

WESTMINSTER

WATCH

Transport Bill

The Transport Bill to establish the Strategic Railway Authority was introduced for its second reading by deputy prime minister John Prescott.

"Improving transport goes to the heart of my politics," said Mr Prescott on 20 December. "All issues for change in transport have been controversial but, in time, have been accepted."

He added that "as an opposition front bench transport spokesman, I warned about the environmental consequences of just building roads to solve congestion and of ignoring the importance of public transport networks. That issue is now centre stage."

However, many MPs of all parties used the debate to promote road schemes for their own areas, the Conservatives in fact accusing the Government of a U-turn in accepting the importance of road building and desirability of making it easier for car owners.

Advancing new ways of obtaining money for transport projects, Mr Prescott said: "I was also an early advocate of public-private partnerships, when the major political parties - including my own - were opposed to them."

"Indeed, in 1991, I advocated the leasing through private finance of an order for Network SouthEast trains. The Tory Government at that time eventually adopted the idea during the election campaign. The option not only provided new trains for the south-east through private financing, but saved the York works from closure."

"Unfortunately, within a very short period, we were back to old public sector financing arrangements, under which money was denied and the plant - which we desperately need today to enable expansion of the railways - was closed. In

the 1990s, I warned of the effects of privatisation, deregulation and uncontrolled markets, which ruined the bus and rail networks."

The then shadow transport minister John Redwood asked: "Will he tell us whether or not there has been a U-turn toward motoring and the car?"

Mr Prescott said he had set out a "clear" strategy for a "better integrated transport system".

He said: "We shall ring-fence any future real increases in fuel duty for public transport and roads and introduce new income streams of revenues from congestion charging and workplace parking to improve local transport."

Norman Baker (Lib Dem Lewes) asked: "Will Mr Prescott confirm whether or not the Government remains committed to adopting national road traffic reduction targets?"

Mr Prescott: "The Government was never committed to that."

Mr Redwood: "Does Mr Prescott recall saying: 'I will have failed if in five years' time there are not far fewer journeys by car?'"

"Does he know that the new Minister for Transport has said that of course there are going to be more journeys by car? Is that not a U-turn and has the Secretary of State not been overruled?"

Difficult decisions

Mr Prescott: "People are changing from using their cars to using public transport."

"We are prepared to take the difficult long-term decisions needed to improve the quality of public transport and reduce congestion through public transport plans."

The Bill requires authorities to develop a bus strategy to ensure good quality bus services tailored to local circumstances. (In the past road building has been justified as a way to

improve bus services!) Mr Prescott said the Commons transport committee had welcomed the Railways Bill, "which we believe is a practical way of addressing the problems of a restructured railway."

Dr Norman Godman (Lab Greenock and Inverclyde) said many members of passenger transport executives are concerned that their rights to set local railway services may be diminished by the Strategic Rail Authority.

Promoting rail

He asked Mr Prescott to have a re-think.

Mr Prescott: "That is indeed a serious point and I am well aware of it. In this matter, although passenger transport authorities in Scotland and in England have some concerns, we shall be giving the grants to the Strategic Rail Authority and it will negotiate with the PTAs about the provision of services. We are well aware of the problem and members of the committee will have a chance to examine that complaint."

Mr Prescott added: "We will promote and develop a growing, safer, better invested railway that is committed to delivering improved performance, quality and capacity."

Mr Prescott repeated that powers vested in the SRA and rail Regulator would ensure better services from Railtrack and the train operators. The SRA's borrowing limit is that of the British Railways Board which it replaces and is to be set at £3b, part of which will be swallowed up by the board's existing debt of £0.5b.

"We are now providing the necessary flexibility for the SRA to accommodate the outcome of the current negotiations on franchise replacement. The existence of a £3b borrowing limit does not mean that the SRA will need to borrow £3b or any other amount."

"The measures in the Bill bring public accountability back to the railway industry. It will allow the SRA to plan for an expanding network."

