

A welcome change of heart

It is nice to know that the Government can, at least sometimes, change its mind. Almost everyone will welcome the decision to reopen the case of the collision between a hydrofoil and a ferry in March.

Last month the Director of Marine, Mr Malcolm Alexander, ruled out the possibility of a marine inquiry and said the findings of his department's preliminary investigations into the collision would not be made public.

The only whisper of what might have been in those findings was a vague "human error on both sides" was to blame. That was fairly obvious. But no recommendations, either for censure of people involved or for improved safety precautions on either vessel, were made.

Apparently the main reason for not making the report public was the risk of legal action being taken against the investigating officer. His report was based on his interpretation of the accounts given by the parties involved and the proceedings, behind closed doors, did not have the protection and privilege that an open court enjoys.

That is understandable. But in that case why wasn't a marine inquiry announced at the time? Why wait a month and stir up resentment? Certainly not one of the Government's best public relations exercises.

Although no one was killed, there could have been heavy casualties. A ferry carrying 190 passengers and crew sank after the collision in thick fog and the public, particularly the many thousands who regularly travel by ferry and hydrofoil, are entitled to know why.

Fortunately, the Attorney-General has decided, after a full study of the report, that a marine court of inquiry "is likely to produce greater certainty as to some of the facts."

No date has been set, but it is in the interests of all concerned that the inquiry be conducted as soon as possible. It is already nearly five months since the collision and memories do not improve with time.

As far as the public is concerned, there are a lot of unanswered questions, not the least being how the crash occurred after the hydrofoil's radar had picked up the ferry. Three-decker ferries are not renowned for their speed and it is puzzling that the hydrofoil was not able to avoid the collision.

There have also been many alarming claims by ferry passengers who said they were unable to release the liferafts.

The conditions at the time may well have been responsible, but this aspect of the collision should be thoroughly probed by the marine court of inquiry and, if necessary, recommendations for improvements made.

The inquiry may well find that no one was at fault and that all adequate precautions were taken. But at least it will clear the air of the mystery and suspicion that the secrecy so far has created.

The thousands of passengers who commute each week to the outlying districts have a right to know why collisions occur — and what steps are taken to minimise them.