

Letter from Scotland

Saving Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde was to have been one of Nicola Sturgeon's great successes as first minister. But this week she watched the yard lose a vital contract, just as she was cleared of any involvement in the SNP's internal financial scandal.

Both affairs have severely rocked the SNP's boat and both have been tales of woe on the scale of a Norse Saga.

Ferguson's, one of the last two shipbuilding yards on the Clyde, was nationalised by the Sturgeon government in 2019 when it ran into trouble building two large ferries for Caledonian MacBrayne. One of them, the Glen Rosa, is still not complete. The other, the Glen Sannox, finally entered service in January this year – seven years late and four times over-budget. This week it suffered another embarrassment when it was withdrawn from the Arran run for a few days while a crack in the hull was repaired.



Is it the end of shipbuilding on the Clyde ? Ferguson's shipyard, begun by the four Ferguson brothers in 1903.

So one could understand why there were doubts over whether it could take on the next order from Cal Mac, for seven small electric ferries worth £175m. These are now to be built in Gdansk in Poland, a yard which has built several ferries for Cal Mac in the past. But it leaves Ferguson's 400 workers angry and anxious because the order book is now virtually empty. And it does seem unpatriotic not to have ferry boats for Scottish islands built on the Clyde.

Cal Mac – or rather its procurement arm CMAL – makes the point that it had to have an open competition for the contract or it would face legal action from the other five bidders on the grounds of unfair competition. And this isn't the only cruel twist in the Saga because Ferguson's insist the delays and over-runs on the Glen Sannox and the Glen Rosa ferries were because they were pioneering the new technology of dual gas/diesel engines and because the design brief kept changing.

And, of course, the ferries were caught in the usual political

whirlpool of blame as to who is looking after the interest of Scotland's precious islanders. The arguments splashed up again at first minister's question time on Thursday. Nicola Sturgeon herself has admitted mistakes were made and perhaps she should have paid more attention to what was going on at Cal Mac and Ferguson's. In the end, the industry secretary Kate Forbes has given Ferguson's £14m to re-equip the yard in the hope it can compete for the next ferry contract from Cal Mac for three new medium sized ferries.

There's been better news for Ms Sturgeon in the second Saga of the week, the strangely named Operation Branchform. This is the lengthy and suspiciously secretive police investigation into how £660,000 of donations to the SNP's referendum appeal found its way into the party's general funds. It's taken four years for one man to appear in court to be charged with embezzlement. Peter Murrell, Nicolas Sturgeon's estranged husband, and former chief executive of the SNP, made no plea when he appeared at Edinburgh Sheriff Court on Thursday. Both Ms Sturgeon and the party's treasurer Colin Beattie have been cleared of any involvement.

"This is the outcome I have always expected," she told reporters. "There was never a scrap of evidence against me." But she admitted it had not been easy enduring the two years between her arrest and this week's announcement from the Crown Office.

I still wonder why it has taken the police so long to investigate what seems a simple case involving just a few people. And did they have to erect an incident tent on Nicola Sturgeon's front lawn, as if there had been a murder? The timing of their actions and announcements has always been suspicious. This week's news, for instance, comes just a few days after Ms Sturgeon announced she would not be standing again in next year's Scottish elections.

Although these two Sagas – the ferries and arrests – damaged

the SNP's reputation and their poll ratings at the time, the party has bounced back. In the latest poll, by Survation, the SNP are on 34 per cent support while Labour are on 23 per cent. Reform, meanwhile, is enjoying its highest score yet in Scotland, of 17 per cent, reflecting a mood of "a plague on both your houses" especially among young voters.

It's not much wonder really, with the failure of all the major parties to come up with more than lip service to welfare reform, NHS restructuring, university funding, and climate change. This week's government plan to convert the Grangemouth refinery into a renewable energy hub, Project Willow, talks of nine possible developments employing 800 people but not for many years and only if the government's £200m can attract £2.3bn of private investment.

As the week unfolded, we needed something to cheer us up. The weather played its part, dry, bright and sunny, if a bit cold. And news came that another of the world's biggest sporting events is coming to Scotland. The Tour de France cycling championship will begin at Edinburgh Castle in July 2027. This most curious of sporting events will mean an economic and publicity windfall for Scotland. And because of that, I don't think it will be long before other countries will want to join in, and the race will become the Tour de Europe.



Picture by Allan McKenzie/SWPix.com – 19/03/2025 – Cycling – The Official Announcement of the 2027 Tour de France and Tour de France Femmes Grand Departs’ – Edinburgh Castle, Edinburgh Scotland – The 2027 Tour de France Grand Depart Men will take place in Edinburgh – (L to R) Mark Cavendish, Christian Prudhomme, HRH Sophie The Duchess of Edinburgh