

# Railwatch

A VOICE FOR RAIL USERS

RAILWAY DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

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## It's just not fare enough!

The latest rail fare rises could be the crucial factor in deciding the outcome of the general election.

The double the rate of inflation increases come into effect in January — and already rail user groups are up in arms, RDS treasurer David Bigg told the Rail Users Conference in Birmingham last month.

Commuter areas in Network SouthEast often have Tory MPs with small enough majorities to be unseated by a wave of angry protest.

"Many of those Tory MPs with small majorities are already very worried about it and have told us so," said Mr Bigg.

"The Tories are very vulnerable on this issue because they have repeatedly stressed their anti-inflationary policy."

There is the added problem for them of the European Community's VAT proposals which could put around five per cent on fares in March — in the run-up to an election.

That would mean rail fares increasing by around 13 per cent when many people have had pay rises of only five per cent.

"That will put a lot of seats at risk," said Mr Bigg.

In many of the South East constituencies, the Liberal Democrats are the second party and could snatch enough seats to give them a key role in deciding the future British Government.

Their Vehicles for Change policy statement is regarded by many experts as the best transport policy on offer from any of the political parties.

"We could almost put Vehicles for Change out as a policy statement for RDS," said one speaker at the conference. "It has some very sensible things to say."

The political realities were outlined to delegates who were advised to target most of their efforts on marginal constituencies.

Mr Bigg said: "The Tories are definitely vulnerable to a Liberal challenge in many areas. Commuter groups have a key role because commuters are already very angry."

They see their fares going up but Mr Major stepping in to hold fare levels down on the line to his constituency of Huntingdon which has a better rail service than many other areas. It is also a vast improvement on what it used to be.

There are also obvious suspicions that the decision to dump BR's route for a high-speed Channel Tunnel link was aimed primarily at saving a few Tory marginal seats.

Hopes that new high-speed commuter services could be introduced on the back of the fast link are now largely dashed.

When the commuters get to London, the shambolic and ever-declining service on the Underground and buses may prompt voters to ask: Is this the result of 12 years of Tory Government?

In Public Transport Minister Roger Freeman's

### RUG 91

Rail User Groups  
Conference  
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constituency of Kettering, travellers have seen crucial cuts in rail services. The rail link from Kettering to Corby has already been axed.

In September while Mr Freeman was boasting about travelling on public transport in London's Docklands, the limping, second rate diesel multiple units operating from Kettering to Bedford were axed. The local council is now paying for a replacement bus service!

Mr Bigg pointed out that all the parties must be asked searching questions about their attitude to rail and their definite plans. Labour has said it would have a moratorium on road building if it won the election and has led people to believe that it considers the motorway-building programme to be complete. But it has also said it is in favour of a new East Coast motorway.

"Just what is their roads policy?" asked Mr Bigg. "I think we should know."

Mr Bigg urged RDS branches, user groups and concerned individuals to send an RDS fact sheet pointing out the inequities of rail and road funding to as many MPs as possible.

John Bigny of Edenbridge and District Rail Travellers Association said: "We must give the issue of rail travel a higher political profile. At the moment there are cuts to evening trains, weekend trains and even peak-hour commuter trains."

"At the same time, a £100 million road scheme is being implemented in our area," said David Goodman of Stratford upon Avon rail users.

General secretary Trevor Garrod said: "There could well be a lot of tactical voting at the next election. Let's make sure we benefit from it."

Chairman Steve Wilkinson concluded: "In an ideal world, RDS and rail users groups need not exist."

### £1 billion bonus

Four days after the Rail User groups conference, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont announced in his autumn statement that BR is to be given an extra £1 billion for 1992/3.

But the extra money will not keep fare levels down. It is earmarked for capital spending.

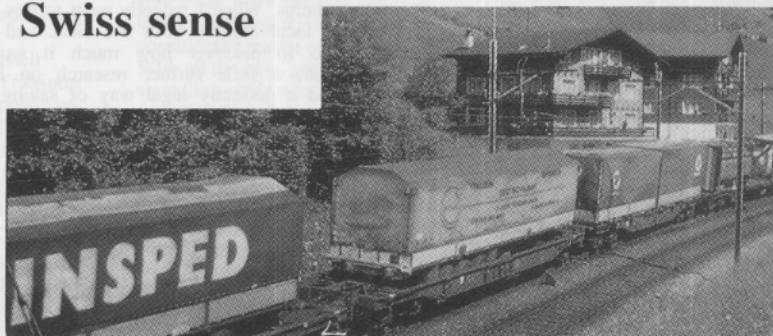
Mr Lamont denied it was a cynical pre-election giveaway and Transport Secretary Malcolm Rifkind said: "We are giving BR and LT the tools. Now it is time for them to do the job."

London Transport is getting £400,000 million extra which will allow it to guarantee investment in the Tube network at £700 million a year, the level the Monopolies and Mergers Commission deemed necessary to turn it into an acceptable modern system.

Labour spokesman John Prescott also warned: "It won't get the escalators working."

The Government also boasted that public transport is getting priority rather than new roads. In fact spending on new roads is already £2 billion a year, after DOUBLING last year.

### Swiss sense



*The only way for lorries: The Swiss insist that all lorries over 28 tonnes should go by rail. Why can't we?*