

Letter from Scotland

People living on the 22 main islands off the west coast of Scotland have two favourite topics of conversation – the weather and Caledonian MacBrayne. On both subjects there is plenty to moan about. The weather is always bad and the ferry service is worse.

You have got to feel sorry for CalMac's 1700 staff. They are standing on windy decks or serving teas in swaying cafés, doing their best for the five million passengers, cars and lorries they take to the islands each year. It's more difficult to feel sorry for the Scottish government ministers, though I do have pity for them. They spend £165m each year subsidising the ferries and yet they suffer wave after wave of problems and criticisms.



When the boat comes in. CalMac ferry terminal, Brodick, Isle of Arran.

This week the boss of CalMac, Robbie Drummond, was sacked, though it's not clear why. Last week the boss of the shipyard where two new ferries are being built was also sacked, again for mysterious reasons. There's talk of the need for "a change of direction" but so far the transport minister Mairi McAllan (the seventh in as many years) has kept her head well below the pier.

The basic problem is that the fleet of 33 vessels is getting old and there has not been enough investment in new ferries over the last decade. But there are other problems. Fares have been kept low to satisfy the islanders and the tourism industry. There's confusion over the CalMac superstructure, a holding company David MacBrayne, an operating company CalMac and a procurement company Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd (set up to satisfy EU state-subsidy rules). Then there is the

issue of where any new ferries should be built, in Scotland or abroad.

In an attempt to keep a struggling shipyard on the Clyde from closing, the Scottish government gave a £94m contract to Ferguson Marine to build two new super-ferries (capable of running on liquefied gas as well as diesel). This turned out to be a disaster. Six years later neither of the ships is in service and the cost has soared to £400m. In contrast, four other smaller ferries are being built to budget and on time at a yard in Turkey.

Meanwhile the islanders are left guessing when the next ferry breakdown will be, how many days they will be without deliveries and how many tourists will be trapped trying to get home. To add to the government's worries, the tourism season is about to start and the CalMac contract comes up for renewal this summer.

For Labour and the Conservatives, there are barrels of rotten fish to throw at the SNP in this election year. For them, the boat has come in.

In all, it's not been a happy week for the SNP. The latest opinion poll, from YouGov, shows them holding on to just 19 Westminster seats in Scotland and Labour storming into 28 (the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are put at 5 seats each).

The SNP's new Hate Crime and Public Order Act, which came into effect on 1st April, has turned out to a rather sick joke, which has caused more hate on social media rather than less. It was supposed to protect minorities, such as religious groups, gay and lesbian and transgender people, from abuse. But the police have been overwhelmed with over 3,000 vexatious complaints – largely against politicians and other public figures with whom campaigners disagree.

It took the magical powers of JK Rowling to diffuse the situation. The complaint against her on-line remarks on trans-women was found to be unfounded and the police, eventually, had to concede that it would not even be retained on their records.

Then the government's attempt to reform the law, to try to achieve more convictions for rape and sexual assault, has also run into difficulties. The parliamentary committee on the issue issued a divided report. And the legal fraternity has been voicing its concerns over the proposal to drop the verdict of "not proven" and the changes to jury numbers and majorities. And they are certainly not in favour of non-jury trials.

The week's boat has come in, but it's brought with it just a cargo of problems and some wet and cold weather.