Second registers have to be judged on their merits, says Jessica Bernfeld, post-graduate research fellow at the Seafarers’ International Research Centre

Second registers, or "secondary" registers, include those that are open to anyone. Some are geographical regions – which includes Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Cook Islands, CSR, DIS, Gibraltar, GIS, Isle of Man, Kerguelen, Netherlands Antilles, NIS, and MAR, among others – and are frequently characterised as providing an opportunity for shipowners to escape the competitive environment of a national register while still benefiting from the association with a reputable flag state. Some of these registers have been designated as "flags of convenience". And, as the quote above demonstrates, these registers tend to be grouped into a single category that is more closely related to open registers than their national counterparts. The incentives secondary registers offer range from less stringent crewing to more profitable tax regime than are found on the national flag. Some require that vessels be owned by a majority of nationals with other interests; others, such as MAR, are open to anyone. Registration fees, government subsidies, and responsibilities under international law (through their respective parent state) all vary from one secondary register to another.

One example is the 2005 Paris MOU black, grey and white list used to target ships for inspection. All but one of the secondary registers listed fall into the "white" category. The single exception, the Faeroe Islands, is on the grey list along with a number of national and many annual reports from three major port state control bodies – France, the United Kingdom, and the United States Coast Guard – confirm the majority of secondary registers listed are at or around (if not below) the average detention rates in these regions, indicating that they are not, as a whole, particularly substantial. However, this is not to say the secondary registers have comparable track records when it comes to port state control. For example, three Red Ensign flags have very different conclusions about the regulatory environment on secondary registers, either individually approached or exceeded regional average detention rates. For instance, the Isle of Man has one of the lowest detention rates of all the flags inspected. It should also be acknowledged that there are ways in which port state control data does not give a complete picture of secondary registers. For many of these registers, inspection data is not listed independently from that of the national register. Where they are separated out, as one marine official I interviewed mentioned, there are sometimes inaccuracies in the data that would not necessarily occur for national or open registers. Additionally, some secondary registers have so few ships visited in a given Paris MOU region that it is hard to get a true sense of their level of port state control. These kinds of practices make it hard to draw many conclusions about the regulatory environment on secondary registers, either individually or as a group.

Another characteristic levelled at secondary registers is that they mean a loss of jobs for national seafarers. While this may be true to some extent (a recent SIRC report on crewing levels found that vessels on secondary registers tend to have smaller crews than on either national or open registers), the fact that crewing requirements on secondary registers usually permit greater employment of foreign nationals than their national equivalents does not necessarily result in fewer jobs. Indeed, there are some cases in which the secondary register actually has a greater percentage of national flag states inspected. One point that is obvious, however, is that secondary registers are treated more as individual entities, as well as distinct from national and open ones, it will be impossible to get a true sense of what secondary registers are doing and the implications they have for seafarers.