

Reality check for MPs

The next general election is likely to see the biggest turnover of MPs for years.

Rail campaigners can stay ahead of events if they take action now to prepare questions to put to the candidates – once the election is called and the candidates are selected.

Railfuture's Norman Bradbury has produced a Railfuture manifesto for the election.

It is available on the Railfuture website at www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-index.php?page=General+Election+2010.

Many of the current batch of MPs have been won over to support rail by our campaigning over the years so we must ensure the the next batch is also realistic about both rail and road.

Questions local rail campaigners could ask candidates are whether they are in favour of:

- 1 The proposed third runway at Heathrow
- 2 High-speed rail
- 3 Trams for towns and cities
- 4 Rail or road investment

The biggest question for most rail travellers is of course fares. A test of how in touch candidates could be to ask them whether they think the fares structure is too complex, whether fares are too high, and how urgent they believe it is to introduce smart ticketing and a national rail card.

It is also important to find out how they stand on local issues, like rail reopening projects.

Campaigners might like to consider preparing for the election by tracking down the local addresses of the political parties and, once the candidates are selected, sending them a copy of Railfuture's election manifesto which can be obtained from the Railfuture website (details above).

Here we go again

The Department for Transport is planning to undertake transport studies on 10 national corridors as part of its DaSTS (Delivering a sustainable transport strategy) programme.

The list includes three studies of access to major cities – Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle, but is reminiscent of New Labour's multimodal studies.

Rail campaigner Andrew Long points out: "We have been down this road before. Is it a clever ruse to justify (to an incoming Conservative government after the next General Election perhaps), how a roads programme could be justified?"

"We should be wary, as the last attempt with Cambridge to Huntingdon and London and South Midlands multimodal studies only delivered road schemes and the dreaded Cambridge-St Ives guided busway! More of the same perhaps?"

"What is needed in our area is High Speed 2, Midland main line electrification and East-West Rail, not more trunk roads and motorways!"

The DfT claims its goals include tackling climate change, contributing to better safety, security and health, and improving quality of life.

Rail supporters have every reason to be cynical about what we used to call the Department for Roads, but if the DfT is genuine about trying to achieve its "goals", rail development should be its number one priority in every corridor. More info: www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/transportstrategy/dasts/

New rail-air link to be built

After years of dithering, the application to build the Airtrack southern rail approach to Heathrow via Staines has gone in under the Transport and Works Act procedure. Services would operate to Reading, Guildford and London Waterloo with some Heathrow Express trains extended to Staines. A new tunnel will be built from Terminal 5 to Stanwell Moor, a new line across the moor and a chord at Staines.

Rail costs distorted

By John Ryan

In the past, road schemes, almost without exception, ran considerably over budget leaving the Exchequer to pick up any overspend which the scheme incurred.

The upgrade of the West Coast main line by Railtrack also fell into this category but, fortunately, was halted before the full overrun in costs was reached.

Because of these experiences, the Department for Transport, and all other government departments, insist that projects, including road and rail, build in a contingency factor, or what they call optimum bias, in the early stages of a project's development.

The OB, therefore, influences the business case and the subsequent benefit to cost ratio calculation which is the all-important measure used by the DfT to take a project forward or to reject it.

The recent Network Rail estimate for their High Speed Rail 2 proposals would be about £34billion, made up of £15billion actual cost, £5billion non-construction costs and £13.5billion for OB – a 66% add-on.

We the taxpayers could, therefore, pay £34billion for a project worth £20billion.

It seems reasonable and good business practice to build into a project an amount to cover unforeseen difficulties which may arise during the project's construction.

It may also include inflation if the project's development is likely to be spread over several years.

However, when we learn that the OB is as much as 66%, we can see why so many schemes do not see the light of day.

The DfT argues that this percentage is reasonable and equates with the experience of all government departments over a number years.

While this may be so, it is an acceptance by the DfT of perceived inefficiencies by planners, engineers and construction companies on a massive scale and should be addressed by more rigorous contracts including stiffer penalties.

It could be argued that OB at such a high rate encourages inefficiency by making such huge allowances for it in the project's cost. A better solution would be to ensure schemes are specified in such a way as to limit cost overruns to a minimum.

In addition to OB killing some schemes in their early stages of development, it may also have a detrimental effect on the taxpayer for schemes which do proceed.

If a scheme proceeds satisfactorily to completion without any call on the OB amount which has been built-in, does the OB, or even part of it, still get paid out?

In other words are we paying up to 66% more than we need to have transport improved?

We do not know the answer to this but would certainly like to hear from any members or readers who do.

■ *John Ryan is a former British Rail engineer who is chairman of the Wirral Transport Users Association*

Congratulations to Burnley MP Kitty Usher who secured an adjournment debate in the House of Commons on a proposal to run a direct Burnley to Manchester train service over a reinstated chord at Todmorden. She said residents of Burnley (90,000 population) had to rely on buses to get to Manchester which took 1.5 hours at peak times.

A chance to visit Malmo

The annual general meeting and conference of the European Passengers' Federation will be held in Malmo, Sweden, next year.

The event will take place in the City Hall on Saturday 20 March, followed by optional visits in the area on the Sunday.

Malmo is capital of the Skane area of southern Sweden, opposite Copenhagen and much more accessible from the rest of Europe since the opening of the Oresund Bridge. Apart from reaching the city by train, or train and boat, you can also fly to Copenhagen's Kastrup Airport.

Our conference will be addressed by speakers from Sweden and Denmark. The European Commission has also been invited to give a presentation.

Saturday evening will include a visit to the City Tunnel – a north/south rail tunnel which is nearing completion.

On Sunday there will be an excursion across the bridge to Kastrup airport in Denmark, 50% of whose passengers are now from Sweden, and then a rail trip up the Swedish coast to Landskrona and Halsingborg.

We are grateful to our Swedish colleagues in ResenarsForum for arranging what promises to be a memorable and informative weekend in an interesting part of Europe.

Full details, and how to book, will appear shortly on the EPF website www.epf.eu and can also be obtained by normal post from Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road South, Lowestoft NR32 1RQ.