

Political answers

We posed some awkward questions in the October issue of *Railwatch* and asked the politicians to answer them.

Labour

Tom Harris MP – who was appointed “Minister for Rail” in September – responded on behalf of Secretary of State Douglas Alexander.

Mr Harris, who is MP for Glasgow South, wrote: “I hope that the meeting I have had with four of your colleagues since you wrote your letter has helped to make things clearer.

“I am a little less comfortable about providing responses, in a form suitable for publication in your magazine, to the specific points raised in the attachment to your letter.

“There are some fundamental policy questions here as, I am sure, was your intention – and I do not believe that I could do justice to the issues in this sort of format.

“I am happy to discuss these and any other aspects of the Government’s rail policy with Railfuture. I hope you will understand, however, why am reluctant to accept your invitation to comment on them in this way.”

Conservative

Chris Grayling, the shadow secretary of state for transport, answered on behalf of the Conservatives.

Mr Grayling, MP for Epsom and Ewell, wrote: “I am enclosing with this letter a copy of the speech I gave in July announcing our Rail Review.

“I’m afraid it is much too early in our policy-making process to give specific answers to questions as detailed as these.

“These are things I am actively looking at. Indeed the whole point of the Rail Review is to move towards the re-integration of track and train to create a more cost-efficient structure, and in doing so to release money for capacity improvements. I want to see our railways grow and develop for the future.

“Other questions will also require detailed work before I get to the point of giving answers. For example, you ask about high-speed rail. We have been open about the fact that we are looking at both high speed rail and Maglev as alternatives for the future, though I will not be doing this in detail until next year, once I have finished the Rail Review.

“We also announced earlier this year we would be looking to build on the work we did a decade ago in re-introducing light rail to Britain.

“I will be happy to keep in touch with you as our work progresses, and by the time of the next election, I hope to have built a programme that will be very attractive to your members.”



As one who lived through the reopening of Watlington Station and knew Ron Callaby (pictured above), I should like to add details to the article in Railwatch 109, writes Clara Zilahi.

Not only did he organise the fund-raising and the campaign with British Rail, but with a small team, spent weekend after weekend with spade and shovel physically digging out the old platforms to make them usable.

Though he gave full credit to all who helped, the bulk of the work had fallen on him.

Liberal Democrat

Alistair Carmichael, for the Liberal Democrats, gave the fullest answers. He said: “Representing the island communities of Orkney and Shetland, I feel duty bound to point out that public transport is not always an option for every MP. However, where public transport is available every effort should be made to encourage MPs and the public to use it.”

He said the Liberal Democrats have frequently highlighted the higher cost of rail fares, have argued for a national railcard and would seek to introduce it in government.

He agreed it should be compulsory, as required by the European Parliament, for all operators to provide spaces for bikes on trains.

Soon after, he had his first heart attack from which he made only a partial recovery. Medical opinion was that the excessively hard work had contributed to his loss of health, and hence his premature death.

By contrast when, some five years ago we approached the train operator with the offer by a small local building firm, to put up, without lengthy delay, a useful cycle shed at a third of the final cost, the train operator could not give clearance for such work on railway land, even if there was

no access to the track, without a complicated and impractical process of training.

This approach affects other schemes such as station reopenings, for which the cost estimate obtained by campaigners is often a fraction of the railway company’s, which condemns the scheme as too expensive.

That indeed was the situation regarding our plans for reopening the Cambridge to St Ives railway.

Did anyone say that privatisation would rid us of British Rail bureaucracy?

He said local institutions should be left to decide many issues, including whether buses should be required to call at rail stations, whether closed rail lines should be reopened and whether light rail should be introduced (facilitated by the Government).

He supported a high-speed railway between London and Scotland and further electrification “where practical, but any such proposals must be economically viable”.

A fuller report of the Lib Dem’s response appears on the Railfuture website.

Scottish Nationalist

Fergus Ewing, transport spokesman for the Scottish National Party and MSP for Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber, pointed out that six

of our 18 questions related solely to England.

He added: “I am a bit confused as to why your members would think the SNP should tell our good friends in England how to run their railways!”

Mr Ewing supports a high-speed rail link between Scotland and London and substantial investment in the rail network in Scotland but said it would be “impossible to carry out my work by public transport” because many parts of the constituency.

He said lorries pay “massively” in tax.

Plaid Cymru

We were unable to contact the transport spokesperson for Plaid Cymru.