"It will require those who own the network to meet their obligations and fulfill their promises, and it will require train operators to fulfill their franchise agreements. It will return the concept of public to the concept of a public rail service. The Bill

takes a further step towards the establishment of a modern, integrated, properly financed and properly regulated transport system to rival the best in Europe."

Mr Redwood, replying for the Opposition, said that to come to a judgment about the Bill, he needed answers to a whole series of questions, including when will there be a Tube public-private partnership, is Mr Prescott able to offer any new Tube lines, when will he have something positive to say about proper car parks at stations and policies to improve access to stations.

Mr Redwood also wanted new trunk roads. He said "The Bill will tax people off the road and clog up the railways with more regulation."

"Meanwhile, the proper Minister for Transport - Lord Macdonald - is busily briefing everybody that there is no chance of car usage decreasing over a five-year period."

"Not only is he saying that more cars will be bought, but that, as a result of that and of what he wants to do - which is to make motoring cheaper - there will be more journeys by car."

Central Railway

Central Railway's plan seems to be exercising the mind of Mr Andrew Robathan (Con Blaby) to a great extent. He wanted an assurance, during questions to the transport minister on 20 January that no public money would be spent on the scheme which, "although superficially attractive, seems unviable to most people." (*Quite why he should be so worried about it then is a mystery.*)

This was an assurance Transport Minister Keith Hill was only too happy to give. "No public money will be entailed in the scheme." He then went on to outline what steps the Government had taken to help transfer freight from road to rail, and generally pour cold water on the Central Railway proposals.

This led Bernard Jenkin, an opposition transport spokesman (Con North Essex) to ask: "If the Minister is not to support large projects for transferring freight from road to rail, as the Central project would do, which projects will he support?" Which indeed?

Action on safety

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott will be again raising the issue of safety at the National Rail Summit in May.

He has already demanded national standards on driver training to be agreed by this month, and a nationwide independent and confidential reporting system, which will allow all staff to phone in safety concerns, to be working by December. This will include infrastructure contractors and rolling stock leasing companies.

Railtrack has agreed to introduce the train protection and warning system at 12,000 sites by the end of 2002, beginning with high risk locations. TPWS will be in operation on

Thameslink's Brighton and Bedford service by the end of this year. Train operators have committed to fit 33 per cent of trains by the end of 2001, 75 per cent of trains by the end of 2002 and all trains by the end of 2003.

The industry will continue to introduce ATP on high speed trains and move towards European standards.

Mr Prescott reminded critics: "Rail is already the safest form of land transport, but naturally the Paddington disaster undermined public confidence. Quite rightly the public expect to see the industry take action. In the future the rail industry will approach safety issues with a partnership approach."

Opinion by Michael Weinberg

Honey, I shrank the train

While travelling from London to Sheffield a short time ago on a tin-pot, tiny Turbostar, down the Midland main line, I fell to musing, as one does, on similar journeys in the dim, distant bad old days of steam and early diesel, when I resided in the steel city for some years.

In those days the trains were of 11 or 12 coaches, all with full restaurant cars for breakfast, lunch and dinner (sometimes all three on trains going through to Scotland). In addition, morning coffee and afternoon tea were served in real china cups from silver tea and coffee pots.

Seats were comfortable, with a choice of compartment or open carriages so one could indulge in one of the past delights of rail travel, standing in the corridor watching the country glide by! There was adequate leg and knee room, there were brake vans scattered throughout the train so that any number of bikes, prams, pushchairs and musical instruments could be taken without problem.

OK, it took longer than today, but so did the competition. I couldn't drive to Sheffield as fast as the train in 1960, but I can now. True trains are more frequent now and I could have gone on an HST, but it is no consolation to know that the train you are on may be lousy but the next one is much better, especially when the fare is the same.

On the Turbostar the seats are cramped and uncomfortable, there's a noisy diesel engine growling away underneath, meals are non-existent and at every stop, and there are many of them, a blast of cold air comes in. Above all there is no feeling of space, the overall impression being of the designers being told to "cram as many seats into the shortest possible train". The Midland Turbostar simply exhibits to a

large degree a tendency that all our trains now have. People are getting bigger but the trains to carry them are getting smaller.

