



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

John Finnie

Member of the Scottish Parliament
Highlands and Islands

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Ball Pàrlamaid na h-Alba
A' Ghàidhealtachd agus na h-Eileanan

Fergus Ewing MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

4th August 2020

Dear Fergus

It's disappointing, but entirely understandable, that the widely reported bad behaviour of a number of visitors to the Highlands has created community anxiety, and in many instances anger.

Tourism is vital to Scotland and impacts on every aspect of public life from transport to housing, from health to education so I conclude this letter with a positive proposal I trust you can support.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the vulnerability of our society, and particularly that of our tourism industry, into sharp focus. I strongly welcome the support that the Scottish Government has given to the tourist sector, often making business-saving interventions.

The actions giving rise to the recent headlines about irresponsible campers leaving rubbish, human waste and damaging trees might be considered nothing new. However, it's perhaps the prevalence and extent that's on a different scale generating unwelcome bad publicity for tourism and the vast majority of responsible visitors.

We know that positive action can, and in the instance of the Lomond and Trossachs National Park, has been taken to address this scourge. I believe better toilet and chemical waste disposal facilities and prompt litter bin emptying, coupled with robust enforcement of existing legislation by local authorities and the police are needed.



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You may be aware that in recent years Highland Council, ever keen to proclaim enthusiasm for multi-agency working, closed a whole swathe of public toilets without discussing this with either the Director of Public Health or the Police. In contrast, public health and visitors' comfort has been greatly assisted by the availability of appropriate toilet and showering facilities as part of joint initiatives with harbour authorities and local community halls and this approach needs to be applauded and encouraged.

Of course, everyone must travel to be a tourist and I'd like to raise a few issues around that important issue;

I will not rehearse the Scottish Greens well-documented position to the Government's encouragement for growth in the aviation sector. Suffice to say we do value the Scottish Government's support for lifeline air services across the Highlands and Islands.

With trains there's a mixed message. Scotrail have done much to promote the use of trains for day trips and holidays and are to be strongly commended for responding to the growth of mountain-biking in the West Highlands by providing dedicated bike-carriages to Fort-William. Sadly that provision is in stark contrast to the modest number of bikes that can be carried on the other lines, including the Highland Mainline. Of course this isn't a simple issue to resolve, rather a longer-term one requiring wider alignment of policies. The bike-carriage example shows co-ordinated working between sectors benefitting traveller and tourist provider alike, and there's no reason why this couldn't be applied to the bus industry who also have methods of conveying bikes.

We also know that many of the areas we encourage people to visit are not served by public bus services. Whilst what public transport is available is not 'active travel friendly' or, in the case of Northern Isles' internal ferries, not even Disability Discrimination Act compliant.



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For our resident island population ferries are a life-line service and not a summer trip. You may recall that, in the context of the present pandemic, I raised with you in Chamber the issue of islanders not being further disadvantaged by not being able to benefit from the lifting of some restrictions on ferry travel, as our nation moves from lock-down.

Sadly, that is not a new issue. Like railway rolling stock, the whole question of ferry design and procurement is complex but must have regard to islanders' knowledge and wishes if we are to prevent the ongoing problem of tourist traffic meaning islanders are unable to travel to the Mainland for funerals, relatives return 'home' to pay their respects or get livestock or produce to the Mainland timeously. Meantime, some system of 'priority' must be considered for islanders.

Again, this is a matter where co-ordination across Government portfolios is required to ensure no unintended consequences from not understanding of the role of tourists, be they day trippers who impact significantly of the Clyde islands, or longer terms visitors across our many islands.

We all note the exponential growth in the cruise industry but less well understand the impact, for local attractions and tourist service providers, never mind the local population, of several hundred being in relatively small area. I recall a conversation with local taxi operator at one port telling me that he saw no benefit from the many cruise ship patrons on his island as, "the tours are all sorted on board." Whatever the accuracy of that statement, I'm sure we all want to see a financial return for the smaller, local operators from this sector. Of course, whilst the social impact of this growth isn't fully understood we do know that these ocean going vessels are often gross polluters who will have a negative impact on port air quality.

The rural private rental sector is vibrant but brings a down side. All but a handful of properties in some areas, for instance the north of the Island of Mull, are holiday lets. Of course the tourism is welcome, but that change has played a significant part in altering whole communities. Work patterns have changed and tied housing is no longer so prevalent, however, no housing means no family accommodation which means no children which means no local schools. This is a pattern I'm sure you're



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very familiar with. I know we both share the view that 'repopulating the glens' would be a positive step forward but to have meaning there must be a rethink on real 'community building' and importantly the continuing role that tourism could play. Likewise, the impact of short term lets in urban areas such as Edinburgh Old Town are well documented, a pattern that applies in both rural and urban settings.

The quality of our marine environment for divers. The accessibility of our hills for climbers. Who 'owns' a destination e.g. 'The North Coast 500'. The state of our roads for travellers. The implications for our emergency services of large tourist events. The maintenance of our national historic estate. Those are but a handful of the myriad of issues connected with our vital tourism sector.

The Scottish Green Party are very supportive of encouraging responsible tourism and are keen to understand its social and environmental impact of tourism in Scotland.

The tourism-related issues I've raised cross many portfolios and sectors. I believe now is a good time for the Scottish Government to commission independent research into the social and environmental impact of tourism. The downside of the pandemic may indeed give a ready comparator rather than a reason not to act. I would envisage a full public consultation and the report to cover the economic, housing, education, transport, planning, trading standard, public health and environmental impact of Scotland's tourism sector and I trust you'll give this favourable consideration.

Kind regards

John Finnie MSP