

Long-term stevedoring pro looks back at a varied career

Sineva Toevai

IF YOU ever want to get a history 101 lesson on Australian stevedoring over the past four decades, there are probably few more knowledgeable about the subject than seasoned stevedore executive Ray Lee.

The former DP World operations director in Sydney, after all, has worked for every stevedore in Australia and has ascended to executive management status from the ground up.

In a rare interview with *Lloyd's List DCN* this month, Mr Lee took us on the journey of his stevedoring career, which spans 37 years. He gives a rare insight into the industry which has hit the headlines for both good and bad reasons in recent decades. He also feels qualified to predict what the future may hold for the industry he holds dear.

The stevedoring landscape in Australia has changed significantly over the decades and this will continue – particularly in the next few years with automation, says Mr Lee, who left DP World this month to re-kick start his business called Portside Solutions.

For Mr Lee, who these days divides his time between Canada and Australia, stevedoring is in his blood. His father became a wharfie in 1946 after returning from World War II where he served in the army.

"There was a bit of nepotism in those days," Mr Lee chuckled.

"My father was a wharfie and so was my uncle was a wharfie. Back then, if your father was on the waterfront and you felt an inclination to do that then sometimes the opportunity would present itself and you could get a position as well."

The introduction of the automated terminal by Patrick in Brisbane was one of several highlights in Mr Lee's career.

"I honestly think that automation is here to stay," Mr Lee said.

"I don't think it is going to go away and with Hutchison coming into the industry, I'm certain that they will automate or they will semi automate."

Mr Lee and his team of fellow senior management went to places like Germany to look at automation before setting up the autostrad terminal in Brisbane.

"There were cynics who said it couldn't be done," he said.

"Those automated strads were still running up there in Brisbane so you can argue all day about how effective they are and whether or not manned or unmanned straddles are quicker."

He acknowledges that automation is a relatively new concept in Australia but he believes it will gain momentum in coming years as stevedores look for ways to minimise costs.

"In Australia it is still in infancy as far as automation goes.

"For example, the Brisbane operation will be fully automated by 2013 – that's no secret.

Third operator

"With enterprise agreements going on there I think that's the direction it will head. I'd like to come back and look at it 60 years from now.

"Costs are massive in the industry.

"There's the running of the equipment, its purchase and of course, the labour costs, which represent more than 50% now of total expenses in most cases."

With the pending arrival of third operator Hutchison at Port Botany, Mr Lee indicated that the other stevedores will need to put their best foot forward.

"I think competition is good and worthwhile and certainly the other stevedores will need to be competitive with Hutchison and maintain their client base.

"They certainly will have to be on their toes.

"Most of those clients [Hutchison's in other parts of the world] are now being serviced by Patrick and DP World so I think that Hutchison will be effective in time."

Mr Lee wasn't always keen on the idea of having a third stevedore in Sydney.

"If you'd ask me that question some years back I would've said no – I don't think the time is right."

"Now the decision has all



COMMON GROUND: Ray Lee finds plenty of positives in his career in stevedoring.

been made and the third operator is a fact of life.

"If we continue to grow the way we are at the moment – the three eastern states continue to see enormous growth and the other states are holding their own – Hutchison in Sydney and Brisbane, I think in coming years, there will be room for the third."

When looking back, Mr Lee points out that you can't mistake the significance of the 1998 waterfront dispute.

It changed the face of Australian industrial relations after Patrick attempted a 'backdoor' restructuring of its business.

"1998 was definitely a turning point in the industry.

"I think that it was something that had to happen and something had to crack back

then and there was really no right or wrong way really in doing it.

"Patrick chose a direction and decided to head down that track. I don't think we'd go there again and I'd certainly hope we don't end up there again. Having said that, you never know . . ."

His introduction to Patrick was made easier by the fact that he joined the company after 1998, he says.

Sophistication

"I was tasked with the role of operations manager to get the Sydney terminal back on track and we were able to do that, and get it moving again."

Dealings between unions and stevedoring companies have improved over the years, he observes.

