

What a choice!

Chris Grayling has been promising a new approach to Britain's railways from the Conservative party.

But to my mind the shadow secretary of state for transport is saying nothing very different from Labour's top man at the Department for Transport, Douglas Alexander.

Like their leaders, they are twins under the skin and do not provide much value in the form of strategic thinking. Both appear to be following party dogma.

"We were wrong about privatisation," Mr Grayling is supposed to have said.

He then goes on about reuniting the wheel and the rail, vertical chains of command and having logical geographical entities.

Lo and behold we are back to the old LNER, SR, LMS and GWR days and everything in the garden almost seems rosy, if you hanker after a John Major-style nostalgic view of the world, that is.

But can we trust a large bus company, whether it be Stagecoach, National Express or First Group, with the railway which the old big four railway companies were committed to? No is my answer.

It's bad enough now with them running their short trains and sub-standard catering.

I heard this damning comment about one of the recently changed franchises: "All they have done is do away with the refreshment trolleys, prevented cheaper travel until after 7pm and repainted the sides of the trains!"

There is a big danger that given a very long franchise, say 20 years, they will not invest, but just choose to sweat the assets. If we are not careful, they could also sell some

of the sites for development in the same way they made lots of money out of selling bus garages and bus stations not so many years ago. As to rail infrastructure, they may well be required to replace like for like when life expired, but what is life expired? We have seen how Rail-track interpreted that requirement!

What is needed is new signalling, enhanced layouts and the improvement of our permanent national rail assets.

Therefore, much as I think Network Rail is a civil engineering-led company with minimal operating skills - it rarely puts in emergency working or attempts to keep going in times of bad weather or extensive maintenance, preferring to run an alternative bus service - I prefer it to remain in situ.

I reject the Conservative vision - or is it nightmare - which would strip Network Rail of its assets and give them to the bus companies.

The new Secretary of State Douglas Alexander has at least made the correct decision on the Manchester tram scheme.

We have to hope that Liverpool and South Hampshire continue to fight their corners to establish their own tram system.

The battle must also continue in Cambridge against the guided busway which will bring the traffic jams into the outskirts of the city and solve nothing.

In my view the guided busway has safety implications but that is too complicated to cover here.

What should be reiterated is that train services to London could run from St Ives and Huntingdon via Cambridge if the railway was reopened instead.

The rail network will be desperately

needed over the next 20 or 30 years. Douglas Alexander should be careful to avoid accusations of double-speak. He has already boasted that there have never been more passengers, more trains, more investment and so on.

But I believe there is a great deal of double counting as well as double speaking about the railway.

If you travel say from Gatwick to Shrewsbury you have a choice of 10 different train operating companies, admittedly some competing with others.

A selection of different flows in the *Review of National Rail Trends* has shown that the passenger figures are seriously inflated.

Even analysing ticket sales can be misleading.

We all know it is becoming increasingly difficult to buy through tickets and many of us now buy several tickets for what would in the past have been counted as one journey.

Not so long ago we were cheered by British Rail's advertising slogan: This is the age of the train.

Well for Douglas Alexander and his department it is now more like: This is the age of the bus.

The DfT is supposed to be campaigning to get people out of their cars on to public transport.

Their main thrust has been to try to increase bus use, while ignoring yet again research that shows people are much more likely to leave their car for a tram or train than a bus.

That's enough politics, although it is pleasing now to hear both major parties talking about railways. That's something, after years of neglect and ignorance.

But rearing its ugly head again is the old chestnut from the road lobby that rail subsidy takes 40% of the transport budget while rail only carries 6% of the traffic.

It is a shame one has to waste yet more time and effort on this issue but let's say again: If you are making comparisons, you must compare like for like.

Compare apples with apples, not pears.

Remember that each trip from and to the supermarket, the school run, and local deliveries are counted as individual journeys.

Can you really compare that with a rail passenger's journey from London to Glasgow for instance?

It might be fair to compare the subsidy on trunk roads with the rail subsidy.

While on the subject of market share between road and rail I noticed from a survey produced for the now defunct Strategic Rail Authority that there is considerable travel between Newcastle and Manchester and that rail has 80%. Part of



Rayner's Review

the reason for that is congestion on the roads. Talking about taxpayers' money brings me back to my complaint about the previous Secretary of State, Alistair Darling.

He said the railway should not be in the business of carrying air. He followed on with warnings about reducing subsidies and encouraging bus substitution.

Well I am pleased to say we now have some sensible research which refutes this Department for Transport mumbo jumbo.

A review of Northern Rail has concluded that it is efficient, the fares reasonable and it has increasing traffic levels.

Rail minister Derek Twigg says there is continued support for the franchise. But also admitted is the fact that any potential savings from service reductions would amount to only 1% of the subsidy!

While this is good news for the Northern franchise, the muddle on the East Coast main line involving GNER, Grand Central and Hull Trains is bound to end in tears.

GNER provided a quality service which seems doomed to degenerate to the levels of the inferior train service on Virgin and First Great Western.

Not only is the franchise muddle still unresolved, but managing director Christopher Garnet has also left. If a "bean counter" management follows, away will go the quality.

My main worry though remains the Treasury-led franchising arrangements.

The forthcoming West Midlands decision looks certain to be even more of a disaster than the East Coast. More of that to come.

It is a pity that every Secretary of State for Transport appears to run back to us with what the Treasury wants.

They should be telling the Treasury what the rail industry needs from the Treasury, not vice versa.

■ Peter Rayner is a former British Rail operations and safety manager

Tory



Chris Grayling, MP for Epsom and Ewell, is Shadow Secretary of State for Transport. He has reportedly apologised for rail privatisation but "has put the rail industry on notice that if the Tories win the next election, it can look forward to its biggest shake-up since privatisation".

Labour



Douglas Alexander, MP for Paisley & Renfrewshire South, is Secretary of State for Transport. He has at last rightly given the go-ahead for expanding the Manchester tram network but looks set to oversee the ripping up of the Cambridge-St Ives line for a guided busway.