

All lined up for a

By Ray King

Ask most people why they don't travel by rail and they will tell you in no uncertain terms: "It's too ***** expensive!"

Rail campaigners know the facts of transport life and believe more people should be encouraged to travel by rail. It's a far more sane, sensible and comfortable way to go. It is also kinder to our fellow citizens than going by road and of course better for the environment than both road and air.

In the long term, common sense will dictate that rail assumes a more central role in transport.

But although it would be a popular policy to encourage people to go by rail, the Government, the Strategic Rail Authority and the private companies that now run the trains seem strangely frightened to take the logical step of trying to shift people from road to rail.

They prefer the status quo, whether it be guaranteed votes from the mythical middle England in the case of the Government, freedom for the SRA not to upset too many vested interests in the industry and, for the rail operators, the licence to carry on making profits by providing high priced services for the few who can afford them.

It would however be easy to persuade many car drivers to abandon what many of them now accept is a hellish way to travel and opt for rail.

Despite industry claims of overcrowding, many trains travel around the country with plenty of empty seats outside the peak hours. Most overcrowded services are limited to a few routes for short times of the day.

That's one reason Railfuture wants to see a national railcard. Railfuture believes such a card would be an attractive proposition for everyone.

The railway has high fixed costs and it is only by filling up those empty trains that the high cost of providing enough trains for the peaks can be reduced to reasonable levels.

At the moment the rail companies try to squeeze too much revenue out of the off-peak traveller. Because many of them have alternative ways to travel, like the car, many poten-



The launch of the National Railcard report at Liverpool Street station in April, from left: Mick Duncan of Transport 2000, Railfuture chairman Peter Lawrence, MP Jeremy Corbyn, RPC national director Anthony Smith, rail writer and author Christian Wolmar, the Railway Consultancy's Nigel Harris and report author Douglas Medrisch

tial passengers resent being milked. They are just the people who would be tempted by a national railcard. In fact it could be argued car drivers should be given a railcard free to encourage them to use trains, a less damaging form of transport, and accepting that car drivers have made a contribution of sorts to the national transport infrastructure investment by buying their annual road tax disc.

This is one of the problems of comparing road and rail costs. Car drivers make heavy capital payments - for road tax, insurance and the cost of the vehicle. But they often count the cost of each journey, merely by adding up the cost of the petrol.

It may be self deception but it has a real effect on people's choices.

Rail travellers pay much closer to the real costs of their journeys when they travel.

This is another benefit of a national railcard. Not only do the train companies get a £60million injection of revenue upfront from the sale of the cards, the would-be passengers start to assess their journey costs based on the reduced price of their ticket, ignoring the fact that they have already paid a contribution when they bought the card.

This year, Railfuture joined forces with the statutory watchdog the Rail Passengers Council to commission a report

from the Railway Consultancy into the economic implications of introducing a national railcard in Britain.

Both the Strategic Rail Authority and the Association of Train Operators admitted that no proper research had been done in the field.

They both however "believed" there would be little benefit from introducing such a card. Surprise, surprise, they were wrong.

When the report was published in April, it showed they, the passenger and the Government would benefit. It was a win, win situation for everyone.

The report estimated that nearly three million people would snap up a national railcard if it gave them a reduction of one third on off-peak fares.

They would be prepared to pay £20 for the card, which would generate both revenue and profit for the rail companies.

It would provide cheaper rail travel for everyone not already covered by existing railcards for the young, the disabled and the elderly.

After studying the evidence, it seems certain people would switch from cars. The card could revive the Government's battered transport policy and would also be in line with its social inclusion aims by making it easy for poorer people to use the train more often.

So many new passengers

would be attracted that the Government could save money too, with the cost of subsidising rail travel dropping from 7.3 pence per passenger mile to 6 pence. The Government will still be paying the same but getting better value for money.

The Railway Consultancy considered various options, from pricing the card at £10, giving 50 per cent savings on ticket prices, to charging £80 for the card and giving only 10 per cent savings. All would have attracted new passengers and made a profit.

But the best option was identified as a £20 card with 30 per cent savings. The train companies would make an estimated extra £55million profit.

The Railway Consultancy points out that there would be economic gains to society every time a passenger transfers from road to rail.

Report author Douglas Medrisch said: "Once people buy the card, they will calculate the cost of rail tickets as the reduced price they pay at the ticket window, rather like a car driver who calculates his costs as the price of petrol used rather than taking into account the overall costs." This applies to all railcards but the national railcard would bring in the many people who fall outside the scope of the current railcards.

After analysing ticket sales and railcard data for the report, and

national railcard

considering various scenarios, The Railway Consultancy concluded that, the maximum increase in passenger miles was roughly 40 per cent.

Mr Medrisch commented: "We tried to find out what would be a fair price for a national railcard. The passengers would benefit from a very cheap card offering a large discount.

"However, given that the passenger is also a taxpayer, if this pricing scheme means losses to the train operators, they would need compensation via more subsidies and the argument would not be so clear cut.

