

Letter from Scotland

For the 50,000 people who live on Scotland's western islands, the words "Cal-Mac" provoke either rage or a shrug of the shoulders. Yet the state-owned ferry company Caledonian MacBrayne is a "lifeline" to the islands, providing them with all their heavy supplies and a means of getting cars to and from the mainland. And, of course, bringing a stream of tourists to boost the local economy.



When the boat comes in....if it comes in! Cal-Mac ferry at Brodick, Isle of Arran.

But Cal-Mac has been sailing through a sea of troubles in recent years, largely due to under-investment in its fleet of 33 vessels and partly due to poor management and political bungling. On Monday, the totem vessel in all this, the Glen Sannox, is due to be handed over to Cal-Mac by Ferguson's shipyard. It's six years late and four times over budget.

It won't actually go into service on the Arran route until December, just as the manager of Cal-Mac, Duncan Mackison, says he's facing "a perfect storm" of delays, just as the winter maintenance programme begins. Another vessel on the Arran route, the 31 year old Caledonian Isles, has been in dry dock for 11 months for £6.5m of repairs and won't be back sailing until next month, at best. Meanwhile, four new ferries being built in Turkey will not start coming on stream till the spring. The first of those has been delayed by four months because of a shortage of skilled workers over there.

The whole shambles goes back to 2006 when Cal-Mac was forced to hive off its procurement arm to a separate agency CMAL to comply with European competition rules. It looked as if all Scottish shipyards would be out-bid by yards in Poland and Turkey and indeed they were, except for Ferguson's on the Clyde which won a contract worth £97m to build two proto-type ferries which could run on liquefied natural gas as well as traditional diesel.

The SNP government was so proud of this achievement that it bore with the delays and cost over-runs as the project proved more difficult than at first thought. It even nationalised Ferguson's shipyard when it went bust. The total bill for the two ferries has now reached £400m.

The opposition parties, of course, have used the debacle to brand the SNP as incompetent wishful-thinkers who have their minds on higher things like independence. And they have succeeded. You only have to utter the word "ferries" and everyone thinks of SNP incompetence. It doesn't help that the Cal-Mac board has tried to distance itself from the troubles. The chairman is Erik Ostergaard, who lives in Denmark. He is said to have made just one visit to see his ferries in action and two other members of the board have never been known to visit any of Cal-Mac's 50 ports of call. The 1,700 people who work for Cal-Mac must feel slightly abandoned, not to mention the 50,000 islanders.

The basic trouble is that no one wants to take responsibility for the lack of investment in the Cal-Mac fleet for the last 20 years. And politicians lack the courage to increase charges or taxes to pay for it.

Ferries are just one example of such austerity. It's a disease which has hollowed our public services and left 40 per cent of all families in Scotland in deep poverty, according to a report out this week from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It lays part of the blame on the social security system and has called on both governments in London and Edinburgh to increase child benefits.

Poverty breeds addiction and crime and this week we learned that our prisons are so full (around 300 over the 8,000 capacity) that short-term prisoners are to be freed after serving just 40 per cent of their sentence, rather than the current 50 per cent. There will be some exceptions, of course, but if we had invested in a proper community service alternative, most of these prisoners would not be in prison at all but learning to correct their ways out in the community.

An even bigger example is climate change. This week over 60 environmental and trade union groups have called on the Chancellor to invest £1.9bn each year in a transition fund, to move Britain out of oil and gas production and into renewables. Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and Extinction Rebellion don't often sign petitions alongside Unite, the RMT and the Scottish Trade Union Congress but they have come together to make sure jobs in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeenshire and elsewhere in Scotland are "transitioned" into the off-shore wind industry.

One man who has gone further than most to highlight the progress of climate change is the Scottish arctic explorer Pen Hadow. He has just paid a visit to the most northerly point of the British Isles, a rock known as the "Out Stack" off

Shetland, to highlight the fact that the ice at the North Pole is melting fast and we are not far away from arctic disaster.

But if we can't even fix our ferries, we will need to try harder to fix the planet.