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VITAL TO BOOST SUPPLY CHAINS

There's a chance it could be harder to find a number of consumer goods if you live in Western Australia or the Northern Territory over the coming weeks.

With hundreds of kilometres of rail freight lines flooded in South Australia, supply chains from Adelaide to WA and north to Darwin have been crippled.

The 1700km Trans Australian Railway runs from Port Augusta in South Australia to Kalgoorlie in the west.

It's a monster and to have it derailed, so to speak, is akin to our nation's central nervous system being severed in two.

As this newspaper aptly put it on Tuesday, the "once in a 200-year" flood has created a Hunger Games-type situation, with supermarket shelves empty and WA being more isolated than throughout the pandemic.

With the train line not expected to be fixed for many weeks, we have a major problem. Companies are coming up with various plans to ensure the supplies are able to be delivered to WA using planes, (other trains) and automobiles.

But there is a solution to this emergency staring Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the face. He just doesn't want to see it.

Australia's strategic fleet, otherwise known as the merchant navy, could have been used to get the nation moving again.

This is where my interest is piqued. I come from multiple generations of merchant seafarers. I grew up on the docks in Melbourne where my dad worked and the merchant navy is incredibly close to my heart.

I also took a strategic fleet policy to the 2019 election.

Mr Morrison and his predecessors in Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull have all refused to boost Australia's merchant navy capacity for fear of paying crews reasonable Australian wages.

They instead prefer to use foreign owned and operated ships, which aren't big enough to solve the current conundrum and sometimes have terrible conditions for their sailors.

This leaves Australia desperately short in emergencies and means our sovereign capability is at risk.

The greatest form of sovereignty is a nation's capacity to feed itself and that requires Australian farmers, Australian processors and Australian transport.

We have a flood in our outback stopping freight trains and merchant ships could be called in to carry supplies to ports and ensure much needed supplies get in and out of WA, but Australia does not have the capability for this at all.

In Australia, despite 99 per cent of our imports and exports of traded goods, including fuel, shipped in and out, we only have 12 vessels in our merchant fleet.

Yes, you read that right, just 12 ships flying under the Australian flag.

Compare this to the UK or Russia, which both have approximately 1300 in their merchant fleets, or Singapore, which has thousands, and our island continent is severely lacking in maritime depth.

It means we are forced to rely on foreign governments and companies for our essential import and help in national emergencies.

The lack of an Australian merchant fleet meant two Norwegian-flagged supply vessels

were needed to supply fuel, food, water and supplies to the stranded people in Mallacoota in Victoria during the 2019-2020 bushfires.

Not only does Scott Morrison not hold a hose, but he simply cannot learn from his mistakes.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese, however, has a plan.

Under an Albanese Labor Government, Australia's economic sovereignty and national security will be bolstered by a larger Australian maritime fleet.

Anthony and Victorian MP Catherine King, shadow minister for transport, have outlined a plan to boost our strategic fleet numbers if Labor wins the upcoming Federal election.

The new vessels will be Australian-flagged and Australian-crewed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the gaps in our supply chain and the danger from our lack of Australian-flagged vessels is now blindingly obvious.

We should have our own merchant capacity for times of emergency and for the national interest to be protected.

We should have our own merchant capacity so we can feed ourselves in a time of crisis.

It shouldn't take a war or a crisis to show us how much we need our own fleet.

Unless we have our own sovereignty, our nation will not be able to get itself out of trouble.

On the other side of the aisle to me, even Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce conceded the need for a stronger merchant fleet to make us less reliant. But it seems to have gone nowhere in the Coalition.

When it comes to fresh ideas, this Government is as empty as some supermarket shelves.

A merchant fleet is a no-brainer.

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