"I'm not sitting on the fence but I'd like to think that we won't see a repeat of 98.

"There's a bit more sophistication and I think the MUA is well organised, well led and the stevedore companies are equally well led, with good management."

He believes that the onus on both parties to improve their relations.

"I'd like to think they can work it out and find some common ground.

"Maybe they need a mediator to oversee that process.

"There's got to be some common sense when in negotiations."

Mr Lee says he enjoyed working for P&O, Patrick and DP World, describing them as being "very different in their management approach."

A highlight of his time at DP World was his involvement with a global organisational development training program that the stevedore set up for next-generation terminal managers.

"It was quite successful," he observed.

"It would have been fantastic if there was something like that in my day. I worked up the ranks to get where I am."

He remembers a number of colourful characters in the stevedoring industry but a stand out for him was Patrick's Chris Corrigan.

"I enjoyed working with Chris.

"I came in after the dispute and I won't say it was easier for me but I didn't have any history with the dispute so it probably made my time with Patrick easier. I didn't have any baggage.

"As managers we were able to get on with our day and Chris Corrigan as CEO and MD, rarely interfered.

Coaching

"He let me run the Sydney terminal and I was responsible to him and the board.

"He was confident in his managers and I think he assembled a pretty decent team."

Mr Lee applies his coaching skills on the sports field to the workplace.

Raised in Western Sydney and an avid fan of Sydney's Canterbury Bulldogs rugby league team, Mr Lee both played for, and coached the team at various levels in the 1970s and 1980s.

"When I was coach of the football team I found there to be some pretty talented players which was like having some pretty talented employees.

"Some players you know you will get the best out of if you put your arm around them and give them a hug. To get the best out of others you need to give them a kick up the bum.

"Management is exactly the same . . . I don't care who it is – some people respond to hugs and a cuddle and some you kick up the bum and you still get the respect. Whether it's a football team or your staff, you need to maintain that level of respect."

NSW maritime body goes in transport super shake-up

Sineva Toevai

NEW SOUTH Wales Maritime will cease to exist as part of a move by the state's government to merge three transport agencies into a single entity.

The Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) and three other agencies will be scrapped as part of the transport restructure, NSW ports minister Duncan Gay and transport minister Gladys Berejiklian announced on July 15.

Policy and planning experts from NSW Maritime, the Transport Construction Authority and the Country Rail Infrastructure Authority consolidate to become Transport for NSW.

The new body will be responsible for the delivery of transport services across all modes.

Another body to be called NSW Roads and Maritime Services will be established to oversee harbours, waterways and roads, Mr Gay said.

"There is no longer an RTA. What we will have in its place is a streamlined, customer-focused organisation to deliver essential frontline services to people who use our roads, our harbours and our waterways."

There is an emphasis on regional NSW, Mr Gay says.

"For the first time key freight system components including road, rail,

marine, ports and intermodal terminals will be consolidated, and will provide a single point of contact for industry interaction."

The Australian Logistics Council (ALC) welcomed the department's focus on freight issues.

"From a governance perspective, given the previous structure was considered to be inefficient, then it is appropriate that the structure of the department be changed to ensure the philosophical direction is consistent with the NSW Government's policy objectives," ALC chief executive Michael Kilgariff said.

ALC would expect this will mean

the NSW Government will have a different approach to the proposed national heavy vehicle regulator as well as the rail and marine safety regulators.

Transport for NSW will be divided into six parts:

- customer experience – improve transport journeys
- planning and programs – consolidate planning for all modes and develop transport masterplans
- transport services – ensure transport services cost-effectively meet the current and future needs of customers
- transport projects – ensure major projects are delivered on time and on budget

- freight and regional development – ensure freight services and facilities meet needs of state economy with focus on regional NSW
- policy and regulation – develop and oversee policies and laws pertaining to transport across NSW

Ms Berejiklian says the appointments of the six new deputy directors-general were being finalised.

"Transport for NSW will take charge of major procurement and long-term planning and policy," she said.

"For the first time we will see a co-ordinated and holistic approach to public transport."