

OUT OF THE SHADOWS



Shadow transport secretary Chris Grayling is stepping up the pressure on Alistair Darling, accusing him of trying to micro-manage the rail industry. But does Grayling have any policies of his own? Paul Clifton reports

Chris Grayling is very late. It's not his fault; a train has let him down. So he strides straight into the impatient crowd on the platform of the tiny station at Dunbridge between Romsey and Salisbury.

'They're surely not taking away the service used by school children? I'll have to raise it in the House with Alistair Darling.'

Grayling is meeting opponents of the cuts to rural services in the draft Greater

Western timetable. Dunbridge gets 17 trains a day, but villagers have been told that from December there will be only five: three to Southampton and two to Salisbury. For the 12-mile commute in each direction, it will be hopeless.

'It's an old British Rail trick,' he informs the appreciative locals. 'Cut back the trains to the point where no-one can use them then declare the station is unpopular and should be closed to save money.'

About 40 people have come to hear him. That's 10 more than use Dunbridge all day; fewer than two people on each train. Grayling certainly stands out, walking with the slight stoop of a man who grew up conscious of being unusually tall.

Until this visit, would any of the local party faithful have heard of the 44 year-old MP for Epsom and Ewell?

Would they remember Damian Green, Tim Yeo, Theresa

May, Tim Collins or Alan Duncan either? They're all recent Conservative spokesmen on transport. The job has been chucked around the party's front bench like an unwanted layer of wrapping in a game of pass-the-parcel.

The party's last significant policy document on transport came in 2003. It was called 'Free to Travel' and aligned the party as a staunch defender of the motorist.

'My own party hasn't done enough on transport in recent years,' Grayling concedes. 'But my appointment as someone who's reasonably knowledgeable about the

subject is a sign that we're serious about transport these days. In 2009 I want to be secretary of state for transport.'

Has he got the right background? Not professionally. A former television news producer, he was elected in 2001 – as was his boss, David Cameron. He spent a couple of seasons on the Transport Select Committee, before moving on to health and education. Now he's back on the transport beat.

'Two thirds of our current MPs have been elected since 1997. We're a new generation. So we can shake off the past issues about the way the railway was privatised. In my view it was fragmented too much.

'Our starting point is to look at what Britain will be like in 25 years' time. Where people are going to live, where businesses are going to locate, what environmental constraints we will have to put on our transport system to balance the needs of our economy. First we need that back cloth, against which we can develop our transport strategy.

'There's no point me getting into specific debates about Crossrail or a north-south high-speed link until we've established that back cloth.'

Oh dear. Does that mean the Tories will be short on substance while they spend months gazing into their crystal ball?

'If you look at Labour's 10-year plan, it contained a lot of targets; lists of projects. What it lacked was a coherent vision as a whole for the role transport needs to play in the development of our country.

'Look at the debate within government over a new high-speed rail link. Alistair Darling will not actually axe it; he will just pour cold water on it; kick it into the long grass. It's what Labour has done with lots of big ideas.'

Would a Grayling-led Department for Transport be any different?

'The Government is spending

five times as much money on rail as it was five years ago. I don't have an issue with the amount of investment. But we're getting relatively little for that money. We could do a lot more with it.'

Such as?

'Well that's an interesting question and it's part of the work I've got to do over the next few months, getting ideas.

'Alistair Darling seems to have turned into a cross between Dr Beeching and the Fat Controller'

'We are projecting passenger growth of a third over the next seven or eight years, and no extra trains for them to travel on. We've got to get to grips with the capacity problem, and we have to use public money to support the expansion and enhancement of the rail network.'

That's not a typical old Tory soundbite. Grayling is short on detail: he is still coming to terms with the complexities of his brief. He's clearer about what is not being done than he is on what he would do instead. But he's honest about the time it will take to formulate his own policies, and the thought processes are obviously under way.

He continues his party's opposition to the regional planning system. He is critical of projects of strategic importance which would take up an entire regional budget and which, therefore, are not moving forward, such as the A3 Hindhead tunnel or removing traffic from Stonehenge. Grayling is also critical of the manner in which central government withdrew support for light rail schemes in Leeds, Liverpool and South Hampshire.

'The Government's baffled

me by the way it has walked away from some of the easy wins, like the South West Trains and South Eastern platform extensions. They were in the SRA Strategic Plan for completion in 2004, and they just disappeared in a puff of smoke.'

So how would Grayling have played it, had he been in charge?

'I don't want at this stage to list what enhancements we would make; I want the rail industry to be talking to us about what ought to be done, should we be in government from 2009.

'Our job as politicians is to set a direction, not to micro-manage. Alistair Darling seems to have turned into a cross between Dr Beeching and the Fat Controller. On the one hand he is chopping back rural services at places like Dean and Dunbridge, and on the other hand he is taking direct control

of timetable issues around the network, and other operational matters like the procurement of the new Great Western train.


'Why should it be for a government minister to decide which trains are bought for a railway line? Surely it's for professional railwaymen to do that!


'The Government has now taken more direct operational control of the rail network than it ever had under British Rail, and I don't think that makes good sense. The Government can never avoid the temptation of trying to run everything itself. It's not what we as politicians should be doing. This is the issue that divides Conservative and Labour most on transport.'

Paul Clifton is transport correspondent for BBC South and CILT Transport Journalist of the Year.



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