

Why our railways need a jump start

By Trevor Jones

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Delegates at Railfuture's annual rail users conference in November were given a lesson in why Britain's railways need to be electrified.

More than 20 years ago the Government accepted the argument and was making efforts to catch up with our more enlightened European allies.

But the basic facts of life have been lost in the muddle of privatisation and reorganisation.

"Railway" companies with a short-term approach to profit have even argued that electrification is no longer needed.

The case however is even stronger now than it was in the 1980s.

Independent consultant Reg Harman told the conference that in 1981 a joint British Rail and transport ministry report on electrification was compiled at a time when there was concern over energy supplies. It established the strategic need for electrification and agreed a rolling programme should go ahead.

The following year, a House of Commons transport committee report said electrification was good value for money, and giving a high rate of return even if the rail businesses that benefited from it directly were not themselves profitable.

The reasons for electrifying include global warming, an imminent decline in petrol production, and the quality of life in towns.

An electrified railway provides high quality public transport within and between urban areas and provides "connectivity" which is vital for high quality people-based economy.

An effective and attractive railway should be a key component in national transport policy, because a small shift from road to rail would pack out the railway.

Mr Harman, visiting research fellow at the Centre for Transport and Society at the University of the West of England in Bristol, said Britain needs a firm decision on transport energy.

Sweden is aiming to eliminate oil use and France aims to eliminate oil use in public transport.

Britain's railways could sustain a major increase in electric rail operation from small savings, for instance in domestic and industrial use.

Electric traction is flexible in fuel use, it draws from various sources, including renewables, and electric traction removes pollution at point of use.

In an image-obsessed world,



BRITISH DISEASE: The new TransPennine class 185 diesel train under electric wires. The 185 is the first diesel version of the proven Siemens Desiro electric train design. The diesels will be operating on routes which should by now have been electrified. They are designed to run throughout the TransPennine network, including Hull-Manchester, Manchester Airport to Cleethorpes and Manchester Airport to the North West. The 51-strong fleet of 100mph trains represents a £250million investment. TransPennine Express expects to have the full fleet in passenger

service by the end of January. There will eventually be 153 carriages to replace the existing fleet of 139 carriages.

Real-time information systems are also being installed at 29 stations on the TransPennine network by Siemens companies.

Automated announcements and travel information will be provided by new public address systems and, for the first time in the UK rail industry, new, intuitive, touch screen passenger help points will be provided, half of which will be interactive and will even offer direct web access.

Picture: Siemens

electric traction also has a much better image.

A rolling programme was judged viable in 1981 and the factors that underpinned this remain fully valid today. Even schemes marginal on economic assessment would add to the overall effectiveness of the network.

But the complex relationships and charging systems on the current network prevent effective assessment decisions which are made on a narrow short-term business basis even at Government level.

The same blinkered tunnel vision affects other electric transport systems, including tramways and light rail. These are also part of the solution to our energy and transport challenges. Transport must be treated in an integrated fashion, if

Britain is to have a viable future. Mr Harman highlighted the fact that a diesel train running the 500 miles from Edinburgh to Bournemouth travels over 315 miles of electric lines - 64% of the total.

Key priorities for electrification are the North-East to South-West route, the Great Western main line to Swansea, Edinburgh to Glasgow, and fill-ins in the South-East.

Mr Harman showed three maps, two of which are reproduced on the back page of Railwatch.

He suggests that a high-priority programme should be implemented as soon as possible, followed by a more extensive second phase.

The proposals aim to reflect three main elements: inter-city passenger routes, including short links, strategic freight routes and main urban

links. The audience at the conference enthusiastically supported Mr Harman's suggestions.

One delegate said Peterborough to Ely electrification would have the extra benefit of providing an electric standby route for East Coast main line trains to London.

Another suggested that the successor to the BR high-speed train should be a combined diesel and 25kV electric.

Electrification schemes sometimes seemed expensive because the line often underwent a total upgrade with improved track and signalling at the same time.

Improving diesel technology has been used as an argument against electrification but in reality electric technology is improving even faster.

Tories get on track

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Conservative Shadow Rail Minister Stephen Hammond said his party had some "new thinking" to offer on both railways and transport generally.

He said the biggest issue for passengers and freight is how to increase the capacity of the rail system.

Most estimates suggest that rail usage will increase by more than 30% over a period of time whereas the Office of the Rail Regulator says there is no plan for an increase until 2014. Therefore there will be more passengers on more overcrowded trains at ever increasing fares.

