

# View from Whitehall



**Explanations: John Spellar**

**A Railfuture team met John Spellar, the Minister of State for Transport on 6 March.**

**Railfuture was represented by president Michael Caton, and vice president David Bertram.**

The meeting addressed the issues of rising costs on the railways, cutbacks in investment plans and reductions in services. The minister argued that the present cutbacks in services are logical to reduce pressure on over committed routes to help reliability.

However, we said this does not apply to the proposed Leeds-Glasgow train withdrawal. The minister did not know the specific details of that service but was clear that too many paths on the network had been sold by Railtrack in the past, and it was necessary to rationalise in order to provide a more reliable and predictable timetable for passengers.

He accepted that passengers will not wait for improvements indefinitely, the cuts are not for ever and financing would depend on the industry showing that it could spend its support more effectively and give value for money.

He saw the recent suspension of the Rail Passenger Partnership and Freight Facilities grants as temporary measures only. The public is pro-rail but frustrated with the present problems.

On soaring costs, he stressed that the Strategic Rail Authority and Network Rail have an uphill task to lower costs but are working hard to get them under control. He certainly supports the SRA, which he said has a very good team.

We mentioned that the road component of multi-modals had recently been given the go-ahead, without a corresponding announcement on rail projects and indicated that rail upgrad-



**Questions: Railfuture vice president David Bertram, centre, and president Michael Caton**

ing would take some of the pressure off some transport corridors, having in mind cases such as Salisbury-Exeter where track redoubling would help to relieve the A30 road.

He argued that roads were not favoured. The multi-modal studies were aimed at developing solutions to the most important problems on the transport network, by finding the best option to serve the needs of a regional area.

He argued that much was being done on rail. For example the widening of the M6 motorway corridor was part of a strategy to improve rail, road and other transport links within this corridor.

Along with the road improvements, a significant amount of work was taking place as part of the upgrading of the West Coast main line.

We raised with the minister the recent Cardiff rugby fiasco. He said that it was the Rugby Football Union and the BBC, who had stipulated the late kick-off time, but commented that fans had been informed well in advance that there would be no services back to England so that they could make alternative arrangements.

He admitted that the situation could have been better handled but the train operators had been genuinely concerned that if they had run additional trains, it would have disrupted the normal scheduled timetable.

This, they said, would have

meant that rolling stock would be in the wrong place for the following day. This would have caused disruption to Sunday services.

On projects delayed by planning and heritage issues, for example the East London Line, he shared our frustration. He is hopeful of early progress on this scheme and felt that earlier submissions to inspectors could have been better prepared in order to deal with the heritage concerns that have now been raised.

He also mentioned the proposed extension of the Docklands Light Railway to London City Airport. This case had been well made, unlike that for Thameslink which had not secured planning consent because it had not been able to satisfy concerns raised during the development of the scheme.

We raised the question of why projects in Scotland and Wales are able to go ahead with funding from the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament whereas there is no corresponding support in England.

The minister pointed out that contributions for regional schemes through the Rail Passenger Partnership process came from the SRA.

He recognised that we would be disappointed by the SRA's decision to suspend the Rail Passenger Partnership schemes. The SRA does not intend to terminate the scheme but for the present it would aim to see through existing commitments



and approvals. He went on to say that the authority was not exempt from budget pressures and that it would have been irresponsible for it to enter into new commitments given the other financial pressures it is now under.

Cost escalation is a key issue in the railway industry. He cited the problems that had occurred with the West Coast main line, under Railtrack, but said that the SRA and Network Rail were now getting that under control.

Tough choices about priorities will have to be made and meeting all the various aspirations is clearly not possible, but the Government and the SRA were taking the decisions required to improve the performance of the industry.

The minister admitted that contractual requirements in the rail industry could often lead people in the industry to be overly bureaucratic.

He cited as an example the concerns raised over the Parry People Mover, where requirements applicable to heavy rail were being applied to a proposal for a new mode of transport, which only shared some characteristics with rail.

He shared our frustration about the lack of speed of change in the industry and said the industry could learn from the road industry in this respect, where new technology was more readily accepted.

We also discussed the question of seeking financial support for rail projects from those who benefit from the enhanced values they create, for example increased property prices.

Examples are the areas in the south-east, which will gain from the much faster services to London via the Channel Tunnel rail link and places served by the DLR extension. The minister said this was being looked at.

**Last year Railfuture provided a list to Mr Spellar of possible projects which could be implemented quickly. Several have now been actioned. Work will begin this month, for instance, after the Strategic Rail Authority announced an improvement programme for Filton Junction, near Bristol, which had become a bottleneck. The work will prevent northbound trains blocking the junction and Cardiff-bound trains can avoid it altogether. It will also allow more trains to stop at the expanding Ministry of Defence offices at Filton Abbey Wood.**