

# WESTMINSTER WATCH

## Railways Bill

The Bill received its second reading in the House of Lords on 10 February.



Lord Davies

**Lord Davies of Oldham (Lab):** The railways are largely funded by the public purse. Over £73million is spent every week to improve the railways in this country. Therefore it must be for ministers, accountable to Parliament and the electorate, to take responsibility.

Because around a third of the clauses in the Bill refer to network modification, that aspect of the Bill has led to cries in some places of Beeching mark 2 and suspicion that there is a hidden agenda for widespread closures. I should like to reassure the House that that is simply not the case. There is no secret agenda of closures and it is certainly difficult to hide 22 clauses in the Bill.

As part of these we are moving away from a test based on passenger hardship towards an appraisal taking account of a broader range of factors, similar to other transport appraisals. Guidance on this will be produced by the Secretary of State and Scottish Ministers.

The Bill does not set out the contents of the guidance. However, we have indicated that it is intended that proposers of closure will be required to undertake an assessment based on the standard approach for assessing value for money for transport projects and policies, covering environmental, economic and safety issues, accessibility and integration. The effects on passengers will be a key part.

Compliance with the guidance will be assessed by the independent regulator.

Let me make it absolutely clear: The Bill is about creating a structure in which we can invest in a modern, expanding railway.

**The Earl of Mar and Kellie (Lib Dem):** I looked with interest for a mention of railway openings and reopenings, but found the Bill silent on those.

**Lord Beaumont of Whitley (Green party):** There seems to be encouragement in the Bill for bus substitution for rail services. This is not a good idea and should be opposed. Such bus services usually prove to be unattractive to users and are often withdrawn after a few years, which isolates communities. A reliable train service with reliable timetables is much the most attractive system for isolated communities. There should be a duty to expand the rail network, both in extent and capacity, for passengers and freight services.

**The Earl of Glasgow (Lib Dem):** I am a passionate believer in the railways. It is surely time they were given a higher political profile. The Government must make plans to make rail travel cheaper. If that can be achieved only by more government subsidies, then that is the way it must be done. It will be money far better spent than building more new roads or, more absurd still, widening existing motorways to encourage more motorists.

The Government need the courage to resist the powerful and vociferous road lobby. Their transport budget must favour the railways: high-speed trains, local trains, commuter trains, freight trains, underground trains and even, perhaps, trams. They must seriously consider the expensive business of reopening some of the old railway lines. There really is only one way forward if we are to solve Brit-

ain's transport problems and that, I hope the Government agree, lies in the efficient management of the railways.

**Lord Faulkner of Worcester (Lab):** When I worked at the British Railways Board, a ridiculous amount of time was wasted in dreaming up unworkable and unpopular bus substitution proposals.

All of them came to nothing, for two reasons. One was the public outrage at the proposed closures; the other was political prudence on the part of Ministers, who could see the aggravation that would be caused by trying to go ahead with them and the fact that that would outweigh any potential cost savings.

## East Coast franchise

The award of the East Coast main line rail franchise was discussed in the Commons on 8 February 2005.

**Iain Luke (Lab, Dundee East):** Some of the proposed options include the possibility of longer journey times, unregulated non-core fares and replacement bus services. Many people along the line in the north-east of Scotland will see that as a clear threat to their direct services to London.

**Mr Luke Sir Robert Smith (Lib Dem, West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine):** It is important that the operator of the East Coast franchise recognises that the line goes all the way to Aberdeen, especially when it tries to improve journey times.

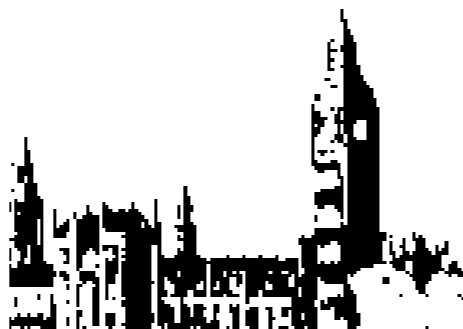
**Mark Lazarowicz (Lab-Co-op, Edinburgh, North and Leith):** We need a 20-year vision for direct high-speed links from London to the north of England and to Scotland – the vision, and the links, that exist elsewhere in Europe. Such a network might make possible a three-hour journey from London to Edinburgh, and needs to be constructed in a way that does not cause disruption to existing services for an extensive period.

**Hugh Bayley (Lab, City of York)** The East Coast main line service, run by GNER, is without doubt the best railway in the country, but I want it to be better still. GNER's East Coast main line is more than a railway; it is an artery pumping the lifeblood of prosperity into all the regions through which it passes.

**Mr Bayley** Yorkshire Forward, my local regional development agency, estimates that the main line contributes some £100 million a year to the region's economy and sustains 11,000 jobs in Yorkshire, mainly in transport and tourism. Of course, a great number of those tourism-related jobs are in my constituency.

