

Special interview

by ARCHIE BAYVEL

All you'll learn at sea is to drink and fight and make trouble, his father warned. So Paddy took a job in a surf shop ... for a while!

"I'm not going to London and I'm not standing for parliament. I'm committed to my members here in Australia and will continue in this role for as long as they want me or until I retire."
 – Padraig Crumlin,
 April 6, 2008.

He's one of our most influential non-parliamentary politicians and becoming increasingly so on the international scene. He's also a strong family man and an armchair philosopher who seems to laugh a lot at himself.

He is Padraig Crumlin in his seventh year as national secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia and vice-president of the International Transport Workers Federation representing 100,000 seafarers. In that role he is chairman of the federation's International Dockworkers section, a position of tremendous prestige and authority.

If not exactly king of the sea he sits very close to him!

Crumlin, he says, means brook or stream in Irish gaelic and Crumlin Road in Belfast was the site of an infamous jail in the time of The Troubles. Then as if to wipe out any taint from that allusion he points out that Crumlin is also the name of a Dublin suburb.

"But," he adds after a moment's reflection, "if you had it on an Irish Monopoly board it'd be the first asset you'd get rid of."

We meet, however, at a much superior property – the union's building at the Chinatown end of Sussex Street, Sydney – and in Paddy's personal office. As offices go it's spacious but not flash and, so SAL members can get insight into how the other half lives, let us estimate that it is maybe twice the size of, say, Kevin Clarke's digs at MSC, three times those of Llew Russell at SAL; but not as large as Soren Houman's at Maersk. But without the views of course and certainly not flash. This is a working man's lair, after all!

The working man himself looks surprisingly youthful, is relaxed, dressed in denim and for all the world like a Saturday afternoon dad at the rigger or netball. As indeed he was for many years having a son who won a scholarship to St Joseph's College where he distinguished himself academically and on the rugby field plus a daughter who won a world junior championship as a rower.

To say he's proud of them would be an understatement and he glows again when he mentions his younger son who has just achieved his integrated rating's certificate at the Australian Maritime College, in Launceston, and is the third successive generation of Crumlins to go to sea.

Paddy's father, Joe, was a foreign-going master with Adsteam and a well-known tugmaster before retiring. Today, at 80, he works one day a week as archivist at Sydney's Victoria Barracks, at Paddington.

Paddy did the AMC course himself when it was introduced in 1987 as the commissar representing the union. He holds Certificate No 0001 as acknowledgement of the role he played.

Our second meeting begins amid mild chaos caused by preparations for the MUA's imminent four-yearly National Conference at the Sydney Convention Centre. Again Crumlin is all denim as are his male staff. Denim must be the new



pinstripe in the upper reaches of the MUA.

Talking of upper reaches ... The traffic in cardboard boxes of conference papers has not only jammed the elevator, it forces us out of the boss's office. "We'll talk in the boardroom," he says and we head for the floor above.

And what a boardroom it is! The table stretches into the middle distance of a ballroom-size space. One struggles to resist looking impressed, far less count the plush red seats. A rough count out the corner of an eye, however, tallies 36 chairs at the table and room for more.

Paddy's eyes, for their part are also red tinged - the result of having worked all the previous day in Singapore, flown back all night on the red-eye special and worked all day since. Despite that he talks for almost two hours; if there's urgency on the floor below, he is cool as cool and says he reads Shipping Australia magazine on planes.

"When I first left school I told my father that I wanted to go to sea," he said, "and he replied 'All you'll learn there is to drink and fight and make trouble.'"

So after his HSC at DeLa Salle in Bankstown Paddy spent time in a variety of jobs including surfboard making and tuna fishing out of Eden. But by the time he was 20 he had a wife and family to support and his father suggested that he might think again about going to sea.

"I said to my father: 'But you told me all that'd do was teach me to drink and fight and make trouble.' And he replied: 'You've learnt all that anyway. Now it's time to go to sea!'"

"So I did. I worked as a greaser and in the fridges before becoming an AB and sailing in ANL's iron ore ships out of Port Kembla while preparing to study for my certificates.

"I was very young and found friendship and support at sea but between voyages I became interested in union work and began to lend a hand in the union office whenever I was ashore. I was a regular attendee at the seafarers' meetings on the last Tuesday of every month. Anything from 100 to 150 off-duty seafarers would discuss what's happening in their industry

"At one time complaints about the cooks were a big part of these meetings. Then when we amalgamated with the cooks' union the first thing we had to do was develop a system of internal dispute resolution!

"I met Pat Gerhart, head of the National Union of Seamen, and he became a great mentor of my emerging union activities. He impressed on me the importance of the maritime industry in the history of Australia and his influence decided me to pursue the political route in my maritime career.

"In 1987 I stood for office as the union's assistant secretary. From there I became NSW secretary, deputy national secretary, deputy secretary of the MUA and finally national secretary when John Coombes retired in 2001."

So that's the Crumlin voyage to date. What next?

A few hours before our second meeting the word was out that Paddy was off and away. He'd got The Big One and was going to London to ... To what? Nobody could say but the rumour was that his days were assuredly numbered.

So we put it to him: "They say you're leaving here for London, Paddy" and here is what he replied:

"I'm not going to London and I'm not standing for parliament. I'm absolutely committed to my members here in Australia and will continue in this role for as long as they want me or until I retire."

