

Building for the future

Attempts by rail campaigners to get the future of the industry discussed as part of the general election campaign were largely unsuccessful.

There appeared to be a conspiracy between both Labour and Tory parties to bury the issue.

If anything, matters have worsened since 1997 when Labour first came to power. Road traffic is just as bad, the railways have collectively failed to provide the alternative for a massive shift of both passenger and freight to rail.

The Government's attempts to buy some short-term success by investing in buses was doomed from the start. Without tackling road congestion itself or providing more bus lanes, buses are crippled.

The Government has been frozen like a rabbit, frightened by the dazzling headlights of the road lobby and Mondeo man.

But much needs doing and it is far from clear how determined the new Government will be about tackling the problems.

"The railway industry faces severe short-term challenges which have to be overcome," warned Adrian Lyons, director general of the Railway Forum on 4 May. "But, with a consistent plan for the next two decades and ongoing political support, Britain can have a growing, modern, safe and efficient railway system. At present that plan is not in place.

"It is not enough to put right decades of under-investment. We need a 20-year plan, in line with the SRA's 20-year franchises, that gets the major infrastructure decisions right. We also need to consider how the huge amount of investment required can best be provided.

"On current plans, investment falls off sharply after 2007. However this is just the time when major projects to meet growth could well be starting.

"These projects will require Government investment to gain the maximum benefit from private investors.

"We have to put plans in place that will deliver the railway everyone wants in the years ahead.

The *Building the Railway for the Future* factsheet can be found on the Railway Forum's website <http://www.railwayforum.com>



For years, the nearest Britain came to having high-speed trains was the InterCity 125s which are still serving out their time with various operators including Midland Mainline which runs services out of London St Pancras. In a few years, real high-speed European trains will be pulling into St Pancras when it becomes the terminus for the Channel Tunnel fast link.

The IC125s were very popular with passengers and are still among the most comfortable trains around and they have helped to give Midland Mainline the fastest growth rate in passenger numbers of any operator. That may well be at risk in future as the parent company is considering staff cuts. Of course, if the line was electrified from Bedford to Leicester and beyond, MML could buy new electric trains and run a superb railway with commuter-like frequency of trains – and inter-city style comfort.

It is sad to see the magnificent St Pancras station disfigured by smoke and noise from diesel trains when a much better alternative is available in return for a judicious chunk of investment. Unfortunately without a more active stance from the Strategic Rail Authority that is unlikely to happen.

On Great Western one option being considered for successors to the InterCity 125s is not electrification, but gas turbine locomotives. As a cynic said: "They have been tried before. They did not work then. They will not work now."

It is typical of British decision makers that they are looking at something short-term and gimmicky, instead of going for the obvious, already in operation in France, Germany, Spain, Italy and many other countries: A good, simple, reliable electric network.

Obstacles to rail improvements

Rail campaigners are often frustrated by the slow progress towards implementing obviously sensible schemes.

But rail planners face a series of formidable obstacles, as well as the opposition of many "transport professionals" steeped in road lobby thinking.

The Treasury has three-year spending plans, while local transport plans are for five years and the Government's own transport plan runs for 10 years. The SRA is trying to manage short-term franchises while introducing 20-year franchises as Railtrack produces an annual network management statement and local authorities

have differing timescales for structure and development plans.

Matters are further complicated by the multi-modal corridor studies, the growth of regional government, and the varying need for Parliamentary Bills, Transport and Works orders and local planning applications.

Then there is the confusing mess of different funding mechanisms and the multiplicity of "stakeholders" and changing attitudes to land use planning. And there is the eternal conflict of private profit and public service. It is not just the industry that it fragmented. Decision making is too.