"But luckily all the plausible pricing combinations imply incremental profits to the train operators."

If the card cost £30 and gave 50 per cent savings, the train operator would make more profit but the number of people buying the card would fall to 2.6 million. Railfuture commissioned the research to persuade the rail industry and the

Government of the benefits of a national railcard.

National railcards could be provided at reduced rates - or even free - to people receiving welfare benefits.

There is scope for reducing the number of different railcards by absorbing the disabled, senior citizens and young persons railcard into a single national railcard. There may still be a case for retaining the Family Railcard, unless the national railcard makes provision for low-priced child fares.

Railfuture is planning to get further studies under way but the case for a national railcard has been established.

The Rail Passengers Council says: "Price is a major determining factor in the choice of rail as a travel mode.

"The Network railcard was an instant success in the south-east of England as the only railcard for the 26-59 age group and was also a very attractive

offer for small groups." The RPC also says that smartcard technology could be incorporated to give the national railcard holder, for instance, an increasing level of reduction on the journeys that he makes.

Points could be accumulated, as with store cards, to be used on rail journeys (for example catering) or for free journeys. The London Transport Users Committee is also keen on the principle of a national railcard which is open to all.

Transport 2000, which has the national railcard as a central plank of its fares policy, said: "This would bring the UK in line with most European countries, where such schemes already exist and are very popular."

The rail industry is much too conservative about fares. It was the Greater London Council which championed the Capitalcard which led to the spectacularly successful London Travelcard. And even

British Rail tried to resist lowering fares until one of their own farsighted managers, Ron Cotton, persuaded it to try out Saver tickets. Saver tickets have been a great success. So too would the national railcard.

For a copy of Railfuture's National Railcard Report, send £5 to Railfuture, Room 207, The Colourworks, 2 Abbot Street, London E8 3DS.

You can also view the report or an executive summary on the Railfuture website:

<http://www.railfuture.org.uk/cgi-bin/newspro/tmpl.cgi?campaigns-natrailcard>

How you helped

The Rail Passengers Council gave Railfuture financial assistance to commission the national railcard research but members also contributed around £7,000 to our appeal. That will help fund the next stage of the research which will examine how national railcards fare in mainland Europe.

We need a reality check

There are still several areas in which we activists of whatever political persuasion ought to be raising Cain about. In *Railwatch 95*, I compared our present Secretary of State Alistair Darling to Sir George Young, his Tory predecessor.

Neither have done Railfuture any favours. Sir George pushed through a flawed privatisation that allowed Railtrack contractors to do as they pleased.

Alistair Darling appears to be excessively bus-orientated. What's more, in the wake of the Potter's Bar report, he declines to direct the publicly owned company, Network Rail, as to how it should behave towards its contractors.

It is less than 1% likely it was sabotage or vandalism that caused the Potters Bar accident but Jarvis is still trying to keep the argument alive.

A year after I made the "less than 1%" estimate, I was pleased to see it recycled by Radio 4.

But how long do we have to put up with these nonsenses before we get a better railway?

When I worked on the railway, we sometimes had to remind irate passengers: "Sir, your tick-



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et does not entitle you to a seat, it entitles you to have safe transportation from A to B."

So do - and should - Potter's Bar victims have a claim along those lines from whoever sold them their tickets?

On the subject of Network Rail, I called in *Railwatch 96* for railway

operators to be given more of a chance, rather than having to bow to the supremacy of the engineers. What happens? On 1 June 2003 Network Rail decides, probably quite rightly, to spend less time looking at its station shops and more time engineering the railway properly.

Network Rail's spokesman said however: "We are principally an engineering company."

No they are not. Every signalman on the system works for Network Rail which is operating a railway.

The reason it is a muddle and will continue to be a muddle is because Network Rail still regulates one train against another by contract. The train on time gets preference or it costs them money. Network Rail must get back to basics. Nothing has really changed. I say yet again, they must regulate trains by sensible signalling decisions based on speed and stopping patterns.

While I am getting cross with Network Rail let us turn to yet another stupidity. Its spokesperson says train spotters are a security risk.

What rot! Train spotters are on

stations at unusual hours and on parts of the station rarely patrolled. They often carry cameras. They are constantly on watch. They often know each other and they love the railway. Far from being a security threat, they are a great security advantage.

Finally, (and I will have to return to this subject next time as it is vast), please do not let us believe the train protection offered by the Train Protection and Warning System is adequate. Do not let us believe either that we are going for the best with phase two of the European system (ERTMS 2).

We must look at the small print of the Strategic Rail Authority's press releases for some enlightenment. Installation will not be until 2015. The trials are being carried out on the Cambrian lines. I wonder it isn't the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch! A signal engineering colleague and myself have written a detailed non-technical appraisal on the subject which can be obtained from the editor of *Railwatch* for £2 to cover costs of production and dispatch.

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety manager.