On 14th April 1912, the White Star liner Titanic was transformed in a few short hours from the world’s most celebrated ship into a name forever associated with disaster.

Many ships have sunk – too many – but few have had the lasting impact of the seemingly invulnerable Titanic.

The Titanic tragedy prompted the major shipping nations of the world, at that time, to take decisive action to address maritime safety. This led to the adoption, two years later, of the first-ever International Convention on Safety of Life at Sea and, ultimately, to the establishment of IMO itself.

Today, much updated and revised, SOLAS is still the most important international treaty addressing maritime safety. And, as 2012 marks the 100th year since that ill-fated ship foundered, the IMO Council decided that the World Maritime Day theme for this year should be IMO: One hundred years after the Titanic.

Since its formation, IMO’s main task has been to develop and maintain a comprehensive regulatory framework for international shipping. Its mandate was originally limited to safety-related issues, but subsequently this remit has been expanded to embrace environmental protection, legal matters, technical co-operation, issues that affect the overall efficiency of shipping and maritime security, including piracy and armed robbery against ships.

The direct output of IMO’s regulatory work is a comprehensive body of international conventions, supported by literally hundreds of guidelines and recommendations that, between them, govern just about every facet of the shipping industry – from the drawing board to the scrapyard. The most important result of all this is that shipping today is safer, cleaner, more efficient and more secure than at any time in the past.

But each new generation of vessels brings fresh challenges and, regrettably, accidents still occur, reinforcing the need for continual improvement. Our efforts to promote maritime safety, not least of
passenger ships, will never stop. We should respond quickly to accidents and we must be proactive.

To this end, we are planning to hold a two-day symposium at IMO Headquarters, in London, in conjunction with IMO’s Maritime Safety Committee next June (2013), on the Future of Ship Safety. The idea is to go beyond the current safety issues under the Committee and rigorously consider the future of maritime safety. The objective is for the discussions to contribute to the future advancement of the Organization’s maritime safety policy.

What separates the passenger and cruise ship industry from the rest of shipping is the unique nature of its cargo – hundreds and thousands of people. The lives of thousands of people are in the hands of the ship's management, the captain and crew and the operating staff. I therefore hope that this sector, in particular, will take the opportunity to lead the way, because safety is its main product – not comfort, entertainment or leisure. Without safety, the industry will not survive, let alone sustain its growth; and real safety does not result simply as a consequence of regulation-compliance.

Some 20 years ago, the International Safety Management Code, adopted by IMO, represented a step-change in the establishment of a safety culture in shipping. The time has now come to generate another step-change. This will not be achieved through legislative measures alone. We must generate a new impetus in shipping to go beyond compliance with regulations and explore industry-wide mechanisms to ensure the safety culture is embedded throughout the entire industry.

So this year, as we look back on that pivotal disaster 100 years ago, I urge IMO Member Governments and the shipping industry as a whole to refresh their determination to improve and enhance the safety of passenger shipping today, and into the future.