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**+** **Patrick Verhoeven** is secretary general of the European Community Shipowners' Associations (ECSA). Based in Brussels, it represents the national shipowner associations of the EU and Norway. Before joining ECSA in August 2013, he served 13 years as secretary-general of the European Sea Ports Organisation and seven years representing the interests of terminal operators, shipagents and silo companies at EU level.

Verhoeven started his career working for the Antwerp shipagent Grisar & Velge. He holds a PhD in applied economics and a bachelor in law from the University of Antwerp. In 2015 he joined the university's Centre for Maritime and Air Transport Management, where he is assistant professor in port economics and business. Verhoeven lives in Antwerp with his wife and three children.

01 Patrick Verhoeven with one of his 500 ties  
(Photograph: Luc Peeters)

# The ties that bind

Discussing neckwear and novel writing with **Patrick Verhoeven** of the European Community Shipowners' Associations

**○ What was your earliest memory?** The wedding of my aunt and uncle, somewhere in the early 1970s. I refused to hand over the flowers I was supposed to give to my aunt.

**Did you go through training/university or straight into work?**

I obtained a master's degree in applied economics in 1991, but had worked as a student with SeaLand in the port of Antwerp every summer since 1985. This motivated me to specialise in maritime economics and got me working full-time in the shipping industry straight after graduation.

**Who have been your mentors?**

The late Fernand Suykens, director-general at the Antwerp Port Authority and my professor of port economics, the most erudite person I ever met. David Whitehead, who recently retired as director of the British Ports Association. He was my first chairman at the European Sea Ports Organisation. And Professor Eddy Van de Voorde, who supervised my PhD at the University of Antwerp.

**Ambition or talent — which is more important?** I would say ambition. You can have a lot of talent, but if you don't use it then it isn't doing that much for you.

**Your biggest extravagance?** My tie collection. I've been buying ties since high school and have never thrown any away. I stopped counting but I must own 500 or so. I wear ties all the time, also at weekends and when on holiday. I don't associate them per se with formality.

**How do you relax?** Watching movies, sometimes up to three or four a weekend. I have a

particular passion for the golden age of Hollywood, films from the 1930s to the 1950s.

**What would you have done if you hadn't gone into shipping?** I would have liked to be a historian.

**What would you like to own that you do not possess?** A teleporter — one of those science-fiction machines that can transport you from A to B in no time. Travelling has, unfortunately, lost most of its charm and I have to do a lot of it in my job.

**Where and when are you happiest?** In Antwerp with my family and friends, either at home or on a leisurely stroll through town, which surprisingly almost always seems to end up in one of the many fine pubs we have.

**What would you change in shipping if you could?** Make it a more extrovert industry.

**Is politics important to you?** Yes, and I deal with it a lot professionally. Still, I wouldn't want to be a politician. I think we often underestimate what a demanding, ungrateful job it is.

**Which four people, living or dead, would you like to invite to dinner?** Peter Benoit, a 19th-century Flemish composer on whom I wrote a book; Lauren Bacall; Nigella Lawson; and my good friend and former colleague Hugo Callens (European Tugowners' Association), who is the best dinner companion anyone could wish for.

**What would your 20-year-old self say to you today if you met?** "What's with the beard?"

**What keeps you awake at night?** Mostly work.

**What are your favourite song, book and film?** Song: *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off* (George & Ira Gershwin). Book: *The Coming of Joachim Stiller* by Hubert Lampo (a magical-realistic novel set in my hometown. I re-read it nearly every summer). Film: *Manhattan* (Woody Allen).

**What is the most important lesson you have learned?** At the end of each day you should be able to look back at something that made you happy that day. It can be a very small thing — it usually is — but you must be conscious of it.

**What are your best and worst characteristics?** Best: perseverance. Worst: keeping frustrations too long inside.

**What is your greatest achievement so far?** Completing my PhD in 2015, on the subject of port management reform. It only took me nine years.

**What has been your greatest disappointment?** Standing next to the legendary Broadway lyricist and playwright Adolph Green at the cash desk of Tower Records, New York, in 1997 and being too timid to ask him to sign a CD of his which I, coincidentally, had just bought. What made it even worse is that I came across him the day after in Central Park — what are the odds in a city of 8.5 million people — and was again too star-struck to talk to him.

**What ambitions do you still have?** To write a best-selling novel. ✘ *Julian Bray*