

WESTMINSTER WATCH

The Tories have begun to highlight Labour's failure to come to grips with Britain's transport problems.

Shadow Transport Secretary Bernard Jenkin said: "The chaos in policy on the roads is all the more obvious on the railways.

"The Government allowed public support for the railways to decline from £2billion in 1996-97 to a mere £1.5billion last year.

"At the start of the last Parliament, it was reported that the Prime Minister told his colleagues, just days after the 1997 election: "The railways are not a priority."

"Furthermore," said Mr Jenkin, "The Government inherited a railway industry that had reversed the decline in passenger numbers and rail freight, and doubled annual investment.

"Moreover, the figures show that punctuality and reliability had improved. The industry was poised for what ministers themselves claimed would be a railway renaissance.

"Today, the industry's morale and financial confidence is in a state of collapse, and it is crying out for additional Government support. The solution is that the Government be positive about what has every potential to be a dynamic, exciting and growing industry."

Mr Jenkin went on: "It is time for the Government to have a strategy for rail, and that is obviously what they do not have."

In a particularly telling passage Mr Jenkin said: "The Conservatives completed the Victoria line and the Docklands Light Railway. We initiated the Jubilee Line Extension, the Docklands Light Railway extension, the Heathrow Express, Thameslink 2000 and Croydon Tramlink, but what has Labour done in its first four years?

"How many projects did Labour start, let alone complete, in its first four years? Not one.

"While the Conservatives put new trains on the Central and Northern lines, refurbished many others and completely renewed the Central line, what has Labour done for the Tube? How many new trains under Labour? Not one. How many



refurbished trains under Labour? Not one. Not a single line upgrade, not a single refurbished train. The Tube is the crowning failure of Labour's transport policy."

Mr Jenkin finished his speech: "Transport is one of Labour's great failures. The Government has promised to make it a great success. We shall hold them to that promise."

This debate on transport and rural affairs took place on 26 June, shortly after Labour's election victory.

Transport minister John Spellar, replying for the Government, began by blaming the present situation on the botched railway privatisation, deregulation of the bus industry and lack of investment under the Tories.

However, he said: "It does not mean that the whole structure must be turned over, but we need to consider how to develop that structure.

"We do not want another two years of turmoil and disruption. We need to work with the structure, but we could be doing a lot better had we not had that inheritance."

Four years wasted

Mr Jenkin said the Government had failed to explain what it was going to do. He added: "The Government has been in office for four years and Mr Spellar does not have a clue what to do."

Mr Spellar responded: "We have begun to deliver change. The M60 Manchester orbital motorway has been completed; 17 new railway stations have been opened and more than 2,000 stations improved; 30,000 new buses have been registered.

"We have had more than 1,800 new or enhanced rural bus services in England; and public transport use overall was up by 7% between 1997 and 2000. That shows the balanced approach of our programme." Also there would be "more

and better public transport – trains, buses and light rail systems, with light rail having been proven to achieve modal shift from the car.

"The 10-year plan for transport envisages a £59billion investment in local transport of which £19.3 billion is public capital – a doubling in real terms of the figure for the previous decade."

(But £60billion for roads will be all public capital!)

On 1 July, several MPs expressed concern about rail developments in the East Midlands.

Mark Todd, (Lab, S Derbyshire) said: "It is crucial that we upgrade the Midland main line service between the Derby area, which is the part of the region that I represent, and London. That means increasing the speed and frequency of the service that is available."

Paddy Tipping (Lab, Sherwood) said: "In the 10-year transport plan, there is no mention whatever of the need to invest in the Midland main line.

"That will have terrible consequences on urban conurbations such as Nottingham, Derby and Leicester."

Phil Hope (Lab, Corby) said: "Corby is the largest town in Europe without a passenger railway station. Midland Mainline has been involved in a feasibility study about reopening the railway station in Corby to make a direct route between London, Corby, Nottingham and the north.

"A passenger railway service is vital to Corby's regeneration and to attracting new retailers and new building to the shopping centre."

Mr Todd also mentioned the importance of dedicated rail-freight services, and asked whether the Central Railway could have a part to play and also the significance of reopening the Ivanhoe (National Forest) line.

Referring to the M1 modal study, Mr Todd said: "I was impressed by the initial consultation document, which set out many alternative strategies to the obvious option of providing more lanes and changing the interchanges for the M1.

"That should be the least favoured option, and we should ensure that the study produces action on a range of alternative measures that reduces traffic on the M1 and prevents the need for substantial road widening."

David Taylor, (Lab, NW Leicestershire) also referred to the Ivanhoe line and the baleful effect the advent of Railtrack had upon its reopening.

He hoped ways could be found to fund the scheme.

He said the rail modernisation fund could be used.

Action now

Mr Todd concluded: "I want to quote Matthew Smith, who is 13 and who wrote to me this week.

"He said: 'The people of this area recently re-elected you back into power and Labour did promise that this time it would be better and would do the will of the people.

"If this is so, make a difference and do your best to improve this area's transport by opening up this rail line and helping people without cars or the elderly to travel more easily."

Mr Todd concluded: "I look to the minister to give us that support. It will find an echo in the community."

In his reply transport minister David Jamieson said: "I acknowledge the wider benefits that scheme would bring, but the economic appraisal of the line shows that a prohibitively large operating subsidy would have to be met by Leicestershire county council.

"I know that Mr Todd has met previous ministers to discuss the way forward.

"Direct capital funding for rail projects is one of the funding options contemplated in the 10-year plan, and the options are being worked up by the Strategic Rail Authority whose strategic rail plan, to be published later this year, will set out the principles of investment support and describe the forms of funding that will be available for rail investment."