

A decade for rail expansion?

It is a welcome change to hear Government Ministers talking enthusiastically about rail travel. A string of their predecessors at the Department of Transport have been keen to see Britain's roads provided as a free social service while expecting rail travellers to pay, pay and pay again — even for the roads which they hardly use.

The new noises from Marsham Street may sound promising but, over the years a whole string of prejudices and a web of Catch 22 rules have been built up which has crippled the railways. The railways are now in a position where it is difficult for them to respond to growing demand for rail services or public aspirations that all our lives and the environment in general could be improved by effective, flexible rail services for both passengers and freight.

Both Transport Secretary Malcolm Rifkind and his colleague Roger Freeman have said they WANT more opportunities. Can they deliver for rail?

Public Transport Minister Roger Freeman defended the present unfair system of making decisions on road and rail investment when he met key members of RDS at a seminar in Leicester in July.

But he revealed that, at the same time, the Department of Transport is reviewing its policy and will shortly be publishing a "consultative paper" on road and rail investment "methodology". RDS was invited to comment.

He expected the 1990s to be a decade of railway expansion — in spite of the cuts being implemented throughout BR at the moment — but insisted that the Government had to make "judgments" about how to apportion spending when there were competing and desirable objectives.

He also defended the use of cost benefit analysis for appraising road schemes because road users, unlike rail passengers, did not pay for roads at the "point of use".

He mentioned that the Government had STARTED a study of road pricing. **Other Governments are implementing road pricing policies.**

He outlined the half-hearted and illogical way cost benefit analysis was already used in assessing urban rail schemes. He said that if a scheme was not likely to bring an eight per cent return on investment (a rule the Government has made for itself), then non-user benefits COULD be looked at.

He said the Government allowed itself to look at the likely reduction in ROAD congestion when it was trying to decide whether to put money into London's East-West CrossRail.

Passengers paying to travel on the overcrowded Central line would be angry to know that congestion on the Tube and their daily discomfort could NOT be taken into consideration.

The Minister said that much rail investment was to replace life-expired stock and equipment. The criterion was then the "least cost" with no requirement on Network SouthEast and Regional Railways to show an eight per cent return.

InterCity and Railfreight did not earn as much a

return on investment as most commercial firms would expect to receive.

He acknowledged pressure for, but pointedly did not accept, some "notional subsidy" for firms to switch freight from road to rail.

On the question of subsidy to Regional Railways and Network SouthEast, Mr Freeman said the public service obligation grant was paid after BR had told Government what level of service was needed.

The Government had increased the grant in recognition of the worsening economic climate that was hitting BR business. Its stated policy however is to reduce the grant.

Our members urged the Government to ensure a "level playing field" on which rail could at least fairly compete with other modes.

Mr Freeman said the balance had already been tipped to public transport even though most experts would disagree. He said the Government would make people aware of the real cost of motoring and there would have to be constraints on road building and usage as we moved into the 21st century.

Meanwhile the massive £32 billion road building programme continues.

Mr Freeman saw the question of Midland main line electrification as an example of the "dilemmas we face". He accepted it should be classified as a high speed line of European significance.

Only two years ago, a strong financial case was made out for electrification of the line under the Government's own seven per cent rule. The Government promptly changed its rules to eight per cent and said therefore the scheme did not qualify.

On minimum service levels, Mr Freeman said this might involve an army of civil servants but he accepted that the fallback criteria, for example any place with a certain population to have a defined minimum train frequency, could be useful.

The involvement of shire counties in providing rail subsidies needed further thought and it was also being argued in some quarters that the PSO grant should be targeted in future at specific geographical areas.

On line reopenings, he saw a role for the private sector but agreed that Network SouthEast and Regional Railways could reopen lines, and indeed had done so, within the finances already available to them. He welcomed RDS input on how specific reopenings could reduce road congestion and serve as an alternative to new road schemes.

In fact NSE and RR are so short of money they cannot maintain existing services and have shelved a series of reopening schemes, including promising plans to bring electric commuter trains to Dunstable and a cross-country Swindon - Peterborough diesel service.

Mr Freeman defended the closure of Speedlink, claiming it was "related to the industrial structure

of Britain in the 1950s" whereas the need now was for intermodal transport. **Most other European railways maintain wagonload services.**

The problems of commuters on InterCity lines, for example from Grantham, were raised. Mr Freeman suggested that "extending the fingers of NSE" might help. He praised InterCity for providing a high quality service but acknowledged its prices were "comparatively high in some cases". RDS would say horrendous.

He suggested that price flexibility might be the answer, saying there were lessons to be learned from the airlines with perhaps a choice of up-market business trains and "cheap and cheerful" ones on the same routes.

To people who are being urged by environmentalists to give up their car and look to the railways for an alternative, Mr Freeman provided little joy.

But at least he's not a mad axe man.

NEWSWATCH

Money for trains?: Increasing the cost of petrol by about 30p a litre would reduce car use by 10 per cent and bring in £9 billion for the Treasury, says Leeds University lecturer Peter Mackie.

Money for trains?: Petrol prices should go up to £4 a gallon to cut road congestion, advises the Tory Green Initiative in a report Taken For a Ride.

Money for trains?: Eurotunnel chairman Sir Alastair Morton is calling for a pollution tax, in which users are charged according to sulphur, carbon and nitrogen emission levels, the number of accidents caused and noise levels. The tax could raise £4 billion a year and could fuel a transport investment fund. He said many major transport projects are not suitable for full funding by the private sector.

Dirty British drivers: Cars with catalytic converters as a percentage of new cars sold in 1990: Britain 3.9, Denmark 65.3, Germany 92, Holland 93.2, Switzerland 100, Austria 100, Sweden 100. Source: The Guardian 29.3.91

Cash aid: People from all walks of life who are interested in studying mobility in towns and cities could obtain grants from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for a stay of up to eight weeks abroad. Apply to the trust at 15 Queen's Gate Terrace, London SW7 5PR before 28 October.

Band wagon: Railfreight Distribution is asking to be able to use 44-tonne vehicles for road/rail intermodal. The current limit is 38 tonnes. But the weight for lorries generally should be increased to 44 tonnes, says the Freight Transport Association "because of the environmental benefits".

Cycle sense: Southampton city council employees are to be paid 24p per mile if they use their cycles for work, the same rate as that paid to car drivers. It is also giving interest-free loans to people who want to buy a bike to use on council business.

Absolute nonsense: Defending cuts on rural lines, the Department of Transport is reported as saying: "We and BR pay particular attention in monitoring to reliability figures in sparsely served areas. Clearly, the fewer services there are, the more reliable they must be."

ADVERTS

Intermodal 91 exhibition and conference. Berlin 12-14 November. One of the themes will be how intermodal traffic and containers can ease Europe's impending transport crisis. EC Commissioner Karel van Miert will be one of the speakers. Details from Cargo Systems 081 330 3911

Forum for European Freight Transport exhibition and conference. European rail integration. Intermodal. Investing in Transport Infrastructure. Speakers include Sir Alastair Morton. Lille 29-30 October. Details from Triangle Communications, High Wycombe. 0494 450836

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