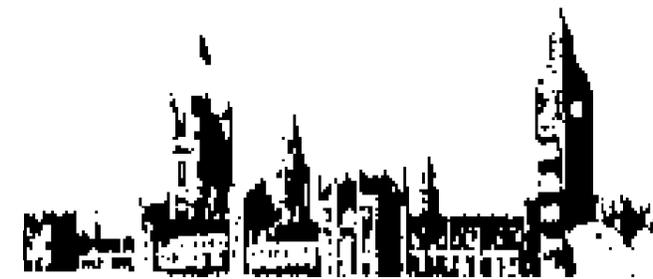
My car has more comfortable seats, a better view out, air conditioning that I control, is quieter to travel in, has my choice of in-vehicle entertainment instead of someone else's ghastly personal stereo, and is free from the curse of modern rail travel, the mobile phone user. And from my house it's quicker to anywhere in England with the exception of a few destinations in London. Why should I use the train? Oh! And the cost is the same whether I go at a moment's or a year's notice.

Electrifying but not here

RDS members will be pleased to learn of two new large electrification projects which have gained recent approval. One is a fairly busy 80-mile diesel hauled commuter route with a mix of fast and slow trains, something like, say, Paddington to Banbury.

The other is an inter-city route, about 110 miles in length which had been electrified at one stage, but whose electric service had been allowed to wither on the vine, and had gradually been replaced by diesels, which themselves had been found wanting to such an extent that downgrading and singling of the track had been considered. Perhaps comparison with Liverpool Street to Norwich would be apt, as one end of the route has an intensive electric suburban service.

Am I talking about somewhere like Germany or perhaps Denmark? It certainly can't be Britain, can it? After all there is no commercial case for electrification here, is there? The cost of putting up and maintaining the catenary



Cash for local transport

Rail did not get a mention when the Government announced a £2.4b "cash bonanza" for local transport for 2000-01. Local Transport Plans were supposed to be all about public transport, pedestrians and cyclists but new roads and road maintenance - increased by 24% this year - swallowed most of the cash. "Highlights" included funding for inner "relief roads", and "bypasses". New Labour seems to have been

quick to adopt the old deceitful language of the road lobby. The Government is adept at blurring the distinction between damaging road building and healthy investment in public transport but Lord Macdonald boasted: "These Local Transport Plans are the cornerstone of our integrated transport policy. They provide for a longer-term, more strategic approach and greater certainty of funding for local authorities."

is prohibitively expensive. Isn't it? No, I'm referring to the good old US of A! The land of cheap oil and a tradition of diesel haulage, second to none.

The commuter route is from San Francisco to the small town of Gilroy, where the board of Caltran, who operate it for the State of California, have agreed a £250m plan for electrification, including £80m for new locos.

It is also spending £440m to extend the track from the present Caltran terminus a mile and a half closer to downtown San Francisco, which I won't go into!

The inter-city line is called the Keystone Corridor and runs from Philadelphia to the city of Harrisburg. The £93m will be spent on upgrading the track for 110 mph running, refurbishing some electric locos, and providing new rolling stock.

Mr Rick Peltz, Pennsylvania's deputy secretary for local and area transportation, whose state is providing half the cost said: "We are delighted that our partnership with Amtrak will provide all-electric service . . . it means direct service into New York City without an engine change at Philadelphia. It was the sensible solution."

Commenting on the fact that Amtrak had toyed with introducing diesel multiple units on the route, *Trains* magazine said, "Despite the obvious incongruity of Amtrak dieselising an existing electrified line while pursuing a national agenda of higher performance trains, the idea advanced to the bidding stage but kept getting stalled or delayed."

If only there was a way of stalling or delaying our stupid rush to run diesels under the wires. How long before Ipswich to Norwich becomes de-electrified?