president of the B.C. Shipbuilding General Workers Federation, is gloomy. Absent the stabilization of the workforce that building ships for the Canadian navy and the Canadian Coast Guard would bring, Mr. MacPherson fears a collapse of West Coast shipbuilding. "If that happens, we will run out of people to maintain B.C.'s ferry fleet, let alone build new ferries," he said.

"Without new ship construction we won't be able to train or retain workers. The Washington Marine Group has the capability to build supply ships for the navy and patrol vessels for the Arctic, and there is the funding for these vessels. I don't know what will happen if the orders don't come through.

"WMG has viable shipyards and has never begged for federal handouts," Mr. MacPherson continued. "What it and the industry need are recognition of our capabilities and fair treatment.

"I just hope we aren't going to repeat the frustrations of the past. B.C. was told it would get to build the Polar 8 (icebreaker). The project was promised, promised repeatedly. We were told that we weren't getting to build (city-class, now Halifax-class) frigates or do work on the (tribal-class) ships because we were going to get the



GEORGE
MACPHERSON

Need recognition of capabilities, fair treatment

Polar 8. Well, we know how that story ended."

The Polar 8 project, proposed in 1985, never made it from blueprint to sea. It was cancelled in 1990.

NEW VOICE

The new voice for the industry in B.C. is the Pacific Coast Shipbuilders' Association, chaired by John Shaw, a vice-president with WMG, which accounts for three-quarters of the total shipyard workforce on the Pacific.

Mr. Shaw said he couldn't join Mr. MacPherson in



Photo: Washington Marine Group

SHIPBUILDING AND REPAIR



By MARK WILSON

fair share of federal government orders

contemplating exclusion from federal orders for major ships. "I can't go there. It is unthinkable," he said.

A shipbuilding forum, held last July, calculated that the government would need more than 50 major ships (vessels of more than 1,000 tonnes) over the next 30 years, creating 30 million person hours of employment. While the navy's new construction must have funding approval from Treasury Board, only a handful of the 29 ships sought by the Canadian Coast Guard have allocated funding.

The anticipated announcement from the government is expected to say where the naval vessels will be built and establish where shipbuilding centres of excellence will be lo-

cated, or at least set out the process for selecting where they will go.

Mr. MacPherson, who is a member of the PCSA, said: "I believe government originally contemplated establishing three centres of shipbuilding excellence, one of them in the West. Now there is concern that only two will be designated - Lévis (Davie Yards in Quebec) and Halifax (Irving Shipbuilding).

"Halifax is a shoo-in because of (Defence Minister and Nova Scotia MP) Peter MacKay, and Davie, which is under court protection from creditors, is in Quebec, so it is special," Mr. MacPherson said.

Mr. Shaw said government needs to invest in shipbuilding. "A key point to a national shipbuilding procurement strategy is that it allows shipyards to invest in facilities, in processes and in people," he said. "New construction extended over a long period provides rateable and predictable programs.

"Ship repair is a fluctuating activity whereas new building work is more controlled and managed. You can have a regular work week and there is the continuity that allows you to recruit apprentices and get them through their four-year training."

Mr. Shaw said the current state of the B.C. shipbuilding industry is dismal. The forest industry, which was the mainstay of coastal marine activity, is deeply distressed. The only federal government work that WMG has is the building of five motorized 49-foot lifeboats for the coast guard.

"New construction is the heartbeat of the industry. It is what keeps it going. If the work isn't there, you



JOHN SHAW

New construction the heartbeat of the industry

cannot invest," he said.

A point being made by the PCSA is that British Columbia is Canada's gateway to the Pacific Rim, but also to South Asia and the Middle East. Traffic in the shipping lanes of the Pacific Northwest will continue to grow.

The PCSA wants a commitment by Canada for a fair allocation of national shipbuilding work to the West Coast. This will stimulate commercial work, which will benefit not only the local marine sector but also the marine sector elsewhere in Canada. Furthermore, a viable and vibrant shipbuilding and repair industry will be vital in supporting the possible east/west rebalancing of the Canadian navy.

"If B.C. shipbuilding is to survive and prosper, it is vitally important that we receive an equitable portion of the \$40 billion in naval and coast guard construction work," Mr. Shaw said.

WMG chief executive officer Jonathan Whitworth has put the issues to the B.C. caucus of the National Conservative Party while Mr. Shaw has met with Liberal MP Keith Martin, whose riding of Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca takes in WMG's Victoria Shipyards Co. Ltd.



Washington Marine Group's Victoria Shipyards.