

Hot talk but an icy wind is blowing

This coalition government is conning us with a constant stream of new ideas, each more bizarre than the last one, many with eye-catching headlines about high-speed lines or value for money. Many of the schemes are frankly irrelevant, impracticable or plain mad.

The first example of lunacy is reservation-only trains. By suggesting passengers will only be allowed to travel on some trains if they have reserved a seat will destroy a principle we have enjoyed, Eurostar apart, for many years.

The Department for Transport has refused extra coaches and when challenged, Rail Minister Theresa Villiers talks rubbish about smart ticketing.

Smart ticketing is pricing the less well-off away from the trains. It is all about raising fares and raising profits for train companies. Still more bizarre is the crazy idea put forward



during the recent heavy snow in Southern England: "Heated track to melt away rail misery". Is the Government seriously considering a proposal which would take sufficient electricity out of the system to cause power cuts in times of extreme weather? Only idiots would give any time to the suggestion.

What they should be doing is asking why, for years, the de-icer trains were not being used as they should have been. A dribble of oil, not a dribble of public relations rubbish, was and is needed.

Sadly what the Government has done – as far outside the glare of publicity as possible – is to take millions of pounds out of local

council funds. This will have a direct impact on rail services, their frequency and whether they are provided at all.

It will also restrict bus services in rural areas, many of which feed local railheads.

It is not often the modern railway infuriates me three times during a two-hour visit to one town – Walsall.

I left Birmingham New Street on the 11.07 train which, until the recent cuts in Government spending, went through Walsall and on to Rugeley.

It now terminates at Walsall and sits there and waits long enough for its former self to come back from Rugeley! I go to Walsall to my meeting and am reminded

that the Wrexham-London Service, now abolished, carried few people because passengers could get off at Wolverhampton but not join the train. Nor could it stop at Birmingham International or Coventry but only at Tame Valley Parkway. Is it any wonder it failed?

It failed because of the insane franchising arrangements imposed on the railway at the time of privatisation and which still continue in spite of Theresa Villiers' pronouncement: "New franchises to provide better services for passengers".

On my return journey I find I am on a Walsall to Wolverhampton all-stations service via Aston, New Street and Smethwick. The direct Walsall-Wolverhampton no longer runs – the last Government's doing.

If we believe all the propaganda, and within that I include talk of the "Big Society", which to me equals an inward-looking, nonstrategic approach, then all the good work presently being undertaken by Network Rail on routing strategy could be lost.

Also, hidden among the "Bonfire of the Quangos" – another silly sound bite – one finds that the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, a valuable campaigning and regulating body pushing for universal design and accessibility standards, is to be abolished.

Again the least well-off and people with restricted mobility who depend on public services will suffer most.

Having listed what I call the nonsense areas, I return as I have done before over the years to the question of how we in Railfuture conduct ourselves.

Reading *Railwatch*, I believe we are in danger of becoming ensnared in the good news stories. Enthusiasts we may be but as campaigners we are not joining the protests about station staffing and automatic ticket vending in enough numbers.

I note several of my fellow vice presidents are Lords, and one is a minister deep in the Department for Transport.

Railfuture members should write to them, especially the minister who has defended the Luton-Dunstable busway in correspondence.

I suppose he is a political "prisoner" to be pitied, but unless there is more protest the railway will suffer.

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Picture: RAY KING

PAYING THE PRICE: *Passengers at Liverpool Street station in London. Some trains throughout the country are now so crowded that operators are "responding" to demand by making some trains accessible only to people with reservations and raising fares with the connivance of the Government. Network Rail knows that, in the face of increasing demand for rail use, it will need to invest in ways of boosting capacity but is coy about admitting in public that an increasing number of passengers will have to be priced off if the Government does not allow it to carry out the necessary infrastructure work.*

Instead the Government is cosy up to the road lobby again by halting the "war" on motorists, removing speed cameras and talking about protecting drivers from increased petrol prices. There has never been a war on motorists and successive governments have allowed costs for public transport users to rise while the real costs of motoring have been going down. London Mayor Boris Johnson has given motorists driving through west London another "gift", by abolishing the congestion charge extension. The capital's population will suffer from increased air pollution as a result but Boris can still boast of his "giveaway".

◆◆◆◆ Cambodia is reopening its 400-mile railway network, starting with freight to Vietnam