

WATCH



created, plus a freight-carrying monopoly. Nobody who had investigated the matter had yet found a privatised railway system that involved real competition of the sort that the Government would like to see.

Mr Rifkind said there was a multitude of ways for greater choice to be introduced on the railways. It was increasingly being pursued.

Decline in safety

John Prescott (Lab, Kingston upon Hull East) said that after 11 years of Conservative Government, the transport for which they were responsible was a disgrace. They had produced the highest fares in Europe and one of the poorest services.

There was growing concern in the country – and on both sides of the House – at the decline in safety standards, most of which had taken place over the past 10 years.

"Inquiries have taken place into the terrible railway tragedies at King's Cross, Clapham, Purley and Bellgrove – all associated with the reduction in resources. In one case single-track running – intended to save money – had caused two trains to collide.

Phillip Oppenheim (C, Amber Valley), responded: "As Mr Prescott often praises the performances of the European rail system, can he tell us whether he welcomes the recent *Railway Gazette International* survey, which shows that passenger growth on British Rail since 1985 has been far greater than in Germany, Spain, France and Italy?"

It also showed how the punctuality of BR's InterCity service was far better than France's equivalent.

Mr Prescott said he welcomed any improvement. "We could argue about why people are changing from road to rail. Perhaps it is because we have the most congested motorway system in Europe."

In 1979 a comparison was made between British and European rail systems, to show how efficient British Rail was. It came out with flying colours; which did not mean there was not room for greater efficiency.

No great future

"We began to identify a social part of the railway and a profitable part, which was when they began to make mistakes.

"When the Tory Government took office, they were ideologically against the fact that the railway system was publicly owned. They did not feel that the system had a great future. People wondered whether they believed in it."

Now the Bill was providing a great

deal of money. "Unusually, Mr Rifkind was knocking on the Treasury door. The House must decide what it wants to do with the railway system and what to contribute to the country's economy and prosperity."

Mr Adley said this was one of the rare occasions when he could agree with almost everything Mr Prescott said. "I suggest that Mr Prescott might allow the Transport Secretary to intervene in his speech. If we can reach a consensus on railway policy and long-term planning, which Mr Prescott is advocating, they would have a better transport policy."

Mr Prescott said that in the 1970s, it was argued that subsidies provided for the railway benefited the rich. "I do not think many people support that argument. The railway system of the 1990s has a major part to play in moving people around – an important change."

During the 1980s the decision to cut back on signalling and maintenance proved to be very wrong. Inquiries into those tragedies revealed a great deal of evidence to support those who said there was a link between the tragedies and cuts in maintenance. At the heart of their argument was the Government's policy of hiving off the profitable parts of the network. The Transport Secretary could say that everybody wants privatisation because it would be much better than what we have. The system we have has resulted from the Government's inadequate financial provision.

"In their privatisation experiments, the Government has created a crisis and then suggested that the private sector could do better. The Transport Secretary had been brought face to face with the real problems of railways and finance. I suggest the Minister puts a towel on his head and starts to think about the real issues of railway financing."

From road to rail

Mr Adley said that, until recently, he had the impression that the Government had no transport policy other than the almost regardless quest for profitability. That had been changed to a positive policy of seeking to transfer traffic from road to rail. He welcomed this obvious change in policy.

He was in favour of ending BR's monopoly. That was also the policy of the Transport Minister. He had not been convinced, however, that the illusory privatisation argument, which was quite separate, would result in a better railway.

"By selling trackbed in the 1960s, we closed options just when the roads were becoming clogged. We have built more roads and they have become more clogged.

"I have pleaded that, unless we recognise that we are constantly destroying assets that can probably never be replaced, we shall not be able to take advantage of the legacy of our forbears.

A rail renaissance

"In this country, and all over Europe, the internal combustion engine, which once appeared likely to sound the death knell of the railways has, by its very proliferation, brought about a railway renaissance. The purpose of this debate must be to see whether we have the will to achieve that renaissance and will the means so to do. It is extraordinary to admit that one has one of the best railways in the world and yet to state that the prescription for its future is to break it up and sell it." He welcomed the start, in early July, of the full electric service on the East Coast main line. *The Times* had undertaken an exercise involving three travellers riding by air, rail and car. "The only one who enjoyed his journey was the one who travelled by train. Yes, but a minister remarked that the car journey cost only £30.73.

"There's the rub, because that amount is only a tiny fraction of the real cost of the car journey, both to the driver and the nation. Until the House is willing to recognise the real cost of motoring, the motor car and the internal combustion engine, we shall never get to the heart of the debate."

Although he welcomed the East Coast electrification, one had to be frank and say that £400 million had been spent on modernising a Victorian line, while most of our continental competitors were building new lines. The Train à Grande Vitesse was the French Government's commitment to a transport policy in which the train was more than an afterthought.

APT 'was starved'

The Swedish had introduced what they called the tilt train. We called it the Advanced Passenger Train, when we invented it 15 years or so ago, and starved it to death for lack of investment. "That system could now be sweeping the industrial world. Fiat is building a train similar to the APT and so are the Swedes. If ever one wanted a classic case of failing to back success, one would have to look only at the sad tale of the APT and the steps that are being taken elsewhere in Europe.

"I close with a few thoughts on what is happening in Germany.

They have a state-funded railway; it is essential to recognise that discussion of privatisation is quite different from the need to strike a fair balance between infrastructure costs of road and rail. The Germans are less hidebound on these issues than we are, with our party political stances. Our future transport policy could be reached in a climate of rationality and realism which is long overdue."

How BR survived

Peter Snape said he should pay some tribute to BR's financial acumen. They had kept things going, though on a shoestring, for many years. It had survived, if not prospered, at a time when inflation had increased costs by 75 per cent, through an ingenious system of increasing efficiency, a dramatic increase in real terms of fares, a reduction in manpower and, at least during the short-term boom years, the sale of property assets.

"In many respects, the Bill represents a watershed – a central failure in Government policy. What price privatisation now? BR needs investment of more than £1 billion per annum over the next few years, in the chairman's opinion."

The Transport Secretary said that major infrastructure projects were due for completion within the next three years. There were platform extensions and other works in preparation for Networker trains amounting to £100m; then came the Waterloo International terminal and the North Pole (Willesden) maintenance depot amounting to £200m and new sections of track, plus the Waterloo approaches, costing about £38m. This was a high priority for BR.

Puffer preference

It was thanks to Tony Speller (C, North Devon), that Parliament made it possible to re-open railway lines once closed, writes Jack Ellis. Today, eight years later, there are 16 newly opened lines and no fewer than 73 new stations. Such outstanding success has encouraged new efforts, led this time by Robert Adley. His Railway Re-openings (Tribunal) Bill is designed to stop disused lines from being removed, if they had carried a public service "since the Stockton and Darlington Railway Act of 1821."

Inevitably, the Bill was too late for the Commons before the summer recess, but the chances should be better next year, Mr Speller told me. "Adley's a steam man who likes puffer trains," he said with a laugh. "I'm not one for nostalgia."