

Letter from Scotland

As I stood on the deck of the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry to Arran last week, little did I think I was sailing into deep political controversy. When I arrived in Brodick, a beautiful sunny day I might add, there were long queues of cars and lorries waiting to board and lots of puzzled and angry drivers. Why had one of the two ferries broken down? Where was the new ferry boat, due five years ago? And who is to blame?

The Isle of Arran is supposed to be Scotland in miniature and last week it certainly captured the mood of the times, frustration. The larger of the two Arran ferries, MV Caledonian Isles, developed serious trouble in its port engine and had to go into dock in Troon to be repaired – it's nearly 30 years old. The state-owned ferry company Caledonian MacBrayne had no replacement available, leaving the smaller boat to ply to-and-fro as fast as it could. That meant delays and long queues and fears that food and fuel supplies would run short on the island and its tourist trade would be thrown into confusion.

The finger of blame then pointed to the two new ferries being

built at the Ferguson shipyard on the Clyde. Why are they five years behind schedule and more than two times the original budget of £97million? Various explanations have been advanced. One is that the design is revolutionary – the boats being powered either by diesel or by liquefied natural gas. Another is that the design was continually being changed by CMAL, Cal Mac's procurement agency. Yet another is that Ferguson's were just not up to the job and installed the wrong wiring.



Trouble on the ferries

But the most politically charged explanation, which the Conservatives highlighted at First Minister's Questions on Thursday, is that the SNP government rushed through the deal with Fergusons (which they had nationalised) to give them some good news in time for their annual conference in 2015. And this was in the face of official advice that further guarantees should be sought.

Sure enough, an Auditor General's report last month found "multiple failings" in the ferry deal with Ferguson's, among them significant gaps in the paper-trail. Nicola Sturgeon admits there are gaps in the documentation but says the deal was not rushed for political reasons. It was to save the shipyard from closure, with the loss of 300 jobs, and to have two pioneering ferries built here in Scotland rather than abroad.

But the issue of lost or withheld documents has plagued the government on several other fronts this week. The Labour Party leader Anas Sarwar has accused the SNP of presiding over "a culture of secrecy". He cites the ferries contract, the secrecy over the state-aid rules that allowed a £40 million deal to save the aluminium smelter in Lochaber to go ahead, and the construction faults at the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow.

And then there's the long-running appeal by both Labour and the Conservatives for the SNP to publish the expert advice it has received over the legality of the planned independence referendum. On Tuesday, the Information Commissioner ruled that such advice should be published.

Of course, all this is part of the rough and tumble of the local council election campaign which will come to a triumphant finish on May 5th, an SNP triumph if the opinion polls are to be believed. Labour and the Conservatives are fighting it out for second place. The Greens, now in government with the SNP, are hoping for a respectable fourth place.

The main issue being talked about is the "cost of living crisis". A survey by the Office of National Statistics has found that nearly a quarter of households are having difficulty paying their energy bills.

It's almost as if the Covid pandemic is a thing of the past.

Masks are no longer widely worn, case numbers continue to fall (now around 3,000 a day) and from Sunday, there will no longer be general PCR testing and contact tracing. However the number of symptoms to look out for has been expanded to include unexplained tiredness, headaches and feeling sick. If you suspect Covid, you are advised to stay at home for ten days, or seven days if two lateral flow tests are clear.

This week attention has turned to a court ruling in England that the decision, early in the pandemic, to discharge elderly patients from hospitals to nursing homes without being tested was illegal. Whether that ruling will stand – and whether there will be a similar case brought to court in Scotland – remains to be seen. But in any case in Scotland there's to be a public inquiry, beginning in the summer, into the difficult balancing act the government and health authorities faced in the ignorant spring of 2020 between safeguarding the elderly and preventing the hospitals from being overwhelmed.

Finally, back to ferries. The P&O ferry between Scotland and Northern Ireland, the European Causeway, spent over an hour on Tuesday afternoon drifting without power five miles off the port of Larne. This was the company whose ferry services were only just getting under way again after it summarily sacked its 800 workers to replace them with cheaper agency labour. Luckily, conditions were calm and the engines eventually restarted. But the 400 passengers on board must have wondered what was going on.

They had a very real version of what is happening to all of us, drifting on a sea of uncertainty.



fbpic- First Minister Statement: COVID-19 Next Steps. Nicola Sturgeon MSP First Minister arrives wearing a tartan mask before announcing changes to The Scottish Government Covid-19 lockdown including the opening of schools Scottish Lockdown Coronavirus.Poolphoto/Fraser Bremner/Scottish Daily Mail Thursday 30 July 2020. Picture FRASER BREMNER