

Britain off the rails again

The way the Government acts over Euro grants to British Rail is illegal, user groups were told at their annual conference in Birmingham

"In due course, the British Government will be taken to the European Court over it," warned European MP Brian Simpson.

At the moment, the Government deducts £5 million from BR, if the European Community gives a £5 million grant to BR.

This inappropriately named "additionality" rule undermines Euro policy and has already wrecked plans to electrify the North Wales main line.

A financial package including Euro development grants was stitched together to enable the wires to go up from Crewe to Holyhead, only for the Government to warn that it would dock the cash from BR's grant. As a result, BR backed away from the project.

Ironically the Commission sees Crewe - Holyhead as one of its top priorities along with the Channel Tunnel high speed link.

Mr Simpson gave full backing to European Environment Commissioner Carlo Ripa Di Meana in trying to force the British Government to abide by the environmental rules it had agreed to, instead of trying to build new roads through ancient woods and areas of special scientific interest.

"Well done Carlo, keep the screws on 'em," he said. "We need have no fear about an environmental assessment of a new railway."

Mr Simpson said a rail system was needed which would take high-speed freight to all the regions.

"In Europe railways are seen as an expanding industry," he said. "Only on BR is there no fast track."

He said that the European Commission had decided that rail infrastructure should be in state hands — but Britain was out of step in wanting to privatise it.

"If road hauliers do not pay the full cost of infrastructure they use, neither should the railways," said Mr Simpson.

The appalling cost of over-reliance on cars and lorries was that 50,000 people a year died on European roads.

"A lot of these deaths could be avoided," said Mr Simpson. "But national governments have thwarted many of the commission's efforts to improve standards."

"There was concern about the use of old public transport vehicles in Britain and in southern Europe."

"Cars should be built for safety, not speed."

"The Dutch are trying to introduce 46 tonne lorries."

"Two million people are unfit to drive for one

RUG 91 Birmingham

reason or another, including many because of their poor vision."

The social group in the European Parliament was fighting for public transport to be exempted from VAT but it was difficult to predict what stance the British will take in the Council of Ministers.

After Mr Simpson's speech, the thirteenth national rail user groups conference went on to workshop sessions, one led by Friends of the Earth activist Chris Gittins, on environmental lobbying.

He urged RDS to co-operate with cyclists, women's groups and other campaigning groups if we want things really to change.

He said RDS Wales had failed to endorse an Environmental Transport Charter promoted by FoE because while it supported the transport initiative, it did not want to be associated with FoE's "other ideas".

But the environment groups want RDS to be involved with them — especially as we have the expertise.

He said planners ignored walkers and cyclists even though they were the two key groups for the future.

With rail as another vital element, we should be able to have in the future the mobility we have now come to expect.

The facts

The conference was told by RDS treasurer David Bigg that MPs must be told about the environmental consequences of their actions.

Socially necessary services run by BR are subsidised to the tune of around £500 million and Tory MPs never tire of sniping at BR and pointing out how these grants are being paid out of public funds — by hard-pressed taxpayers.

But the real waste of public money is on roads despite the Big Lie of the road lobby that tax and excise levied on road users is greater than the money spent on roads.

£6 billion is spent every year on roads in excess of what is raised from fuel tax and excise duty if the figures are added up properly.

The roads balance sheet looks like this:

Revenue:

| | |
|------------------|--------|
| Fuel tax..... | 10,760 |
| Excise duty..... | 3,065 |
| Total..... | 13,825 |

Costs:

| | |
|------------------------------------|--------|
| Direct costs..... | 5,625 |
| Accidents..... | 6,360 |
| Company car and parking perks..... | 2,500 |
| Social costs..... | 5,300 |
| Total..... | 19,785 |

(millions of £s)

The figures are based on recent research in Holland and official British figures.

Most new investment in BR is not funded out of general taxation but by borrowing (which has to be repaid with interest) and by fares.

BR receives section 56 capital grants towards some new investment but only where there is a benefit to non-rail users, for example, in easing road congestion. So road users benefit directly from rail investment.

RDS believes the much smaller amount of pollution from railways compared to roads should also be taken into account as a non-user benefit.

We want a level playing field — not fraudulent presentation of public accounts.

NEWSWATCH

Voting time: The annual general meeting of RDS will be held on Saturday 2 May at the Lyttleton Theatre in the Birmingham and Midland Institute, Margaret Street, Birmingham.

Save our trains: The Rail Defence Fund now stands at £658. It can be used to help groups fighting closure plans or service cutbacks. More help is always welcome. Send donations to Trevor Garrod (address in panel below). Make cheques payable to RDS.

Shrewsbury is set to lose its 28-a-day direct trains to London in May. InterCity will make travellers from the city change at Birmingham New Street. The supposed aim is to maximise InterCity revenue! Shropshire Chamber of Commerce has helped to pay for advertisements in the national press pleading with Sir Bob Reid to intervene.

Electrifying between Liverpool and York would cost £53 million, compared to £1 billion for widening the M62. Electrification would provide a better financial rate of return, according to the Tran-pennine Rail Study group.

One million drivers in Britain probably have defective eye sight, according to road safety surveys.

250,000 people die on the world's roads every year. 10 million are injured.

ADVERTS

Back numbers of Railwatch (28 - 49) are available for 45 pence each (post free) from RDS sales officer, 139 Harrowdene Gardens, Teddington, Middx TW11 0DN

Places to Visit by Train in Kent and East Sussex £1.75 post free from RDS (LHC) 44 Ravensmeade Way, London W4 1TF

Interesting ideas on how to transfer traffic in Surrey from road to rail without expensive new building schemes are included in the RDS booklet A Rail Strategy for Surrey. It is available for £1.08 (post free) from Reg Snow, 48 The Park, Great Bookham, Surrey KT23 3LS

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