He was born on 14 April 53 years ago as the second of six children one of whom is now a doctor and prominent amateur archeologist, another became the NSW assistant ombudsman, and his youngest brother is master of the Sydney Harbour pilot boat

"I come from a background of academic achievement," he says, "albeit I might have been something of a blacksheep in that respect during my early days. My mother was a teacher and both parents were very keen on knowledge and education and insisted that I do French and Latin all the way to the HSC. I was more interested in the spirit of adventure and experiencing the diversity of life.

"In the past many seafarers left school early because they hated it but the union always encouraged its young people and they were given the chance to retrain when the 12-week course for integrated ratings was introduced.

"My father had very modern thoughts and great largesse and intelligence. He was always able to discuss things with his crews and to create a team concept, even in the face of the old British class differential between officers and crew.



"I experienced that only once on a ship where one of my school friends was a junior officer. We had a long talk together but he was admonished later by the master for fraternising with someone from the lower deck. That experience enhanced my political awareness.

"As a family man at sea I became impressed by the two-crew system because it enabled crew to enjoy a family life as well as to pursue their career at sea.

"Today it enables the industry to attract and retain people who are vocationally suited and have the experience and love of the sea to translate that into mature

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age. This enables more people to train as officers where previously their sea careers might have been truncated for family or economic reasons.

“The economic demands of society today are that both parents usually need to work. Now all crew right up to senior masters can enjoy a normal family.”

He knows about family and his own has an extensive tree within the Australian Irish community and it goes a long way back. He notes wryly, however, that the difference between the Irish who emigrated to New York and those who came to Australia is that the Americans had a choice.

You could say his lot are now Old-Family Irish with a great-grandfather an army sergeant-major and his maternal grandfather, Hollywood George Lynch, a bookmaker and racing identity. On Australia Day the Prime Minister invited the Crumlins to the The Lodge and Paddy was among the 2020 talk-festers.

Crumlin responds to a recent media report claiming he wanted to re-open the issue of pattern bargaining and that he opposing drug checks on heavy machinery operators with:

“The stevedoring industry and union has zero tolerance of drug use and our members understand this. But one reporter misinterpreted my comments when I said I wanted the existing urine tests for cannabis to be stopped and replaced by saliva tests. Saliva tests measure a person’s level of impairment from the drug while the urine tests only indicate you have used it recently.

“My view is that with cannabis use almost decriminalised in many jurisdictions, we should focus on whether a person is under its influence rather than whether they have used it sometime.

“One reporter didn’t understand that and so we had the drug furphy. The same person didn’t understand whatever I said

about pattern bargaining and didn’t even understand that it’s illegal.

“It was very disappointing to read such nonsense; particularly because we had been working so long on the drug problem. It was like the cold war days of rhetoric against unions generally.”

So what are the highlights of international shipping today? - “Part of my responsibility at the International Transport Workers Federation was with negotiating an agreement for flag of convenience vessels – those where there is no link between the vessel and its flag.

“It was time to bargain with the world’s employers of these kinds of vessels and we now have a level of dialogue that’s never been seen before. To have achieved that level of consensus is extraordinary and rewarding.

“Problems included the fact they were often in competition with each other, geo-political differences, and the Scandinavian lobby. Even having the Japanese and the Koreans at the same table as the International Maritime Employers’ Committee and the Europeans is an extraordinary development.

“What emerged was that they became part of a single collective agreement that came into force in January 1 and encapsulates all the core values.

“That was one of our greatest achievements and it provided a beacon to all industries.”

At one of the functions associated with the conference, the president of NYK said to Crumlin: “We’ve noticed in recent times that there’s a different industrial approach on the wharves.”

And Crumlin replied: “That’s got a lot to do with how we see ourselves these days. Job security is linked to productivity and efficiency. We have become very successful in reconciling and reaching mutual respect at the conference table. We have reached a

state of maturity.”

Progress made includes agreement on issues such as:

- Skills – Officer replacement is a big issue .
- Proper standards
- Being able to lobby governments and organisations with an understanding of each others’ viewpoints. It isn’t collusion, it’s meeting the demands of modern industry.
- Security
- General risk management
- New governance for the industry
- Meeting new regulatory standards.

“One of my great satisfactions was bedding down the amalgamation with the WWF. The future is being able to provide a single forum where employers can negotiate.

On the future of shipping in Australia he looks thoughtful and reflects on the size of portfolio facing any minister responsible for shipping: “To cope with the complexities of such a massive portfolio, you’d need to be able to turn ADS into an art form . Shipping needs to develop good administrators as well as ship managers.

“And we can’t allow ourselves to be isolated; we must be an active participant in world maritime affairs.

“We’re a shipping nation yet our ratings’ career opportunities are largely restricted to coastal shipping. Our young people want to go to sea but where’s their opportunity? We need to think how they can engage in the industry to its and the country’s advantage.”

“Now, aren’t you going to ask me about Patricks?” Actually that wasn’t the intention but Paddy tells us anyway: “The Patricks dispute was a failure by all the parties to avert war. Once it was over we all realised the importance of returning to functionality ASAP. Consistency of behaviour is very important in building trust.” ▲

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