

Railwatch

AN INDEPENDENT VOICE FOR RAIL USERS

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End the money-go-round

Railtrack has never seemed like an enthusiastic advocate for expanding and improving the railways.

It has been content to do the minimum in keeping the network ticking over while trying to maximise profit for its shareholders.

Now with a financial crisis, it is desperately trying to offload those schemes which it had shown at least some interest in - for fear of giving any kind of financial commitment for the future.

The Strategic Rail Authority, which has also found shy of its responsibilities, appears frozen in inaction, waiting for someone to replace Sir Alastair Morton.

It must now be obvious even to the Government that after five years of a disastrous privatisation process, reform is needed.

With a non-car-driving Transport Secretary in Stephen Byers, perhaps the time is now ripe for real action on the transport crisis, not just lip service to the road lobby.

Railtrack should be turned into a non-profit-making trust with its main aim clearly spelt out: To maintain the existing network and to expand and improve it.

The trust could still have access to private capital for investment, and taxpayers' money could be used efficiently and more directly on project work. If the money was not being creamed off in profits, the taxpayer would accept large amounts of public money being invested.

Railtrack access fees are a disincentive to expansion, modernisation and electrification. The Government should simplify the horrendous money-go-round and pay a grant directly to a reformed Railtrack. That would clear the way for access charges to be slashed to a mere token level. For instance, if each train had to pay only the equivalent of the vehicle excise duty required of a road coach, fares could be reduced to a reasonable level.

But the SRA must fill the gap left by Railtrack's current failings, providing the vision which can command and control Railtrack and the other companies.

It must also face up to the fact that it alone can bump start the many rail expansion schemes which are currently stalled, not just Thameslink 2000 and London's CrossRail but regional enhancement schemes like East-West Rail.

It must also create the conditions to bring back into the mainstream rail network lines like Carlisle-Edinburgh, Luton-Dunstable, Cambridge-St Ives and Uckfield-Lewes as



After years of neglecting its passenger railways, America now has faster trains than Britain.

The 150mph tilting Acela Express trains between Washington, New York and Boston, launched in December, will also be the catalyst for high-speed projects in 10 other US corridors.

"Acela Express is the leader of all that is yet to come as high-speed rail spreads all across this country," said Tommy Thompson, chairman of Amtrak. "The travelling public is sending out a distress call to escape our nation's endless traffic jams and airport gridlock."

Railfuture's US equivalent, the National Association of Railroad Passengers, is part of a big campaign to persuade the US government to match funding for the network from 36 individual states.

NARP director Ross Capon said: "Given halfway decent service, people are already riding the trains in impressive numbers. With still better service, they will ride in droves."

well as making agreements with preserved lines like the North Norfolk Railway to get a public transport benefit from what are largely leisure lines at present.

It will also have to face up to its responsibilities to give direction about a whole raft of other issues, like the minimum amount of leg room for passengers, catering services on trains, the space needed for luggage, and the minimum number of cycles that can be carried on each train.

In fact it must represent the passenger and ensure that for the large amounts of public money being swallowed up a proper national, rational service is provided.

Britain, like the rest of Europe, needs a good network of really high-speed (at least 180mph) rail links with a loading gauge

adequate for both continental rail wagons and lorry-carrying domestic trains. The SRA must also stop running away from technical issues like electrification and signalling. It is wrong to suggest that electrification is not a passenger issue. Electrification can give the biggest boost to comfort, reliability and simplicity of operation than any other single initiative, immediately reducing noise and air pollution at the point of use.

But the biggest single issue the Government, the SRA and Railtrack must face is fares. With the current financing practice, ordinary fares have increased alarmingly with promotional ticketing providing a fig leaf for train operators to hide behind. A national railcard for regular passengers is long overdue but so too is a change in the way of financing rail.