

1992-2002 Ten wasted years

By Mike Crowhurst

Ten years ago in July 1992 after the Tories' unexpected election victory in May, John Major's Government published a White Paper *New Opportunities for the Railways*. One might be forgiven for being wary of anything titled new opportunities, and with good cause.

Within 18 months, by October 1993, the new Railways Act was on the statute book.

As so often with dogmatic legislation, precious little changed between the White Paper, the Bill and the Act. This was despite the extensive and lengthy inquiry undertaken by the then Conservative dominated Transport Select Committee, chaired by the late Robert Adley, between October 1992 and February 1993.

The committee's final report, published in April, was a damning indictment of the Government's proposals. In oral evidence, Lord Richard Marsh, uniquely both a Transport Minister and BRB chairman, summed up by saying that the White Paper's "...significance... lies - without wishing to be rude about it - in the appalling low quality of it." Enough said.

Lord Marsh was one of several peers who delayed the Bill in the Lords later that year. Had their Lordships stuck to their strongly held beliefs that the Bill was indeed badly flawed, forcing a year's delay and making the Government invoke the Parliament Act to pass the Bill 12 months on, privatisation might not have happened in the disastrous way it did. Also had Robert Adley not so tragically died following his heart attack, a stronger rump of opposition might have grown within the Tory party. The effects of privatisation later lost the Tories a number of seats, particularly in the London commuter belt!

So the privatisation and dismemberment of British Railways was under way. Thus began the frantic drive to ensure that all the changes were implemented, and beyond the point of no return, within the three years remaining before what was almost universally foreseen as the inevitable government defeat in an election, to be held not later than May



ROAD: The ugly, polluted face of motorways at Spaghetti Junction in Birmingham. Pupils at schools nearby were found to have high levels of lead in their bodies, enough to impair brain function. According to a poll commissioned by the Rail Freight Group, 91% of people think more freight should transfer from motorways to rail

Picture: Advantage West Midlands

1997. And so it proved. Labour's hesitant promises to reverse the process were widely disregarded. BR's achievements of recent years, including the barely complete Organising for Quality - "O-for-Q" - were cast aside.

The widely voiced concerns of industry, academics and professionals were ignored, as they had been a decade earlier over bus privatisation.

By the spring of 1997, not only had the passenger franchising process been completed at breakneck speed and a myriad of ROSCOs, TESCOs, IMCOs, etc been sold off along with the freight operations, but also, totally unforeseen in the legislation, Railtrack itself had been sold by flotation. In the meantime, train building ceased, as orders dried up for almost three years, and at least one major carriage-building factory closed at York, only to reopen 18 months later on a much reduced scale building wagons and is now expected to close for a second time.

The half-way mark of the 10 years was the 1997 election. As any footballer knows, teams

change ends at half time but not much else changes. To be fair, the incoming Government showed some signs of recognising the underlying problems of transport, producing a widely acclaimed White Paper *A New Deal for Transport* one year into its tenure, following it up with the *10 Year Plan* a year later, and backing these up by getting a new Transport Act passed by the autumn of 2000. Among other things this set up the Strategic Rail Authority, thus filling one of the yawning gaps left by the Conservatives (filled in shadow form the previous year).

But the enthusiasm of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was evidently not shared by other members of the Government. In the 2000 budget the fuel tax escalator, only just hypothecated for transport, was duly axed, and the motoring lobby showed their gratitude six months later by staging fuel tax demonstrations. At this whiff of grapeshot the Government rapidly backtracked from any serious attempts to rein in the growth of road traffic. Since that false dawn, progress on implement-

ing the 10 Year Plan has been painfully slow. Needless to say, reversing the 1993 Act is not on the agenda.

Meanwhile, rarely had the prophecies of the Jeremiahs come true so soon. Within six months of the change of government, the first of a series of major disasters occurred, at Southall. While the preceding years had by no means been accident free, for example, Clapham in 1988, nevertheless there were only 10 fatalities on the railways in the five years 1992-97 and apart from the 35 killed at Clapham, only 13 in the previous five years. In the five years from 1997 to 2002, almost 60 were to die, half of them in one accident at Ladbroke Grove.

