

# Labouring under a few delusions

*The Labour Party has come forward with an ambitious package of pro-rail measures, including the reopening of the old Great Central main line north from London to Rugby to form Britain's first TGV-style high-speed line.*

*It is considering presenting plans to the electorate as part of its general election manifesto. Last time round, Labour did not win any prizes for tender, loving care of the railways and, post-Beeching, closed many lines. MIKE CROWHURST sounds a further note of caution.*

RDS has some serious reservations about the planned new infrastructure while welcoming Labour's commitment to high-speed rail transport.

We argue that while it is vital to build the Channel Tunnel high-speed link from London to Folkestone, large-scale new building north of London is probably not necessary in the foreseeable future.

Rather than building new lines, we would argue that upgrading our existing excellent rail routes would be a much more sensible and cost-effective answer.

The East Coast main line from King's Cross to Edinburgh has just been electrified to take the InterCity 225 trains.

It is vital that the West Coast main line from Euston to Glasgow - Britain's one-time premier route - should benefit as soon as possible from realignment and new technology to allow similar high speeds.

With a short link from Milton Keynes to Luton, the overcrowded Euston lines could be relieved by diverting trains into St Pancras.

The Midland main line itself is also crying out for electrification from Bedford to Yorkshire and could then be fully exploited in line with the opportunities offered by Channel Tunnel traffic.

Other top priorities for electrification are the North

Wales line from Crewe to Holyhead, the main line north of Edinburgh to Aberdeen and the Great Western lines from Paddington.

The S-shaped route which Labour proposes could have far more relevance as a main corridor for freight. Starting from London, the West Coast route through Bescot is already electrified and there is talk of electrifying the TransPennine route through Huddersfield, where the route could proceed via Port Wakefield to Northallerton, Tees yard, Ferryhill and then up to Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Labour's grand gesture of a rail M25 round London is also questionable. InterCity's attempts to encourage outer London stations have not been a notable success. Expensive, complex interchange stations might be necessary if this idea were to work.

The overwhelming need is to develop cross-town links. The proposed East-West link needs to be followed by other cross-town lines linking Euston and King's Cross with Victoria, Waterloo and London Bridge. The three lines could focus on a Centre Point interchange.

The Drain - the Waterloo and City line - could also be extended and upgraded.

There are also existing London lines, in desperate need of investment but with the potential to solve local and strategic traffic problems. The Barking - Gospel Oak line for instance needs rescuing from oblivion.

To avoid wasteful radial travel via London, relatively small amounts of money could drastically improve other lines.

Electrification of Reading - Tonbridge would allow a whole host of new services between Kent and Berkshire.

The Coastway line from Ashford to Southampton has vast potential now, even without the Channel Tunnel.

In the North, a modest reopening scheme from Cambridge to Huntingdon and a short reinstatement between Sandy and Bedford could allow East - West links based on Oxford and Cambridge (and Stansted airport).

So much can be achieved with relatively small sums of capital expenditure but RDS welcomes Labour's commitment to a high level of rail spending.

It also welcomes Labour's commitment to abolish the additional rules which prevent EC cash being used effectively on Britain's railways, to free BR from the stranglehold of the public sector borrowing requirement and the limitations on access to private funds.

We also welcome Labour's commitment to achieving a common basis for evaluating all modes of transport, a far cry from the present situation where we get a new M20 road to the Channel paid for by the taxpayer but no high-speed rail link.

PLANS for a £200 million round-London railway were announced by Labour in May. The 20-mile long route would cost £160 million to create although it would largely use existing track. New trains would be £40 million.

The one-hour orbital route via Willesden, Dalston, Bishopsgate, Peckham, Brixton, Battersea and Kensington would see trains on a five to 10-minute basis.

Labour promised the link would bring environmental benefits, stimulate inner-city economic regeneration and relieve mainline BR stations such as Paddington and Euston. It is hoped people will use the trains rather than their cars to get across the capital.

Shadow transport secretary John Prescott said only four miles of new track would be required. The radial route would incorporate the present Tube line from Shoreditch to Surrey Docks

# Top ten hopes from the Liberals

By DAVID BIGG

The Liberal Democrats are keen to see some BR freight lines used for passenger trains again and they have asked RDS to supply details of our top ten choice of routes which could be thus improved.

The party's attitude was outlined when an RDS delegation went to the House of Commons to see their transport spokesman Ronnie Fearn, MP for Southport.

He told parliamentary committee chairman John Barfield and treasurer David Bigg at the April meeting that the Liberals are firmly against privatisation of BR. The party also supports providing a subsidy for BR but believes it is feasible for Network SouthEast to make a profit.

Mr Fearn said he was worried about pressure for automatic compensation for rail travellers because it could end up with BR paying vast sums back to season ticket holders. He thinks any additional cash should go into providing new rolling stock.

The Liberals also have plans to strengthen the Transport Users' Consultative Committees but they don't spell out exactly what they expect to achieve by this.

They support the idea of a high speed link to the Channel Tunnel and back RDS policy in believing that King's Cross is the best choice of terminal. Quizzed about their attitude to subsidies for late trains, Mr Fearn said they preferred a broad

transport grant to cover all public transport but with local councils setting their own priorities. Details of the Midland main line electrification campaign were handed over to Mr Fearn who said that the party would be in touch with RDS in future.

He also asked for detailed RDS comments on their "green paper" on transport and comments on the Swedish experiment in splitting infrastructure from operations in an attempt to improve financial results. Both RDS and the Liberal side agreed that the meeting which had been secured thanks to behind-the-scenes efforts by RDS member Malcolm Jeavons had been useful. More regular meetings may well result.

# And this is what the Tories say

By DARRYL TAYLOR-SMITH

After years of battling for rail with little positive response from the Government, RDS members were dumbfounded when they heard Public Transport Minister Roger Freeman give rail a vote of confidence.

He insisted that the age of rail was here, that it was going to develop, and that nothing would stop it. But he warned that campaign groups should carry on fighting.

Cynics at the RDS-backed Kettering event were quick to point out that while investment in rail is niggardly, road proposals race ahead. In the

neighbouring county of Leicester, there are seven major road schemes in progress as well as the plan to widen the M1 to four lanes.

BR does not have enough money to provide adequate levels of existing service let alone provide anything new. Regional's plans for a Swindon - Peterborough service has been put on ice yet again. It has been talked about seriously for at least two years but Regional is not now planning to dust off the file again until 1993.

On the Bletchley - Bedford section of the route there is an overall 40 mph speed limit and the old diesel multiple units are unreliable. Sensible plans to extend the branch services into Milton Keynes

Central are now being put on hold because the diesels are too unreliable to be allowed on the main line where it is feared they will disrupt other traffic.

Mr Keith Robinson, the manager responsible for closing the line over last Christmas, said current Government requirements for return on investment were tough and it must be viewed as unlikely that electrification of the 16-mile line would take place much before the end of the decade.

A shortage of signal and telecommunications staff - caused by low pay - is delaying repairs to public address systems on the line so passengers are left angry and frustrated when there are delays and cancellations.