

Not much backbone

By Norman Bradbury

From a railway perspective, John Prescott's transport plan announced in the summer of 2000 was good news. The railway was to form the backbone of an integrated transport system with some £60 billion of investment over 10 years.

Grand schemes to upgrade and expand capacity were announced so the railway could cope with 50% more passengers and 80% more freight. Five decades of contraction, neglect and decay would be reversed.

Suddenly, the highly expensive, complex and confrontational structure of the privatised railway no longer seemed to matter. After all, the private sector was going to invest around half the £60 billion!

At last, one could foresee the bus industry re-regulated with services designed to complement rail rather than operate in competition.

Rail stations could become focal points for park and ride facilities to get motorists out of cars, bus routes would naturally connect with them, safe routes to stations for cyclists and pedestrians would quickly be developed as would train-Taxi schemes, to name but a few good ideas.

Long-closed rail routes and stations would be reopened to expand journey opportunities and new high-speed lines were in prospect to combat aviation growth and free up capacity on existing routes for increased freight and passenger services.

Loading gauge enhancements on strategic freight routes were announced as were longer freight loops to make rail freight more cost effective.

So, two and a half years on, where are we? Regrettably, much of the above has not even got to the planning stage. Integrated bus and rail services are no more than a dream and little, if any, progress has been made on other soft options.

Indeed, most new light rail schemes are still having to contend with competing bus services, some of which are apparently subsidised.

Apart from a scaled-down West Coast main line upgrade and the Channel Tunnel rail link, all major upgrade and expansion schemes are on hold as the cost of rail improvements has escalated to the point that the Treasury and the Government are complaining rail investment



The first Virgin Pendolino entered service on the West Coast main line in January and is pictured here passing Watford Gap on the M1 motorway. From March, other services from London to Manchester, Liverpool and the West Midlands are gradually being converted to the 125mph Pendolinos. They will operate in non-tilt mode at only 110mph until 2004 when infrastructure on the line is complete.

Picture: Milepost 92^{1/2}

is no longer worthwhile. Just why have rail costs have increased so much and who is responsible?

It was Government that created the privatised railway with its multitude of layered profit centres and compensation ridden contracts.

It was Government that imposed on the railway the expense and impossible target of compliance by 2004 with the Disability Discrimination Act.

It was Government that required full implementation of the Train Protection and Warning System (TPWS) by the end of 2003.

It was Government that ordered the railway to scrap all slam door trains by 2003 or fit them with expensive new safety equipment if they needed to run until 2004 and to replace them with new power-hungry trains to achieve a questionable safety benefit and for which around £1 billion must now be spent just to upgrade the power supply.

It was Government, through the Health and Safety Executive, that imposed crippling working practices unique to the railway that have seen, for example, the enforced closure of all four tracks of the West Coast main line while renewal work was carried out on two of them (imagine this happening on a motorway!) and have ruled out new electrification projects as a

consequence. It was Government that put Railtrack into administration at a reported cost of £1 million a day and may still face a legal challenge over its action.

Of course, there are other factors that have contributed to rising costs, not least of which has been industrial action which pushed up train crew pay and which may now result in job losses if funding for subsidised services is reduced.

However, Government must again bear some of the blame for this since the fragmented nature of the privatised railway can be linked to many of these disputes.

In short, Government is wholly responsible for the financial crisis in which the railway industry now finds itself and there can be no justification for Government, whichever administration is in charge, to now withhold investment on the basis that railways no longer represent value for money.

The Government must not be allowed to return the railways to the age of neglect, contraction and decline but must pursue a policy of improvement and expansion of the rail network so that it can begin to fulfil its true potential as a major contributor to transport solutions.

Regrettably however, Alistair Darling's recent cut of £312 million from the Strategic

Rail Authority budget for 2003-4 and 2004-5 will already impact on the Rail Passenger Partnership Fund, the Freight Facilities Grant and Track Access Grant. So much for rail expansion!

Clearly costs must be reduced, but it is time the Government acknowledged that, as conceived, privatisation of railways has proved to be an expensive mistake and radical changes to the structure of the industry are now a matter of urgency.

The creation of the SRA and Network Rail are steps in the right direction but while reducing the number of franchises and focusing operations on an area-wide basis and taking track maintenance back in-house will help reduce costs, this process will take years to evolve and the SRA brief must now include the elimination of the compensation culture that is crippling the industry as a next step. This will mean some measure of vertical integration is inevitable.

Finally, the Transport Secretary must solve the SRA funding crisis with regard to rail recommendations contained in Multi-Modal Studies. Surely, this can only be achieved by means of a dedicated MMS budget to be used by road and rail projects alike.

Meanwhile, the objectives of the Ten Year Plan seem to be fading into oblivion.