

WESTMINSTER

Wrong at the top

British Rail has something radically wrong at the top, said *Sir John Stokes* (C, Halesowen and Stourbridge), in an adjournment debate on **13 MARCH**.

He had always preferred travelling by train to driving a car, he said, particularly on today's crowded roads. But since steam went out, the service had deteriorated, with bad time-keeping and many more stops at the stations.

"The number and frequency of delays, the cancellations of services, the breakdowns of engines and signalling, about which there is little or no information, are innumerable. Even yesterday, the train that I had planned to catch from Marylebone left 20 minutes late." Some years ago, he began corresponding with the then chairman of British Rail on all these matters. Replies were slow and always temporising and unsatisfactory. "I had a long series of complaints about the appalling state of the car park. Eventually, in exasperation, I was fobbed off with promises of a meeting that never took place."

There seemed to be no incentive for efficiency and a lack of leadership at all levels. No senior official ever appeared on the scene.

Recently there had been a new name for the region in which he lived - Network SouthEast.

"Although some stations have been improved and repainted, the whole idea of Network SouthEast seems to be a purely media and promotional one, with appalling stupid signs such as 'Welcome to Little Snodgrass.' What the customers wanted was a better service.

Station staff morale was not good, although there were still some marvellous railwaymen with some of the prewar ideals.

"The whole organisation needs much better leadership and inspiration at the top. The railways have lost a huge freight business. Unless they improve they will lose passengers as well."

Business after business had lost confidence in the railways, due in large part to strikes and the poor service that is given. "With too many cars and lorries on our roads, the railways had a golden opportu-

ity, which they have not taken." *Roger Freeman*, Minister for Public Transport, said Sir John had described from his knowledge of British Railways over the past 40 years a comment on how society itself had moved. Needed in the years to come was to organise the future of British Rail so that it would respond more positively to the requirements of the customer. There were parallels with the National Health Service, and perhaps with education.

To go private again

"It is surely right to place BR in the private sector. The Government have not reached any conclusion about the timing or the method of that - it is a very difficult task. But we are clear in our determination to move the railways back to the private section, from which they originated."

Turning to freight, he said there had been a dramatic shift of freight from the railways to the roads. That had been partly due to the growth of the motorway and trunk road system and the greater freedom and flexibility of moving freight by road for manufacturers and shippers. But the Government believes that in the next decade BR, whether in the public or private sector, will face the great challenge of capitalising on the opportunities presented by the Channel Tunnel to move freight long distances from the great regions of the nation through the tunnel to compete with other European nations at a competitive price. That was the way to recapture some of the freight now being carried on the roads.

Faster to Edinburgh

Conservative and Labour MPs both expressed their support for the second reading of the British Railways Bill on **19 MARCH**. Moving it, *Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson* (C, New Forest) said the Bill was designed to add to the capacity and improve the safety and reliability of the railway system.

Electrification of the East Coast main line to Newcastle, Edinburgh and Carstairs would take place this July. This would bring Edinburgh within four hours of London for the first time.

Dr. Norman Godman (Lab, Greenock & Post Glasgow) said he received many complaints from businessmen and women passengers, that the service along the west coast of Scotland and England into Euston was massively inferior to the service between Edinburgh Waverley and King's Cross.

Alan Beith (Lib, Berwick-upon-Tweed) said that he and others were concerned that sleeper and overnight services were maintained. *Sir Patrick* said he understood that Mr Beith and his colleagues had met the chairman of British Rail on 27 February and that an early response would be given.

The Bill represented an essential building block for British Rail in its continuing attempt to build a more effective and reliable service. "I hope the difficulties of the past are behind us."

Dr. Godman spoke again of the Anglo-Scottish service. Particular concern was expressed about trains stopping at Berwick-upon-Tweed. "I speak as a consumer who occasionally travels by train, but - regrettably, you may say - much more frequently on the shuttle service between Glasgow and Heathrow, though unquestionably the most civilised way to travel between the two cities is by train. There is no argument about that." There had to be some equality between the service down the west coast of Scotland and the one that runs between Edinburgh and King's Cross, which for a start was much more frequent than the Glasgow-Euston run.

"Moreover, the Euston service is often run with old rolling stock. Two weeks ago, my wife and I went to board the Royal Scot leaving Euston for Glasgow at 10.25am. Given that it is supposed to be the premier train of the daily service, the rolling stock was a disgrace.

"The buffet service, too, was nothing short of scandalous. If British Rail is to attract passengers - particularly business passengers and tourists - we shall need not only improved travelling time between Scotland and London but improvement in on-board services offered to passengers."

Peter Snape (Lab, West Bromwich East) urged that if imported coal was to be moved in the UK it was best moved by rail. Another small point was his pleasure at the restoration of the line between St. Helens and St. Helens Junction. This provided a connection for Warrington, Birmingham and the West of England. He welcomed the Bill on behalf of the Opposition.

Replying to the discussion, *Sir Patrick McNair-Wilson* told *Dr. Godman* that the InterCity 250 service was designed ultimately to

take 30 minutes off the journey time to London, and to provide the sort of benefits to which *Dr. Godman* referred. "Sadly the time scale for the project does not envisage completion until 1994."

He welcomed Mr Snape's support. He also welcomed his agreement for imported coal on this occasion and for trying to get freight off the roads. The Bill was given a second reading.

Tube in trouble

On **1 MARCH**, *Michael Shersby* (Con, Uxbridge) moved an adjournment debate about the standard of service on the London Underground.

Why was London Underground in such financial trouble? It said that its land sales were £35 million down during the current financial year and it estimates £45m down in income next year. Fare estimates were below normal.

The overloading of trains was another appalling problem. Recent events showed that levels of train loading were a major safety problem. There were continuing problems on the Victoria line, where the trains had developed square wheels due, it was said, to unseasoned wood being used on sleepers when the tracks were laid. What was being done about that? "I hope the minister will explain."

Despite overcrowding, London Underground had reduced peak hour services on several lines; on the Victoria for instance, the number during peak hours had been cut from 36 to 30 to save costs. But in practice, the lack of available drivers meant that 30 trains were unlikely to run. The usual was 24. Replying, *Roger Freeman* said there were four major problems. London Underground was in large measure an Edwardian railway. The cost of completely rebuilding some of the underground stations was enormous. The cost of rebuilding Angel Islington station was likely to exceed £72m.

The inheritance that our Victorian and Edwardian forefathers had left was a system that was difficult to alter or adjust without building new capacity. Secondly, it was vital for London Underground to maintain the system it had inherited. Eventually the lack of investment would begin to make itself felt. The ride would make itself uneven. That was unpleasant for passengers. Speed limits had to be introduced, which reduced the capacity of the system. The third factor affecting the underground is safety. The report on the King's Cross fire identified many areas where improvement was needed.

"There is an urgent need to increase the capacity of the system. One way is to build new lines. The other

