

Profit and loss

It is correct for RDS to emphasise the basically political nature of our transport problems. We are one of the few organisations with the courage to do so, making it even more important for us to continue.

Railway operation and funding have been a political issue since the turn of the century when both the new industrial railway unions and the Liberal/Conservative government were in favour of some degree of central government regulation.

Since that time arguments have raged at the highest levels about the operation of Britain's railways and this indecision is partly to blame for the mess we now find ourselves in.

The question now is, where do we go from here? None of the big three political parties has a clean slate where the question of vested interest in existing policies is concerned. It is unfortunate that we have to go so far back to bring out the essential arguments, but things change very slowly in Britain!

Perhaps 1992 and the Chunnel will give us all a shot in the arm. Things are certainly warming up on the party political front.

The argument for government funding of railways was best summed up in the period following the First World War, when our railways were so nearly nationalised. It goes as follows:

Railways in private hands must be used for immediate profit but it might pay the State to run railways at a loss to develop industries and agriculture.

Transport operations result in benefits to their users and the areas they serve that do not necessarily benefit the transport operators themselves.

The construction of a railway line will raise land values in the area it serves, create jobs, etc. These benefits are quite separate from the profits a line may make. Hence only the State can make a judgment as to the OVERALL worth of running a particular transport service.

I am convinced that we will make little real progress with railway development until the above arguments are accepted and acted upon by the government of the day. As there is a real possibility that Labour may form the next government, I wrote to John Prescott expressing my views on the importance of railways to the economy and the urgent need for a large-scale railway revival.

I also put forward the case for a separate railway ministry which is about the only way to counteract the road lobby. Such a ministry could be obliged by law to listen to and act upon the views of the rail user groups. So much the better if the first minister was a woman.

Things do change and I cannot see us ever going back to full state control of every single part of railway operation. I am convinced that strict state control of basic infrastructure is, however, a must, with private capital allowed in other areas under overall government control.

Going back to my earlier points, we now have the environmental arguments completely in our favour, which was not the case 70 years ago. The Labour Party is not putting this argument strongly enough but then it does have a strong body of vested interests to contend with in the shape of the motor industry.

When the Second World War was upon us, we changed very quickly from civilian to military production. We could change equally well now from road to rail vehicle production.

I did eventually receive a reply from Labour, several pages of hopes and intents but no specific commitments.

It is rather a pity from my personal point of view

that some of the most telling remarks about the state of our railways and this government's attitude to them, come from the Tory MP Robert Adley.

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Adopt a station

I wonder if fellow members would back my idea? With British Rail and the local passenger transport authorities being short of cash, why don't members "adopt" their local station?

In my case I noticed the money spent on environmental improvements by Strathclyde PTA on Shotts station. Unfortunately ScotRail only have staff at the ticket office up to around 2.30 pm and of course many stations are completely without staff.

Only certain sites would be appropriate of course if we were to think about planting or maintaining gardens.

I have started keeping an eye on Shotts station as I've noticed weeds growing among the plants and of course the place seems to be a haunt for certain anti-social elements who drop all sorts of litter, including wine bottles.

This type of rail watch could of course cease if the voter would choose a party that is really serious about railway investment, thus allowing most stations to be permanently staffed.

Who knows, perhaps more people would travel by train if they saw some sort of effort was being put in by someone and that the place wasn't just an empty desert

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Multi-purpose link

July's Railwatch referred to a Milton Keynes - Luton link in the context of providing relief on the main line into Euston. It would provide much more than that because:

1. A direct link to Luton from the North West and Midlands is long overdue
2. A link between Milton Keynes and Thameslink has considerable potential

Furthermore, assuming the link is made by construction of a spur at Bletchley and new rail between Ridgmont and Flitwick, this could be part of a larger scheme if a further link was built between Flitwick and Letchworth/Hitchin.

Building this 15 miles of new track in conjunction with the complete resurrection of Oxford - Bletchley would create:

1. A direct Oxford - Cambridge link with potential for realistic timings compared to road
2. A new link between East Anglia and Milton Keynes (and the West Coast main line) offering a whole range of new and much quicker journeys
3. A relief route for Haven ports freight traffic to the West Coast main line and South Wales avoiding the congested sections of the Great Eastern main line
4. An orbital route for the London conurbation, linking the Great Western, Chiltern, West Coast, Midland, East Coast, West Anglia and Great Eastern lines
5. The potential to develop an East - West route from Hitchin, through Stevenage and Ware to Stansted, as proposed in the discussion document Home Counties Railways.

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Expand the network

Although a number of closed railways are now proposed for reopening, it is often said that general reconstruction of closed railways would be too expensive.

However, assuming rail rebuilding currently costs about £1 million a mile, and allowing for the occasional large structure requiring replacement, the £12 billion road programme could, if the funds were diverted, provide for the rebuilding of 10,000 miles of closed railway, restoring a comprehensive network which could be better planned with proper co-ordination and modern technology.

It is well known that new roads increase traffic and congestion. An expanded rail system would reduce it, benefiting the whole population and the environment.

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Strike it out

While I agree, if only from an environmental and energy-use viewpoint, that it is a disgrace that nearly all mail now goes by road or air, the rapid drift from rail was surely inevitable following the series of one-day ASLEF/NUR strikes in the late 1970s which must have been very disruptive for a high throughput business such as the post.

It is not surprising that the Post Office sought, and once off the contract hook, switched to alternative modes over which they had more control.

Similarly, while one can understand the frustration caused by the Speedlink closure, there must be a better way for drivers to protest than by threatening industrial action which can be almost as damaging as an actual strike.

That simply antagonises the system's users and its supporters and thereby jeopardises future jobs. Short-sighted politicians and perhaps accountant-driven senior management are surely more to blame.

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Wake up Whitehall

The Department of the Environment has produced a publication called Wake up to what you can do for the Environment in which it compares the energy efficiency of cars and buses but makes no mention of rail or light rail! Does the department need to be reminded that railways exist?

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Right way round

It is disappointing to find RDS toning down Labour Party proposals in favour of others which, though desirable in themselves, do little to meet the Labour Party's stated objectives. For example, people travelling west from Stansted airport are unlikely to want to go via Huntingdon, and RDS offers nothing for the vital link between Heathrow and the Midlands.

There is surely a clear need for a decent orbital rail link serving the vastly expanded towns around London, linking at suitable points with the inter-city network and also serving airports. RDS is right to criticise the concept of a route following the M25 itself but how about the following network:

South orbital. Existing route Reading - Redhill - Gatwick/Ashford with a new interchange station at Farnborough or Frimley Green.

North orbital. Oxford - Milton Keynes Central - Ridgmont - Flitwick - Hitchin - Stevenage - Ware - Harlow - Stansted - Braintree - Witham - Colchester.

West orbital. Gatwick - Redhill - Leatherhead - Claygate - Surbiton - Kingston - Heathrow - West Drayton - Rickmansworth - Watford - St Albans - Luton. A tunnel under Kingston would be the only really expensive part.

East orbital. Romford - Upminster - Thurrock - Swanley - Sevenoaks, serving an interchange with the Channel Tunnel rail link.

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