

Looking at the ferry in a new light

We're pretty accustomed to talking about Marine Atlantic in the negative, as a local issue, and as a transportation issue. Indeed, there are many challenges in operating this ferry service that combines passengers and cargo, that faces some difficult weather conditions, and that is a major link for an island with few options. One of the biggest challenges is getting the topic of Marine Atlantic enough attention on the national scale, and I hope to do that as the chair of the St. John's Board of Trade.

The following comment is fairly obvious - if you want something here, or to leave here, it floats or flies. My next point is rarely talked about, but I hope the media monitors in more federal departments than Transport Canada read this next line and circulate it to their bureaucratic and political colleagues. Marine Atlantic serves the island as a link, yes, but it serves Ontario car companies, Quebec wholesalers, PEI farmers, New Brunswick suppliers, Nova Scotia tourism operators, and the Alberta oil patch. Newfoundland is still buying and mainland Canada is looking to sell. It's not hard to see Marine Atlantic playing a big role in helping other provinces' economies.

Let's be very clear about a few things. Marine Atlantic is a vital link, not a link of luxury. We need it. On average, Marine Atlantic ferries approximately one-half of the goods entering the province, including 90 per cent of all perishable items. Items from Ontario and PEI and other provinces, whose economies are hurting. Do you see now how Marine Atlantic is a national, economic issue, not just a provincial transportation topic.

Let me elaborate. This province is in the unique position of being a buyer when others are selling. So let's get Ontario and Nova Scotia and the other provinces and territories to say to the federal government, 'look, we need Marine Atlantic to be at its best too.' That conversation isn't happening a whole lot but if we want to see marked improvement in service and less costs in our businesses, it's going to have to happen.

I don't mind issuing a challenge from time to time when it's something that the Board and its members have a vested interest in. The challenge is this: next time you are talking to a mainland partner, supplier, or customer, tell them that Marine Atlantic is their link to prosperity. If they want to help their bottom lines, they will relay the message on to their local politicians.

National issues often get national solutions. Regional ones might get regional solutions, and provincial issues can largely be left alone. We can and should put this on the radar because it will mean lower prices for tourists who come to our shores, savings that consumers and businesses keep in their pockets in this province, and a few more trips home for our ex-pats.

Lest anyone be put off by my words, this isn't a slight against the professional Marine Atlantic employees who serve the travelling public and the shippers who move products on and off the island. It is a call to make this issue, in the eyes of the people creating the environment in which Marine Atlantic operates, one that they can't side-step because it's just a Newfoundland problem.

Let's get Marine Atlantic the attention it deserves, from the people who profit from the service to the people who make the rules for the service. This is a Canada problem, and it needs a Canada solution. So let's create one.