

WESTMINSTER WATCH

Competition

Andrew Turner (Con, Isle of Wight) asked on 23 January how the Government intended to promote competition between train companies following the introduction of longer franchises and a single franchise serving each London terminus.

Transport minister David Jamieson said: "The main competition for rail operators is from road and other modes of transport, and this competitive pressure would not be reduced by the introduction of larger franchises or a policy of single franchises serving each London terminus. The aim would be to produce a more reliable, cohesive and attractive service for passengers." (Which at least shows some awareness of the facts of transport life - MW)

Increasing capacity

Mr Turner asked what additional capacity is planned for London-Portsmouth, London-Southampton-Lymington, Bristol-Brighton, and for Isle of Wight Line and how much of the investment would come from public funds.

Transport minister John Spellar said: "Capacity on the Portsmouth and Southampton routes will be increased in stages over the early years of the replacement South West Trains franchise through rolling stock investment. It is proposed capacity is increased to facilitate a half-hourly service on the Bristol to Portsmouth route. Longer-term increases in capacity will depend on infrastructure investment to permit longer trains to operate.

"These projects, and their financial arrangements, are subject to the outcome of commercial negotiations for the new South West Trains and Wessex franchises. The Strategic Rail Authority is developing a franchise proposition for the replacement of the Island Line franchise, in consultation with the Isle of Wight council. Further announcements will be made by the authority in due course.

Horsing about

During questions to Leader of the House **Robin Cook** on 11 April, **Mark Francois** (Con, Rayleigh) quoted an article in *The Times* by Libby Purves: "What an extraordinary country this is. The railways are in tatters and hospitals in crisis: clearly we can't run a wheelk stall. Then at a few days' notice we put on a vast, immaculate procession of brass and



plumes and pomp, timed to the second . . . if the Royal Horse Artillery fancy taking over Railtrack, I'm for it."

Mr Francois asked: "When can we have an early debate on the fact that the Government have still failed to lift Railtrack out of administration?"

Mr Cook: The process will necessarily take some time, given the need for legal and accountancy procedures. That said the travelling public greatly welcomes seeing the last of Railtrack as a private company. Railtrack constantly struggled with the question whether to put first the interests of the travelling public or private payments to shareholders. We have removed that conflict from the minds of those who run Railtrack."

The concern felt by Scottish MPs about rail services to and from England was reflected in questions to **Scottish Secretary George Foulkes** on 30 April.

Frank Doran (Lab, Aberdeen, Central) said: "The legacy of rail privatisation is a fragmented and confused ticketing system. Recently, one of my constituents attempted to buy a ticket on the Virgin train which runs directly from Aberdeen to Exeter and in the process discovered that no cheap rail tickets were available to anyone north of Edinburgh or Glasgow. When Mr Foulkes meets the SRA, will he take up the issue of that blatant discrimination against all travellers from the north of Scotland, which is a further indictment of the rail privatisation system that we have been left with?"

Mr Foulkes: "I fully agree with Mr Doran. The Tories left the railways in a complete mess, with a lack of investment and fragmentation, and we cannot clear it up overnight. I agree about the importance of accurate information not only on tickets but on prices, and particularly on the purchase of through tickets. I give him this pledge: I will discuss the matter with the SRA and other rail bodies, and report back."

West Coast main line

Peter Duncan (Con, Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) asked about the upgrading of the West Coast main line stopping at the border?

Mr Foulkes: "The upgrading of the West Coast main line is very important for Scotland, and it is being carried out because of our huge investment in the railways - £64 billion is now available in real terms. That is more than the programme of spending on the railways in any of the last 50 years, during the whole of the Queen's reign."

John Robertson (Lab, Glasgow, Anniesland): Mr Foulkes will be aware of the controversy surrounding the rail link between Glasgow and Glasgow airport. Will he allay those fears, give his full backing to that link and ensure that it is built quickly?

Mr Foulkes: "The Government, together with the SRA and the Scottish Executive, are carrying out a study of airport links, both to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports, which will be completed in the autumn. I personally welcome the SRA's readiness to consider the development of direct rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports, which are both vital to the future development of air services out of Scotland."

Electrification

Sir Robert Smith (Lib Dem, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): "In meetings with the Strategic Rail Authority, will the minister take on board what Mr Doran said about the problems of being outside the central belt and the railway network, and make it clear that it is not just ticketing that is a problem but the whole investment in the infrastructure? Electrification stops at Edinburgh. We must make it plain to the SRA that Aberdeen should be part of the strategic rail network. It is important that journey times from Aberdeen southward are as fast as they are from Edinburgh southward."

Mr Foulkes: "I agree. It is important to improve the links to

Dundee, Aberdeen and the north in general. I am concerned about that and discussed it recently with representatives of GNER, who are thinking about having new trains that run straight through without the need for electrification, so providing a quicker and better service to both Dundee and Aberdeen. I am sure Mr Smith will agree that the £400 million that is being spent on Waverley station to allow more trains to run through it will also be of assistance. All in all, as far as the north-east is concerned, the rail organisations, with the whole-hearted support of the Government, are doing everything possible to improve connections."

(This again denies the advantages that electrification brings to all services and which is understood by virtually the whole world - MW)

Nottingham network

During questions to **David Jamieson** on 23 April, **Vernon Coaker** (Lab, Gedling) asked for the minister to put some "oomph" behind attempts to improve the rail network around Nottingham.

Mr Jamieson said the SRA would be trying to get some "oomph" behind the problem by working with Railtrack on a feasibility study for incremental improvements in performance and increasing capacity.

West Coast closures

Railtrack came in for another barrage of criticism on 23 April over its weekend closures.

Transport Minister Mr Spellar said there was a very acceptable and efficient alternative rail system from the West Midlands to London via the Chiltern line. The original proposal was for the West Coast main line to be closed for four weeks, including the working week.

Eric Martlew (Lab, Carlisle) said that even when the West Coast main line was upgraded to 140mph, there would still be a capacity problem.

He asked if Mr Spellar supported the Strategic Rail Authority's plan for a brand new high-speed line from London to the north of England.

Mr Spellar would only say the option was being examined as was Central railway's proposal for additional freight capacity.

He said: "The SRA is in intense negotiations and will be making its recommendations later this year."