We receive some four million tourists a year, of whom 24% arrive in York by rail, a number that has been increasing in recent years. However, the economic impact is not just on transport and tourism.

The East Coast main line service run by GNER acts as a magnet. It has drawn investment to my constituency from a wide range of businesses – largely high-technology firms in



computing and biotechnology. Jobs in York, in Yorkshire and elsewhere along the line depend not on the mere existence of the railway but on the provision of a good railway service.

GNER's industrial relations record is good. The single most attractive thing about GNER is that it has delivered what it has promised. One cannot say that for all its competitors.

The importance of GNER to my constituency ought to be underlined. When rail privatisation happened, York lost thousands of railway jobs. Since then, we have been clawing our way back. We now have about 3,000 railway jobs in the city, in engineering, design, track maintenance and renewals, as well as train operations. However, the magnet for all those jobs has been GNER's decision to base the headquarters of its operations in York. No competitor for the franchise offers to have its headquarters in York. If any of them were to win the franchise, the 409 GNER headquarters jobs in York would be at risk. Other jobs in the supplier industries, such as in Corus Rail Consultancy, which must employ 300 or 400 civil and mechanical engineers, could also move elsewhere.

I accept that GNER has to win the franchise on merit and has to offer the taxpayer value for money. However, the Government must also take into account its track record in providing an improving service. It would be quite perverse if the train operating company that by common consent has performed the best since privatisation were to lose its franchise. It would send entirely the wrong message to other train operating companies; it would say that quality and reliability are not valued and rewarded. It would create a hiatus and economic uncertainty in the regions through which GNER services pass, when continuity and certainty are required. I urge the Government to make an early decision on the franchise and to award a new franchise to GNER.

**Dr Ashok Kumar (Lab, Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland East):** As to investment in service, the Minister will recall that the East Coast main line is unique in this country, as other MPs have said, in that it is the only one not to need a subsidy from the taxpayer. In those circumstances a crucial factor in the franchise process will be the amount of return to the SRA. That raises the issue of where the return will

## Crossrail Bill first step

The Bill to provide for the construction of London's Crossrail was "deposited in Parliament on 22 February 2005. By contrast with the fast track provided for the Railways Bill, the Crossrail Bill is expected to take two years in Parliament. Funding still has to be organised and the line is not expected to be built until 2012.



Dr Kumar

be invested. The East Coast main line has several feeder branch lines such as the one in my constituency, which runs from Saltburn, through Redcar and Middlesbrough, and connects with the main line at Darlington. Unlike the main line, it needs investment and subsidy from the SRA and the taxpayer, but it is a vital link to the main line for the communities that it serves. In that sense it also directly underwrites the profitability of the East Coast main line.

A logical approach would be to invest the cash returns to the SRA and the Treasury in that line and, indeed, the other, similar, lines that serve the East Coast main line stations and services.

**Iain Wright (Lab, Hartlepool):** The rail service from King's Cross to Darlington is extremely effective; the journey can be done in two and a half hours. My only problem is that if I use the rail network, it can take another two and a half hours to go from Darlington to Hartlepool.

**John Thurso (Lib-Dem, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross):** GNER might be considered a role model for other franchisees. The SRA's own survey reports that 85% of passengers are happy with the service, which is the highest satisfaction rate for any long distance operator. Passenger numbers have increased by 32%.

Last year, my party committed itself in principle to the north-south high-speed rail link.



Mr Knight

**Mr Greg Knight (Con, East Yorkshire):** Today we are witnessing a unique occasion, because I cannot remember any other debate either here or in the main Chamber in which Members of all parties with little or nothing in common have spoken with one voice in praising a rail operating company. GNER

has proved that the railways can operate successfully. It has combined the provision of a customer-focused, reliable and efficient service with profitability. The line is vital to the economy, not only for much of the north of England but for Scotland.



Ms Atkins

**Transport Minister Charlotte Atkins:** I start with a quick word on the north-south high-speed line. The Government wants to draw on the useful work already done by the Strategic Rail Authority, and particularly to consider international experience. We are looking at the case for investing in high-speed lines, as compared with upgrading existing lines. That is something important for the future.

The bidders were also required to provide proposals for rolling stock which set new standards of performance, reliability and presentation. As a minimum, the rolling stock fleet must be able to provide seating capacity equivalent to, or in excess of, that of the current fleet. It must also operate at up to 125 mph and have a better reliability rate.

Electrification is continually being considered, but its advantages over other innovations are not as great as they were. That issue is, however, constantly kept under review.

The East Coast main line is a vital route for the millions of passengers that it carries each year.



## Television trains

The topic of television on trains has raised its head on our c2c line in Essex following a protest where three ladies and a group of supporters locked themselves in the loo on a train in protest at their installation!

