

Secret road plans

By Chris Wright and Ray King

Rail campaigners are furious that within days of learning that official funding for part of the East-West rail link had been rejected, the Government's Highways Agency was revamping plans for east-west road schemes and a motorway by stealth.

There is now widespread suspicion that we have been conned by new Labour's spin which claims to want greater use of public transport while secretly planning roads.

If a road can be justified for east-west, a railway must have a better claim.

Yet the Highways Agency is resurrecting the Bedford-Milton Keynes road scheme plan, ready for an early start.

Apart from the extra environmental problems the new road would create, it would also undermine the financial case for an adjacent rail link and the whole East-West rail project. And that is what the SRA used as an excuse not to fund an Oxford-Bletchley service.

Their verdict on it as "uneconomic" is however completely wrong.

Another road scheme will bring improvements between Bedford and the A1 route to Cambridge.

Just what is the Government doing? Is its real transport policy about road building or has it lost control of its officials who are notoriously wedded to a road "solution".

We plan to ask opposition parties to raise this question in Parliament.

The closure of the Oxford-Cambridge line was described as a "national fraud" in *The Times* in 1963. It was.

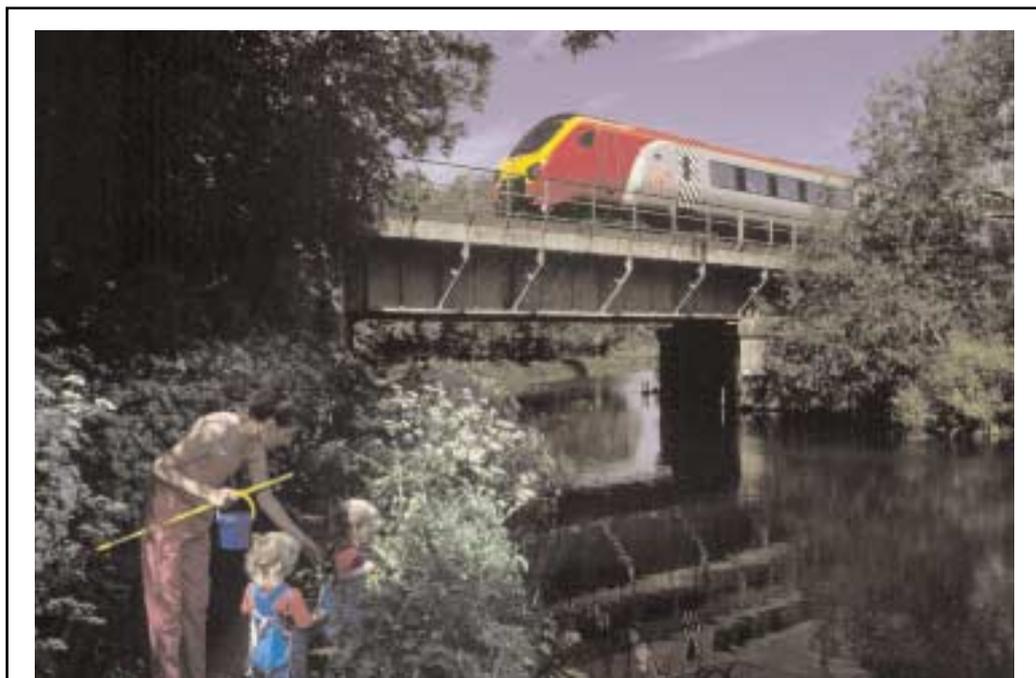
The same attitudes still seem to apply in the new millennium and in the multi-modal studies.

We were told they were a way of introducing a rational, sensible approach to transport planning.

But now as the first reports are published, the truth is out. They are just another cover for road building.

The public transport and rail option has been given little consideration.

The Cambridge-Huntingdon study is presenting a case for widening the already horrendous



Train for the future: A new Virgin Voyager crosses the Oxford Canal in the Cherwell Valley with a Reading-Birmingham train

A new dawn for CrossCountry

They look like worthy successors to the InterCity 125s they are replacing on some routes, and increasing numbers of Virgin Voyagers are coming on to the CrossCountry network.

Virgin admits the CrossCountry network has been a "Cinderella" but it carries as many passengers as the West Coast main line.

And linking 115 towns and cities from Aberdeen to Penzance it is to be given a big increase in service, along with a clockface timetable.

Virgin aims to double the number of passengers, partly by providing "massive improvements in the travel environment" like at-seat headphones for radio and music as well as catering innovations and a shop selling books, CDs, magazines and games.

Journey times will be up to 20% faster and the timetable will be based on hourly departures which Virgin sees as the best way to compete with the often parallel motorway routes.

As the heart of the five core CrossCountry services, Birmingham will have 10 departures an hour, five north and five south. By 2003 the number of departures from Birmingham to Cardiff for instance will increase from one daily train to seven. Blackpool will get eight daily trains from Birmingham instead of one. Reading station

will be the second hub, with up to 12 Voyagers an hour. To simplify interchange for passengers, the routes are to be coded, from VT0 to VT4. A similar coding system (VT5 to VT9) will be introduced for the West Coast main line.

Virgin will be launching a major information campaign so that the many people who do not currently travel by train know what is on offer.

Who would choose to sit in a car for hours, if they knew a comfortable, reliable speedy service was available on a train?

A big programme of track work is also under way to increase line speeds to 115 or 125mph.

Bombardier is supplying the 44 Super Voyagers which tilt and the 34 Voyagers which do not tilt. Bombardier will also maintain the trains.

By 2008 they will be equipped with the European train control system.

So far, there has been a general welcome for Virgin's plans. But there have been criticisms. Each train has room for only four bikes and there have already been complaints about the toast-rack seating and restricted view out of some windows.

One of the key challenges for Virgin will be to offer reasonably priced tickets while recouping its massive investment.

dous A14 road. It failed to consider providing a bus lane along it, instead proposing snatching an existing mothballed railway line for a busway despite local people's preference for a rail service. Even the Government has

had to reject the Hastings multi-modal study recommendation for a six-lane road because it would be so damaging. With the approach being taken by these studies, no major rail scheme will ever get off the ground. In

the West Midlands a great public relations splurge about improvements to public transport hid the fact that the multi-modal study was recommending motorway building and widening.