Neither Network Rail nor the Government is getting to grips. National Rail asks for more and more money so either the Government or the fare payer must pay more.

The Government seems bent on pricing people off the railway.

This can't be the right way forward environmentally. The Government is also interfering too deeply in the detail of running the railway.

It is wrong for civil servants to write new timetables, and wrong that there is a lack of incentive for train operating companies to invest strategically.

Politicians should not try to run the railway. According to Mr Hammond, the Conservatives will remedy this if they become the new government in 2009.

The structure is now quite different from at privatisation, but with hindsight the Conservative Party thinks that track and train

separation was a mistake that slows down decision-making. With separation, it is difficult for passengers to know to whom to complain about late trains. Politicians need to recognise that railways are a long game.

We must take the Government out of running railways. Rail projects have a long lead and long build time.

The party is launching a review of the operation of railways with particular regard to the track and train split. It intends to use the next three years to ensure we get the correct method.

All interested parties, both in the industry and lobby groups, are invited to contribute and the party will welcome any input. It doesn't know the answer and wants to learn. The status quo is not the answer to required capacity increases.

Beyond the review, the party wants to see scope for more long-term investment, such as is not possible under current franchise arrangements.

Chiltern Railway is a successful example of longer franchises. The party will protect the interest of rail users and continue the shift from road to rail.

It is also imperative to ensure that rail workers see a share of what comes, as stakeholders, because they are skilled professional people who should share in the financial success of the railways.

As a practicality, the party does not want to start the review on day one in office, but wants by then to have ideas ready and already costed. The party has already received many people's

pet schemes, some of which have already been discarded. It is looking for £15million to £50million schemes to walk in with on day one in office. It is already working on a Railway Act 2009. Finally there will be a Green Paper to look at long-term infrastructure issues.

Mr Hammond is sceptical about a north-south high-speed rail link, although open to persuasion. We need more investment to relieve overcrowding, with better value for money, minimisation of political interference, and a structure where it is clear who is in charge, in order to get speedier decision-making.

Railfuture chairman Mike Crowhurst urged Mr Hammond to beware of vertical integration if it means breaking up Network Rail.

He also warned him to be sceptical of unproven technology like Maglev, mindful of past difficulties with the Advanced Passenger Train and moving-block signalling.

He also asked him not to listen to Jeremy Clarkson, John Redwood and Norman Tebbit, but instead to listen to Zac Goldsmith, Steven Norris and John Gummer.

Mr Hammond admitted there might be some tension between front bench people and party policy groups, but he and shadow transport secretary Chris Grayling will make the final decisions.

He was not in favour of Maglev but had an open mind on Network Rail which did not even mention capacity in its mission statement.

The facts

Proportions of route length electrified:

Great Britain:

1970 17%

1989 27%

2004 31%

West and Central mainland Europe:

1970 34%

1989 43%

2004 52%

Extension of electrification continues for most countries in mainland Europe but virtually none is in hand in Great Britain

Of the 100 largest cities in the European Union:

85 are served by electrified main lines

Of the 15 non-electric cities:

2 are on Mediterranean islands, 4 are in small Baltic countries, 2 in Greece, 1 in Denmark, and 1 in Ireland 5 are in Great Britain

New thinking and new warnings

By Railfuture chairman Mike Crowhurst

Despite some last minute equipment and logistical problems and delays caused by a major programme of engineering on the rail network, around 90 people enjoyed Railfuture's rail user conference at Reading on 4 November.

Conservative shadow rail minister Stephen Hammond enlivened the afternoon and gave us the impression that the Conservatives are genuinely open to new policy ideas.

Railfuture of course does not endorse any party, but it was refreshing to hear a party spokesman distance himself from the old certainties at last.

We were also warned by Martin Tugwell, planning implementation director of the South-East Regional

Assembly that rail campaigners have to adjust their language if they want to win advances. He said: "The importance of rail investment comes up in its own right to deliver needed economic growth. You can't win an argument solely on cost-benefit ratio, but on how much it delivers for new housing or economic development."

And Chris Irwin, the chairman of TravelWatch South-West said that rail users had to make sure they are listened to. He said the Department for Transport is the biggest monopoly of all, specifying in detail what is to be done, with the aim of reducing Treasury costs rather than serving the consumer.

That is why an independent, campaigning Railfuture is so important