But the accident with the most severe consequences was not the one with the worst casualty figure. Only four died at Hatfield in October 2000, but the consequences were far worse for the railway industry than from any other accident. For about 18 months the railways were crippled by draconian speed restrictions, now widely agreed to be an

over-reaction, and many passengers deserted rail for other modes of transport. The problems were made worse by especially severe flooding that autumn.

As the blame came to be seen to lie with Railtrack and their contractors, heads rolled at the top including that of chief executive Gerald Corbett. By the summer of 2001 a new regime was in place, but it was too little and too late. In October that year, after yet another request for emergency funding, Secretary of State Stephen Byers pulled the plug and forced Railtrack into administration. Whether this was the best solution, and the circumstances in which it happened, will be argued over for years to come. What seems clear with hindsight is that many of the consequences were not fully anticipated. At the time of writing in June, Railtrack was still in administration. By the time you read this, it may be out of administration.

Meanwhile, all was not well with the franchise operators either. Having won their franchises by paring costs, especially staff, to the bone, several (such as SWT) found they no longer had sufficient to operate services reliably, and hurriedly had to train new staff to replace the experienced staff lost. In 2000 two franchisees (MTL and Prism) gave up.

Back in the real world, the industry did the best it could despite all the distractions. Indeed on the surface, privatisation did bring some improvements, for example in customer service from the best operators such as Anglia, Chiltern and GNER. Some new services were introduced, and one "open access" operator - Hull Trains - started up. There was also innovation in fares, especially Apex fares, but at the cost of increased confusion not only among travellers but also among staff. Several popular fares such as supersavers and network card reductions were undermined or lost.

Work on infrastructure renewal went on at major stations such as Euston, both Manchester termini and (notoriously) Leeds. Even light rail schemes somehow survived, some local authorities finding them easier



RAIL: Bescot yard in Birmingham has spare capacity, enough to absorb a large amount of freight which should be diverted from overcrowded roads

Picture: Advantage West Midlands

to build than conventional rail under the new set-up. Manchester, Sheffield, West Midlands and Croydon joined Tyne & Wear and DLR in the light rail club during the decade.

Despite escalating costs and increasing bureaucracy, a steady trickle of line and station reopenings continued, as projects already in the pipeline came to

fruition, but the rate of progress has slowed markedly. Fifty six stations were added to the network in 1992-97, but only 27 in 1997-2002. In contrast, the previous decade was the heyday of new stations, with 76 between 1982-87 and 80 from 1987 to 92. Progress with new and reopened lines tends to be "lumpier", with the total new mileage in the four five-year

periods roundly 80, 60, 95 and 40 respectively.

The two most impressive achievements in the past decade were of course the Channel Tunnel (excluded from the above figures) and Heathrow express. But neither of these can be attributed to privatisation (the tunnel was almost complete before the Act was passed) and one can only speculate how much else might or might not have been achieved by BR. And at almost £1 a mile for Heathrow Express and rather more than that for Ashford-Calais, these two lines charge just about the highest rail fares anywhere in the world!

The most depressing picture of all is electrification. Since completion of the East Coast main line in 1991, a mere 167 miles of route have been energised (less than half the East Coast mileage), and about half of that total were PTE-led schemes. In fact since the opening of Heathrow Express in May 1998, no additional electrification has been in progress anywhere in the UK, and our proportion of electric operation remains well below the European average.

Indeed the only serious new infrastructure now under construction is the Channel Tunnel rail link, and that nearly didn't happen, having to be rescued financially by the Government in 1998. The prospects of any Eurostar services beyond London seem dead, cross Channel rail freight is mired in Anglo-French asylum politics, and various infrastructure schemes from local reopenings through Thameslink 2000, the East-West route and Crossrail, to major line upgrades (not to mention Central Railway) struggle to get off the ground.

At the time of writing we were expecting an updated 10 year plan possibly in July, the original having been savaged by the Transport Select Committee. Meanwhile Stephen Byers has been replaced by Alistair Darling, and there has been yet another major accident at Potters Bar. Four loose nuts are thought to be at the root of that accident.

Four people are also largely responsible for the state of Britain's railways today. Their names are Major, MacGregor, Mawhinney and Rifkind.