

FAST FERRIES

I have looked at the issue of fast ferries and I do not believe that fast ferries are an economic proposition in a Scottish context, except in very special circumstances. I do not know of cases where the circumstances apply. I detail the reasons below.

It is true that fast ferries are being introduced by many major ferry companies, including those in Norway and the Pacific North-West (BC Ferries and Washington State Ferries). Despite the Bergen-Stavanger tragedy, it is unlikely that safety will be seen as a major problem with these designs, and the environmental problem of high wakes seems to be dealt with in at least some versions of the new craft (ref 1 below). However there seem to be three elements in common in each of these cases that do not so readily apply in the Scottish context.

(a) High volume of traffic

The new breed of fast ferries have tended to be introduced where there are high volumes of traffic. The ill-fated passenger-only Bergen-Stavanger ferry ran between two cities with a combined population that is nearly as much as the entire Highlands and Islands region. The market potential for six fast passenger-only ferries on four Puget Sound routes to Seattle is estimated to be about 18,000 foot-passengers daily (ref 1). The three new Pacificat fast (37 knot) ferries that BC Ferries are building will carry 250 vehicles and 1,000 passengers (Ref 2).

(b) High cost of service

Many fast ferries are designed to be passenger-only and foot passengers tend not to be major revenue generators (e.g. in the region of 10% of combined operators revenues on the Gourock-Dunoon runs). Foot passengers on the two Gourock-Dunoon ferry runs accounted for a little over £400,000 revenues in 1996-97 (a little over £1000 a day in revenues), although revenues from vehicle-related traffic on the two runs were about £4mill over the year.

However, while they are not major revenue generators, foot passengers are costly to provide for in terms of comfort and amenities, in contrast to vehicle-related traffic (the minimum needs of the latter are an open deck, as on Western Ferries Dunoon service). There is also a premium to be paid for speed, and technical reports that I consulted in the Andersonian Library (Strathclyde University) were producing estimates of substantial increases in fuel consumption for modest increases in speed. The Norwegian fast ferries generally carry a 50% fare premium over standard ferries and even then they tend to have 60 to 80% of their operating costs covered by government subsidy. Commuters may be expected to be less price sensitive (and so pay higher fares) than many other categories of foot passenger such as low income non-car owners, and commuter fares already account for 48% of all fares in the Puget Sound area (ref 3), this could increase with the new ferries.

(c) Barriers to road and rail alternatives

Fjord geography make other transport links difficult or impossible down the Norwegian coast. Imagine having the populations of Aberdeen and Dundee separated

by a fjord coast line, and there you have the Bergen-Stavanger fast-ferry service. In the case of the Puget Sound developments, these have been introduced in an attempt to get Seattle commuters to leave their cars at home instead of taking them on the ferry and adding more congestion to the roads (ref 1). In the case of the BC Ferries Pacificat service, they are designed to deliver more frequent “pulses” of traffic onto the roads and so ease road congestion (ref 2). It is difficult to see similar conditions in a Scottish context. For example, Glasgow is a major destination for many West Coast travellers, but starker ferries+rail public transport connections already exist for foot passengers from Dunoon and Rothesay, while (relatively uncongested) road or rail alternatives often exist for those travelling to Glasgow from centres of population up the West Coast. If you wanted to get up the Clyde to Glasgow, on the figures I have seen it would be one of the most expensive options. If it embarked and disembarked passengers on the way (like trains), it would lose its speed advantage. If it did not embark and disembark passengers on the way, it would only be suitable for passengers connecting with a very limited range of terminals – and you would have to get to these terminals if you do not live near them.

So if there is consideration to be given to introducing fast ferries in a Scottish context, it should be recognised that the conditions that have led to their adoption in these other cases do not apply so obviously here. Fast ferries are expensive and tend only to be adopted where there is a high volume of passengers, a lack of transport alternatives, passengers willing to pay a high price premium and/or a government willing to heavily subsidise their operation. I do not see these conditions as generally holding in Scotland.

There are a couple of final points; if fast ferries were adopted on the Clyde, it might be fine for higher income foot passenger commuters (like me) who would be prepared and able to pay the price premium to get me to and from Glasgow more quickly. But such a service would have to work partly by diverting traffic from the conventional Clyde ferry services. That could threaten the viability of these services, many of which (Gourock, Largs, Ardrossan, Wemyss Bay) are designed to integrate with the rail service.

Also, ferry plus rail connections mean I can get from Dunoon to the Centre of Glasgow (Central station) in as little as 70 minutes, every hour or half hour for £8.80 return. You would need a lot of heavily subsidised fast ferries making limited stops to replicate that kind of service. And not just for Dunoon based travellers like me, you would have to do it for other travellers scattered along the Clyde.

I am open to persuasion otherwise, but on economic grounds (and on the information I have available to me), I do not see fast ferries as a realistic option for Clyde travel at the present time.

References

The following references are all available on the internet and I have added their web pages for easy reference.

- (1) WSF news march 1997 “ferries in the Millennium”
www.wsf.wa.gov/ferries/news

- (2) "Why Fast Ferries?" Pacificat Highlights
www.bcferrries.com/news
- (3) Puget Sound Trends T4 May 1999
www.psrc.org/t4trend4.htm

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