Research following articles in the heavyweight papers (particularly *The Times* and *The Independent*), shows that nearly all the major commuter routes into our main cities, particularly London and the large city areas, are being targeted. The company 360 On Board (parent company TNXI in the United States) responsible for the installations, is already boasting that it has signed contracts with eight train operators.

Companies quoted as offering this "service" soon include WAGN, One, Silverlink, Southern Trains, c2c and Central Trains. More train operators are being courted by the American-owned company that supplies the televisions.

Despite trying to speak with the train operator for some months we and our fellow rail users groups along the line have failed to get any straight answers.

So what's wrong with these televisions, you may ask? Well what the people canvassing opinion didn't tell the good people of Central (who are the guinea pigs and now inflicted on every 323 train) and c2c is that there are a minimum of six televisions in each coach, with eight to twelve speakers which cannot be turned off and that they will be in every carriage owned by the company.

Designated "quiet" areas may well not have speakers, but the screens and their reflection can clearly be seen in the glass and windows around the area.

Add to this the fact that there are only about 23% of seats not within earshot of the television (on an eight-car c2c train for instance the ratio is 122 seats without speakers to 434 seats with) and you can see the reason for concern. Finally the content of these televisions is aimed to show advertisements for 60% of the time!

The campaign against these things appears to spread across the full age range and spectrum - what's the opinion of all you train travellers out there, do you wish to become "two prime time advertising opportunities with a captive

## Letters Extra

audience" as quoted by the company installing the televisions?

Or would you prefer to relax on the train, read a book or newspaper, listen to your stereo, chat with friends, study, sleep or merely gaze out of the window?

We'd like to know your feelings on this. Do you believe televisions for advertising purposes on trains are a good idea?

We have a lot of information about this topic at [www.c2c-offline.co.uk](http://www.c2c-offline.co.uk) and would ask that you take the opportunity to look at the section about this topic.

*Pauline Cridland, Liaison Officer, Thurrock Rail Users' Group c/o 35 Nutberry Avenue, Grays, Essex RM16 2TL [trug@btopenworld.com](mailto:trug@btopenworld.com)*

## Pedestrian link

The North Downs Line task force is taking part in a Rail Passengers Committee-centred study on the future of the vital Gatwick-Redhill-Reading line, parts of which, it is alleged, are poorly used in off-peak hours.

The draft comments I've seen so far list a number of junctions and interchange links, all of which add to the usefulness of the line, but omit two, presumably because each involves a short walk.

One, awkward but perfectly negotiable, is that between Dorking Deepdene and Dorking North Stations.

The other, unknown to the timetable compilers and poorly advertised, but very useful if you're not carrying heavy luggage, is that between Ash Vale Station (on the Alton-Waterloo and the Guildford-Camberley-Ascot lines) and North Camp Station on the Gatwick-Reading line.

The walk itself takes some eight to ten minutes, and makes it possible for an off peak traveller leaving, say, Bentley Station at 08.51 to be in Reading at 10.00 and Swindon by 10.40.

I've pointed out both omissions to the task force, in the hope that the more such links are advertised the better.

*Professor Brian Thomas [brianthomas@f2s.com](mailto:brianthomas@f2s.com)*

## Speed is bad

I was disgusted with the Channel Tunnel rail link picture in *Railwatch* 102. High speed is bad for railways.

All the distinctive advantages of railways – safety, comfort and economy – wane above 60 miles per hour. Speed is a style

choice but also has a drastic effect on the energy and pollution costs of transport. Roughly, doubling speed quadruples costs. The French TGV is effectively nuclear-powered so the costs are hidden in future risks.

The CTRL is a great scar on the landscape, heading for one of the nastiest bits of a grim capital.

Wasteful fast trains demand their own rail "motorways" at ruinous expense.

People are being hustled, rail-road, duped and globalised into an early grave.

*Peter Michael Grant, 8 St Peters Road, St Margarets, East Twickenham TW1 1QX*

**Editors' note: Railfuture has campaigned for both high-speed railways and for improvements to conventional rail.**

**Curbing expenditure on high-speed rail could have the effect of encouraging use of more wasteful and damaging modes like road and air.**

## Message to MPs

I wrote to MPs on the committee scrutinising the Railways Bill 2004 with the following message:

"It seems important that the Secretary of State has appropriate powers and a duty to promote the use and development of the railway network for the carriage of passengers and goods.

"This should facilitate coordinated development of rail, road, water and air transport in the national interest.

"A high speed passenger and freight direct rail link from the Channel Tunnel to the Midlands and North could relieve pressure to concentrate economic development in the south east.

"This could help Surrey, where I'm a county councillor, preserve the Green Belt and areas of outstanding natural beauty and reduce the need to spend billions in the south east subsidising housing for key workers."

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**Editors' note: Thanks to all members who lobbied their MPs about the Railways Bill.**

Railfuture and *Railwatch* welcome letters, news items and articles on the railways. The opinions expressed by contributors do not necessarily reflect Railfuture policies.