

Second class message

Virtually no one wants freight transferred from rail to road but in road-crazy Britain that is just what the Royal Mail wants to happen from April next year.

If, as it claims, the Royal Mail can save £90million a year by switching from using trains to lorries, it is yet more proof that lorries do not pay their proper "track" costs.

The Government must intervene in the short term to stop more lorries going on to the road but it must also change the rules so that there is a financial incentive for freight to switch to rail – not the other way round.

The Government claims it wants freight to switch to rail and is spending taxpayers' money, in some cases, to achieve that.

Lord Berkeley of the Rail Freight Group has given the Government some pointers in how to deal with the Royal Mail.

He reckons that, in this case, Value Added Tax might be adding costs to rail, while reducing them for road.

He also wants an examination

of how costs could be saved by Royal Mail sharing its eight rail depots – which were provided by taxpayers' money – with other operators. Royal Mail also has 27 rail loading facilities.

He also believes that Royal Mail has not done its sums right.

The Royal Mail has also closed the underground Post Office Railway and is in the process of axing travelling post offices.

The London Assembly has called for swift action to bring the railway back into use.

"Taxpayers want to see good use made of this asset," said Andrew Pelling of the GLA.

Even schoolchildren can tell Government ministers that trains are environmentally more friendly than lorries and planes.

"Society will have to pay the extra costs," said Philippa Edmunds of the Rail Freight Group. "It is a shocking decision."

Why is the Government encouraging the wrong modes?

The Royal Mail may be wrong in its approach but it has exposed the Government's

incompetent and crumbling transport policy.

If the true costs of road transport, including the casualties and emergency services, are taken into account, switching freight on to the road would not seem a bargain.

Giving planes tax-free fuel is crazy.

Providing more subsidy to the railway would actually be a cost-effective move.

Railfuture members should remind their MPs that this is not what they were elected to do.

We will provide a briefing on the Railfuture website which members can send on their MPs.

But remember, one freight train removes an average 50 big lorries from the roads.

More than 90% of people want freight switched from road to rail and 60% believe the Government should provide more rail subsidies to achieve that.

The Royal Mail's extra lorries will add 15,000 tonnes of pollution to the atmosphere every year. Shortly before the Royal

Mail made its announcement, the Strategic Rail Authority published a progress report which "shows that UK rail freight is delivering the goods".

It outlined how Felixstowe-Nuneaton was to be cleared for bigger containers and similar plans laid for Stafford-Manchester Trafford Park.

The report also mapped out where future general action could be taken and how a strategy for Channel Tunnel freight could be developed.

"Freight is an integral part of our strategic plan," said chairman Richard Bowker.

On the same day, the SRA announced £5million worth of Freight Facilities grants to help switch half a million lorry journeys to rail.

Meanwhile the RAC is perpetuating lies, claiming rail freight is only competitive for long-distance traffic. In reality it can be profitable for short distances as well, including the 19-mile aggregates flow from Greenwich to King's Cross and the 27-mile waste trains from Edinburgh to Dunbar.

Up a blind alley

The problems on our railways reflect, I believe, a greater general malaise within the country. We are badly governed.

Our systems of government are no longer good enough to run an advanced post-industrial nation at the beginning of the 21st century. Decisions take an age to arrive and are often wrong.

This was brought home to me as I trawled through recent official reports of Parliamentary debates. I noticed a short debate in the Lords about Britain's bid to stage the Olympics in 2012.

The Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, the unelected Baroness Tessa Blackstone, said apropos of Crossrail, that a successful bid was not dependent on its construction. (See Westminster Watch, page 12)

The reason she gave was not that it was unnecessary, or too expensive. No, it was that there wasn't enough time! I ask you: a

Comment

By

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supposedly advanced nation cannot dig five miles of tunnel, build a few rail connections and perhaps electrify a few miles of line in nine years!

And this for a project that has had millions of pounds spent on it already. In Madrid they planned, designed, built and commissioned 35 miles of new metro in 43 months, including 41 stations.

We cannot emulate this because our political systems are too slow, inefficient and centralised to get anything done.

It's incredible that Birmingham, our second city, still hasn't got a metro system worthy of the name. I doubt if there is a city of comparable size anywhere in

Europe that hasn't got one or does not have one planned. And I don't mean three tram routes that may or may not be built at some time in the far distant future. This is political failure: the inability in this country to see what is required and get it done!

We have a system of quangos set up to distance the electorate from government. Thus we set up the Strategic Rail Authority to plan rail developments for the future, to general acclaim.

We end up with virtually one bloke pontificating on the day-to-day running of the trains.

Probably in no other developed country would the ludicrous and unworkable proposals to privatise our railways have been allowed to pass through into law, against all the opposition from experts in the field.

People have been killed as a direct result of this folly yet not one ex-Minister or civil servant who dreamed this policy up has

been held to account. I have been involved in the campaign to reopen Bletchley to Oxford for the best part of two decades.

We've never really had a decision from government as to whether or not this line should be re-opened.

Instead we've been through the mill of various government departments both national and local, set up as an obstacle course to prevent anyone, anywhere actually reaching a decision.

We seem to use our political systems to prevent projects being carried out rather than to facilitate them. We have new transport Ministers every year or so, none of them having the guts or determination to see anything through.

They bend with the wind and are usually uprooted by the roads lobby. Is it any wonder we have the worst transport, public and private of any of our major overseas competitors?