

National Rail Card



Westminster Watch

By Michael Weinberg

The Government's transport failings were brutally exposed by Liberal Democrat MP Don Foster in December.

He said: "In the past month, we have learned that rail delays have doubled under Labour, and that cancellations are up by 50 per cent.

"Bus and rail fares have increased in real terms, while the cost of motoring has fallen. We have learned also that, under Labour, buses outside London are carrying fewer passengers, that the airport consultation paper was illegal and biased, that there has been improper accounting of Network Rail, and that the public-private partnership for London Underground no longer offers value for money.

"Moreover, we have learned that Labour's road congestion charges will not be met, that rail improvement projects are being shelved, that some rail services are being abandoned, and that passengers will be expected to pay even higher fares.

"To cap it all, the Secretary of State has returned to the failed predict-and-provide approach to the road building programme.

"Does not Mr Alistair Darling agree that the only way to tackle rising road congestion is to provide an integrated public transport system that is safe, reliable and affordable?

"How can that be achieved by cutting rail services, increasing fares and reducing by £312million the money going to the SRA?

"How can it be achieved by initiating - against the advice of the Government's own advisory bodies - a massive road building programme that contains not even a hint of road pricing?"

Transport Secretary Mr Darling replied: "The money is there, and Mr Foster's assertion that something has happened to change that is simply wrong.

"The money is there, and it is beginning to make a difference. There is no doubt that the scale of the task in relation to road congestion and the railways is far greater than many people believed when the plan was put in place, but that is something that we must face up to.

"It is our job to make sure that we tackle the problems, which is why I announced the investment in roads last week. Three of Mr Foster's colleagues said that they wanted even more to be spent on the roads."

This is the front of the new Railfuture leaflet calling for a national rail card. After initially meeting a negative approach from some representatives in the industry, Railfuture is now making progress on this issue. We are undertaking research into the financial implications for train operators of having a national rail card. The first stage of the research, being carried out by a consultant, should be published at about the same time as this Railwatch.

At the same time, Transport 2000 has also launched a campaign (leaflet inset right) highlighting the need for a national rail card. It points out that in Britain we pay 26p per kilometre for standard fares compared to 8p in Austria.

It also points out that between 1996 and 2000, walk-on rail fares increased by substantially more than inflation. Supersaver fares rose 20% and other fares rose by 24%. Some companies have even scrapped SuperSavers forcing passengers to buy more expensive 'Savers'.

Railfuture, like Transport 2000, wants a national rail card, available for everyone to buy, that can bring down the off-peak travel costs and encourage drivers to switch to trains.

In one European country, buying a road tax disc for your car entitles you to a free rail card which gives 50% off fares. The thinking is that you have paid your contribution to transport infrastructure costs but should be encouraged to use the socially and environmentally

acceptable train. Yet the British Government's 10-year plan assumes that motoring costs will fall by 20% while rail and bus fares keep rising. That is completely unacceptable.

Even the Government's social exclusion unit knows that two-thirds of the poorest people have no car and depend on public transport.

It has reported that:

40% of job seekers find it difficult to search for a job because of costs, mainly for transport, and children from the poorest families are five times more likely to become fatal road casualties.

The unit is now investigating, along with other departments, the negative impact of transport on socially excluded people, such as pedestrian deaths, pollution, and communities being severed by transport routes.

Unlike public transport users, car drivers are rarely confronted with the external costs of their behaviour.

A driver pays a high price to put a car on the road, but then his cost per mile appears cheap.

A national rail card would help to convince rail users that they too can pay upfront for the advantage of cheaper travel to come.

