

Skye Bridge

Revenge of the Picts

ISLE OF SKYE

One man and his obsession could cause a lot of trouble

EVERY politician knows them—the obsessives who write densely argued letters on obscure subjects and won't take no for an answer. The nightmare is the one who seems to have a point—like the one on the island of Skye off the west coast of Scotland.

In 1984, Brian Robertson, a perfectly intelligent man, formally changed his name to Robbie the Pict. Mr Pict was campaigning for Scottish independence. The Picts were the original Scottish natives, who were wiped out in the 8th century by the Scots, who were originally Irish.

Never mind. An admirer gave Mr Pict an acre of Skye, which he promptly declared to be the Pictish Free State. He lives there now and is its diplomatic representative. The government does not recognise Pictland.

Never mind that either. The Pictish Free State is now also the Scottish People's Mission against unjust laws. One such bad law, according to Mr Pict, is that allowing the collection of tolls on the Skye Bridge. They are levied to pay back the privately-financed £24m (\$34.8m) construction cost. At £5.70 one way for a car, the toll is steep. Some islanders refused to pay and got fined. Since then, the toll has been cut for locals.

Delving into the paperwork, Mr Pict discovered that the law allowing the collection of tolls was not properly published and the order allowing the government to pass on the right to collect them was not signed or dated. This means, says Robert Black, professor of Scots law at Edinburgh University, that the tolls are illegal.

This sometimes happens with parking restrictions, and everyone who has been fined gets their money back. But Mr Pict's various appeals against convictions for non-payment of tolls have all been rejected. Curiously, the judges have ruled against him on grounds other than the defective paperwork, on which they have avoided pronouncing.

This may be because ruling the paperwork out of order would cause such a headache. It might mean several million pounds in compensation for the millions of people who have paid up and the 124 people who have been fined for not paying. Trying to back-date a new law to when the bridge opened might break human rights legislation. It would even be hard to get a law through the Scottish Parliament to make future tolls legal, because the Lib-

eral Democrats, Labour's coalition partners in Scotland, oppose the tolls. Not passing a new law would mean paying around £100m compensation to the Bank of America, the ultimate owner of the collection rights.

Meanwhile, there is now a stand-off between Mr Pict and the courts, which last prosecuted for toll non-payment in 1997. Prosecutors appear to have abandoned the 372 outstanding cases mainly, it seems, to avoid giving Mr Pict the chance to argue that the tolls are illegal. But Mr Pict, with the confidence of the obsessive, says "we will win." He might just, too. ■

Culture wars

Ken who?

The French have discovered the new Dickens. He's called Ken Loach

PARIS likes to think of itself as the cultural and intellectual capital of the world, so it is rare that the French notice anything of that sort coming out of Britain. Oscar Wilde, Anthony Burgess and Henry Moore provoked a certain *frisson* of excitement across the Channel in their day, but that was all a long time ago.

Now, however, Paris, and indeed the rest of Europe, has discovered what *Le Monde*, France's poshest newspaper, describes as the heir to Dickens. He is Ken Loach, an elderly British film-maker.

This latest accolade comes after Mr Loach's most recent film, "The Navigators", about the privatisation of Britain's railways in the mid-1990s, was shown in Europe. According to *Le Monde*, this film brims with Dickensian indignation and compassion. In "quelques scènes incisives", the great director brilliantly exposes "la logique... infernale" of privatisation.

Mr Loach must be used to this sort of gush by now, as he has now become the darling of the continent's film critics. Europe's cultural elite has anointed him the supreme chronicler of contemporary Britain. He has regularly picked up awards at the Cannes film festival, and last year he acted as patron of the 40th Cannes "Critics' Week", succeeding Bernardo Bertolucci. He is also big in the Netherlands and Germany, where, argues Thessa Mooij, film officer at the Goethe Institut in London, he "is the one UK film-maker that people will be looking at for new films".

All of which is rather baffling to the British. Despite their culture-free environment, many of them have heard of Messrs Wilde, Burgess and Moore, but Mr Loach's following is select.

In the 1960s Mr Loach made several good movies—"Cathy Come Home", a film about homelessness, for instance, and "Kes", about childhood and poverty—but his unrelenting hostility to capitalism, Thatcherism and any ism not prefixed by social had made his more recent work predictable. His films tend to be of the type that is politely described as "didactic", and his politics as "minority". At the last election he backed the Socialist Alliance party, which polled 57,000 votes out a total of 26m cast.

In Britain, Mr Loach's work went out of fashion in the 1980s. Now he is enjoying a revival thanks to the enthusiasm of the European cinéastes.

So how has Mr Loach won this newfound popularity? Ms Mooij argues that Europeans are more familiar than are the British with films that tackle ideas. But there may be a more atavistic reason. Lionising Mr Loach is a way of indulging in an ancient French pastime. "The Navigators" commends itself to *Le Monde* as a commentary on "l'interminable agonie de ce qui fut le système circulatoire du capitalisme anglais." As long as Mr Loach sticks to that sort of subject, his French reputation is assured. ■



It must be his dialectical materialism