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Commentary on MV Quinsam Incident by Patrick Brown

## *If they'd tell us, we'd feel safer*

On Tuesday evening, January 7, vehicles were boarding the ferry MV *Quinsam* at Nanaimo when the ferry, apparently without warning, left the dock. The driver of the Gabriola-bound truck on the boarding ramp was able to escape, but his truck ended up in the water.

No explanation has been given for this incident. The results of various investigations of the sinking of the *Queen of the North* off Gil Island about a year ago have not been released. The results of former Auditor-General George Morfitt's overall review of safety on BC Ferries have not been released. BC Ferry Services Inc has not replied to accusations made by its former safety director that its safety culture was not what it should be. And the acting auditor-general recommended in September that BC Ferries be more open and accountable.

Considering the thousands of individual voyages made by the ferries every year, any individual's chances of being involved in an incident are small. (In twenty years of regular ferry travel, I can only recall one incident where *Island Tides'* staff was on board an imminent shipwreck; that time the skill of the skipper of 'C' Watch on the *Queen of Nanaimo* performed a manoeuvre with amazing panache which resulted in only minor damage to the Sturdies Bay waiting room.) But ferry users have a right to be a little worried. Given that safety has to be the first priority in operating any ferry fleet, it would be reassuring if the ferry corporation would talk about it a bit more.

The corporation's silence has been noted by none other than former premier Glen Clark, who hasn't said anything political (at least in public) for years. He felt moved to point out that when he was accountable for ferries, a similar incident at Departure Bay in which a minivan fell in the water, and two people were killed, was investigated within four weeks.

MLA Gary Coons, the official NDP Critic for Ferries and Ports, has asked Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon to provide some assurances that any recommendations Morfitt makes will be acted on immediately. Coons is MLA for North Coast, and his constituents take a lot of ferry trips. He describes ferries, correctly, as our 'marine highways.'

But back to the *Quinsam* and its unexplained departure. A remarkably similar incident occurred at the same Nanaimo terminal on April 13, 2002, when the *Bowen Queen*,

substituting for the *Quinsam* on the Gabriola run, backed off the dock without warning. This incident was the subject of a little-known Transportation Safety Board report, released December 17, 2002.

According to the report, the *Bowen Queen* 'spontaneously' backed off the dock, and then immediately returned, over a time period of some 15 seconds. Vehicles were unloading at the time, but alert deck crews halted the operation; no vehicles were damaged, and there were no injuries.

The *Bowen Queen*, like the *Quinsam* and seven other ships in the BC Ferries fleet, is powered by four right-angle drive (RAD) units (like outboard drives), one at each corner. Each drive can rotate 360°, is individually powered by a diesel engine, and can be individually controlled, but most of the time all are controlled by twin joysticks in the wheelhouse.

When the vessel is in the dock, it is held there by running the engines forward at light throttle. The TSB report concluded that two of the units (either forward or aft, since all these ferries are double-ended) had rotated without being so commanded, thus first moving the vessel sideways, then back, then sideways, then forward again.

To quote the TSB report: 'While the cause of the ferry moving away from the dock and then quickly back toward it again, was not determined, the automatic steering control system has been known to behave erratically on several occasions. Interviews with the crews of British Columbia Ferry Corporation (BC Ferries) vessels fitted with similar RADs and steering control systems, show that all nine vessels have a similar history.'

'It appears that these RADs will, suddenly and without warning, spontaneously rotate independently of the command signal. Sometimes the RAD legs rotate through 360° and stop of their own accord, although most times they continue turning until the engine is shut down. There have been numerous instances where one RAD leg has spontaneously rotated. While it is not unknown for two RADs to spontaneously rotate simultaneously, these instances are comparatively infrequent.'

The TSB concluded that the printed circuit boards in the RAD control system could be defective, and recommended a regular replacement schedule for all components in the system.

(It's worth noting that when the *Quinsam* was first put into

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service, it was referred to locally as the 'Flying Flounder,' reflecting the difficulty that various helmsmen had in adapting to the new steering and propulsion systems. However, these RAD-powered ferries are the workhorses of the inter-island fleet, and have given years of reliable service.)

So now we know. The ferry corporation is in the process of replacing the RADs on these ferries with improved and updated units. And we hope that soon they will replace what looks like a culture of secrecy with one of openness and accountability. We'd all feel safer.

The Transportation Safety Board, as part of the investigation of the Quinsam incident, suggested (BCFS 'may wish to take measures') on January 16 that all of the vessels equipped with RAD propulsion units be equipped with audio-visual alarms indicating when the position of the RAD units differs from that

indicated by the bridge controls. No such recommendation had been made following the 2002 *Bowen Queen* incident.

BC Ferries made the TSB's document public 'consistent with BC Ferries' commitment to releasing Marine Safety Advisories. 'BC Ferries supports Transportation Safety Board's view regarding audio-visual alarms and has already made a commitment to install such devices on the nine vessels in the fleet equipped with RAD units,' said David Hahn, BC Ferries' president and CEO. 'In light of last week's incident, BC Ferries is also reviewing tie-up procedures and arrangements throughout the fleet.'

In the meantime, BC Ferries says that their internal investigation into the *Quinsam* incident is ongoing, and the final report is anticipated next week. ✍