

Letter from Scotland



A landlubber's journey to
the isles

Being a city boy, I don't often think of my fellow Scots on the 94 inhabited islands around our coast. And when I do think of the isles, it's a romantic vision of blue seas, high mountains and picturesque harbours. Then there's Caledonian MacBrayne, the red-funnelled ferry boats that take you "over the sea to Skye" and 21 other islands. I mention this because, as I write, negotiations are taking place to try to avert a strike of ferry crews this weekend, the first weekend of the holiday season. Already there's been a work-to-rule and some disruption to services.

The dispute highlights a whole host of issues for me. The immediate one is the tendering for a new eight-year government contract to run the western isles ferry services from next year. An open competition is required under European trading laws and state-owned Calmac (for short) faces a rival bid from the private international services company Serco which has already won the contract for the northern isles. The RMT union, which represents half of Calmac's 14,000 strong workforce, is demanding a guarantee from the Scottish government that pay, conditions and pensions will be protected under the new contract.

It's not easy to see how this can be done, since these are some of the few areas for manoeuvre Calmac and Serco have as they prepare their bid. The 29 ferry boats and harbour facilities are owned by a separate state company and the routes and timetables and fares are fixed by the government. It's all part of the complication of being in a single European market.

On the face of it, the single market sounds like a good idea. Companies should be able to bid for contracts – public and private – on an equal footing across Europe. But does that mean that low-paid workers should have their wages and conditions cut to the lowest common denominator to achieve this? Or should public “lifeline” services be exempt from the usual competition laws?

And other questions crowd in upon me as I stand on the deck of my imaginary ferry boat waiting for it to take me to the magic isles. Do we owe a special duty to the 103,700 people who live on our islands to provide them with a link to the mainland? Should we be encouraging tourists to go to the islands? Is the Gaelic culture of the Western Isles worth supporting? My own answer to all three questions is “Yes” but I’m not sure everyone agrees with me – whatever they might say.

The newspapers this week carry pages of densely typed names of students who have successfully completed their university degrees. It’s a lovely and quaint tradition, honouring the effort that young people have put into “being educated”. This week too is the end of the school term and the end of the parliamentary term at Holyrood. At First Minister’s question time, all the talk was about childcare during the holidays and the change of many college courses from part-time to full-time.

MSPs also signed off the bill ending automatic early release from prison and another introducing a licencing system for air-guns. The Scottish Government published its long-awaited estimates of the tax revenues we can expect from the North Sea oil and gas fields over the next four years. They are down fourfold from the estimates a year ago and range from £2.1bn to £10.8bn depending on the assumptions made.

The government also published its controversial land reform bill which would give ministers the power to order the sale of

land if the owner was deemed to standing in the way of “development.” The bill will also encourage community ownership of land and will end the rates exemption for shooting estates. The Conservatives have dubbed it a “rural land-grab” by the SNP.

Let’s not forget the Scottish Labour Party in all this radical talk. The two leadership contenders, Kezia Dugdale and Ken Mackintosh, have been exploring their differences. This week they clashed over council tax – Kezia wants to continue the freeze, Ken wants to end it. And on “the Glasgow question”, Kezia thinks the route to the recovery of Labour fortunes begins in winning back Glasgow, Ken thinks the party should move its headquarters and its emphasis to Edinburgh.

Finally, a hand-written copy of one of Robert Burns’ little known poems has come to light. It was found in a 19th century scrapbook and was sold at auction this week for £7,500. “The Humble Petition of Bruar Water to the Noble Duke of Atholl “ has been hailed as evidence that Burns’ was a pioneering environmentalist. In it the river Bruar calls on the Duke to plant trees along its banks, trees which can still be seen by House of Bruar, a well-known watering hole and shopping centre on the A9.

“Would then my noble master please
To grant my highest wishes,
He’ll shade my banks wi’ tow’ring trees,
And bonnie spreading bushes.
Delighted doubly then, my lord,
You’ll wander by my banks,
And listen mony a grateful bird
Return you tuneful thanks.”