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Editorial: Full Astern

British Columbia's ferries have been serving coastal residents and visitors for 50 years. However, the system was never designed to be 'sustainable'—with enough leeway to renew the fleet. The aging fleet was surfacing as a major problem by 2003.

The Liberal Cabinet did not want to be responsible for the enormous fare hikes they saw coming—if it did not put money into BC's coastal transportation link.

In a clever piece of spin, a reason put forward for 'privatizing' the ferry service was to 'remove it from political control'. In fact, not surprisingly, they did not want to carry the can. So they thought up a quasi-privatization scheme to put the user-pay system at a remove—in the structure of BC Ferry Services Inc.

It is clear now that the eight-year-old, poorly planned and inadequately financed 'privatization' dodge was a serious mistake. The government did not count on the public's option of simply not riding the ferries at the prices asked. And worse, it did not take into account the impact of the subsequent rise in living and business costs for BC's 750,000 ferry-dependent citizens.

The resultant economic downturn for the corporation and the province makes a 'full astern' imperative.

The *Coastal Ferry Act, 2003* needs more than a review; it must be repealed. It's up to Ferry Commissioner Macatee to set a new—maybe an old—direction in his review. It is likely that reverting to a Crown corporation, financed as part of the provincial budget, with its debt assumed by the province, would both reduce crippling interest rates and permit more reasonable fares.

This essential service, and its fares, are a government responsibility; its ships are a vital part of the provincial transportation system; its debt is really a provincial debt. This can be seen by reflecting on whether the government could let BCFS go bankrupt and let the ferries stop running. Of course it can't. (Though, of course, it does not want to be seen to add \$1.3 billion to the provincial debt).

However a restructuring needs to be done honestly and straightforwardly to restore this provincial economic catalyst to its rightful place, and to restore public confidence. ☞

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