

Where is my train? You'll have to take the bus instead

The Government is providing neither leadership nor vision for the railways, which is in contrast to Labour's attitude when it was in opposition. Then it had a strategic approach to public transport based on the importance of the railway.

Light rail schemes were progressed in Manchester and Croydon before it came to power in 1997.

But in the nine years since it was elected, Labour has been slow to implement major projects like Thameslink and Crossrail. We are still waiting for them.

You would have thought an incoming Labour government which had been banging on about environmentally friendly rail for years in opposition and had plans, helped by yours truly and others, would do the right things.

They could at least have taken up the baton where progress had been made and run with it. But no!

Now tramways are sneered at in Luton or Cambridge, Leeds or Liverpool. The Department for Transport might as well be renamed the "Department for Buses".

To be specific, the progressive city of Birmingham's transport policy is a shambles, thanks to the Department for Buses' incompetence.

It seems planning control of that great city has been wrenched from the city fathers and city planners and handed over to Network Rail's public affairs department in an attempt to get investment into the station area at New Street.

Their plans will take years and years, cost millions and millions, and inconvenience thousands of people who will have to change unnecessarily in that escalator hell from platform to platform.

The passengers will end up with the same bottleneck of a railway that they have now. I know because I have operated that railway and I understand it.

Rail franchising in general has been rightly condemned by the transport select committee of the House of Commons and even a Tory transport spokesman is talking about returning to a vertically joined-up railway reuniting train and track.

Although I do have some reservations about that, the Department for Transport does not seem to have any better ideas.

The DfT is again led by a Scottish MP although in Scotland ironically, there is a healthy attitude towards a resurgent railway.

I suppose the Government is saving money by having one person doing two jobs – being responsible for both transport and Scotland.

However, a second-class transport policy for England seems to be a high price to pay for such

"economy". One loser is the West Midlands where the DfT is preventing the development of an effective rail and transport policy.

The West Midlands is supposed to have both a rail strategy and an air strategy rather than a hotch-potch which is effective at putting money the way of bus companies.

I have examined the Birmingham International Airport Surface Access Strategy which shows that, in 2005, 640,000 originating travellers to the airport used rail. Of these 69% came from the West Midlands, 14.5% from the East Midlands and only 1.2% from the North West.

Yet, under the new CrossCountry franchise, all trains serving Birmingham International will go to and from Manchester, while all trains serving the East Midlands will be routed via Solihull – but not stop there despite Birmingham airport funding a linking bus service.

The original West Midlands route utilisation strategy proposed that both CrossCountry trains each hour would be re-routed via Birmingham International.

The ASAS points out that the Government's 2003 air transport white paper stated that BIA should aim to improve the public transport share of trips to the airport "with 25% as a long-term target. Improved rail, bus and coach services will need to contribute to this".

Yet again under the proposed franchise there are no improved rail services at Birmingham International other than one extra "local" train an hour, extended from Coventry to Rugby and Northampton, operated by the new West Midlands franchise.

In addition – but not part of the new franchises – Virgin West Coast plans to run one extra train an hour between Birmingham New Street, Birmingham International, Rugby (but not Milton Keynes) and London. A Government-led shambles!

In its new ASAS, BIA now wants to push its public transport share by 2012 up to 25%, the Government's long-term target in the aviation white paper.

By 2012, the airport forecasts it will have 14.4 million passengers, compared with 9.4 million in 2005 – a 53% increase.

The ASAS proposes that rail's modal share of all air passengers should rise from 9.1% in 2005, to 12% in 2012 – an absolute increase in rail passengers of 90% in only five years. The ASAS proposes a similar percentage increase in rail use by airport staff.

The West Midlands rail planning assessment and the ASAS do not tie together, despite the fact that the Department for Transport should have overall responsibility. The rail

planning assessment ignores the need for a step change in the level and quality of rail services identified in the West Midlands area multi-modal study.

I also have noted that there is now no expectation that the West Coast main line between Birmingham and Coventry will be quadrupled within the foreseeable future, and it is not proposed to pursue the "international connection" between Birmingham International station and the Derby-Leicester rail lines.

The West Midlands RPA appears to envisage a rail network in 20 years time which is essentially similar to today's rail network, and is seeking to accommodate growth rather than actively promoting it. This appears inconsistent with both central and local government policy to reduce car use and congestion.

It is also inconsistent with the 2003 air transport white paper, which proposes that rail should play a larger role in bringing passengers to expanded regional airports, including Birmingham International airport.

So forgive me for this detailed discussion of incompetence which is symptomatic of a general anti-rail attitude at the DfT.

This attitude is personified in a recent Cambridge newspaper headline: "Countdown begins for guided bus."

I am still worried that there are safety implications in running a guided bus across foggy fenland which have not yet been debated.

The guided bus which will obliterate an existing railway will do nothing to ease congestion, is environmentally less effective than rail and has many other disadvantages. But the Department for Transport loves it. More evidence of the UK not being as rail-orientated as the



Rayner's Review

rest of mainland Europe, apart from in the world of media spin, can be demonstrated, and is equally worrying. It was publicised in *The Times* of 17 October that "Digital sensors will reduce the gaps between trains in the rush hour". This is a reference to the European Rail Traffic Management System. You would think when reading it we lead the world, not that we are the only European rail system without a proper scheme in place.

We have the worst traffic management strategy in Europe, relying on a system that is inferior and cannot be developed, is not failsafe, and was described by the public inquiry into the Southall accident as the cul de sac of technology.

The Government seems intent on pushing the railways further into a cul de sac instead of recognising its obvious value as the backbone of an environmentally friendly, efficient transport system for the future.

The Government's attitude has been a bitter disappointment for those of us with hopes and sensible ambitions for the railway.

■ Peter Rayner is a former British Rail operations and safety manager



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