

Summit wrong up north

NEWS ANALYSIS 4: DIVIDING LINES

You don't need a degree in sociology to know the north has been nursing a grievance for well over a year now about Strategic Rail Authority policies. Just how much of the increasingly frugal national rail cake is to be divided, has led to some gritted teeth in the North



ALAN WHITEHOUSE

SURE, WE KNOW THE ARGUMENTS OFF BY HEART: 40 PER cent of all rail journeys happen south of the Thames. 70 per cent of all rail journeys begin or end in London. So logic says that is where the investment should go.

Oh, and the regional rail network swallows up around 70 per cent of the subsidies given to the railways while delivering only around 20 per cent of the passenger miles. It is a refrain the north is growing increasingly impatient with.

The second Northern Rail Summit, staged in Manchester a few weeks ago, was set against a background of increasing agitation for a better deal for what the SRA wants to call the 'secondary' network. The event tapped into growing concerns about poor quality rolling stock, inadequate investment plans and what will become of the system under the proposed new maintenance regime.

Rolling stock first. There is not enough of it to go round, and much of what is there is sub-standard. This is an issue dating back to the 1980s, when British Rail replaced first-generation DMUs with a combination of Pacers and sprinter-type vehicles.

Pacers were a huge mistake, being less reliable and more costly to operate than originally envisaged, particularly when those reliability problems entailed replacement of transmission systems. They are also largely unpopular. Travelling on one on the approaches to Manchester a few weeks ago I saw children covering their ears as the flange squeal threatened to deafen everyone on board.

If you tried to market a car with these characteristics, you would be bust within a month. Why should public transport users put up with something so obviously second class, particularly when, glancing a couple of hundred miles to the south, they can see their counterparts boarding state-of-the-art, air-conditioned electric trains that glide along, making far less noise?

So much for rolling stock. What, then, about infrastructure? The signs here are little better. The Trans-Pennine Express franchise has been watered down from its original vision, which proposed heavy civil engineering and resignalling work to bring up linespeeds and increase capacity.

Remember the big Railtrack launch of plans to re-open the two disused bores at Standedge? The idea was to create a sort of giant passing loop for both 'Up' and 'Down' lines. The result would have been a revitalised Leeds-to-Manchester North Trans-Pennine, with a half-hour repeating timetable, allowing for two expresses, two stoppers and a freight path every hour. When will happen now? Don't even ask.

More modestly, proposals to rework the central Manchester network with a curve linking Victoria and Piccadilly stations, allowing more services to cross the city centre, has also disappeared entirely from the planning radar.

Contrast this with the one billion pounds plus being spent merely to upgrade power supplies south of the Thames to allow fleets of new trains (see above) to operate to maximum capacity, and it becomes apparent why opinion-formers right

across the industry spectrum are sufficiently concerned about the future of the north's rail system to get involved in the summit.

And, on top of all the long-standing concerns, come the SRA's maintenance and renewal plans. If these go unmodified they will condemn the commuter networks into major cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield to 'secondary' status, with maintenance and renewal work deferred and only the bare minimum done to ensure safety.

Even the SRA agrees this will create a bow-wave of maintenance work that will probably mean a rising number of TSRs. In effect, they will be creating half a dozen new Settle and Carlisle lines, with a daunting list of time-expired equipment and badly deteriorated structures. Not only will it make commuter services increasingly unattractive to use, but those responsible for the services using them, the Passenger Transport Executives, say it will all end in route closures.

This might not matter if the northern rail system really was a little-used backwater. But that simply is not the case any more. In their evidence to the recent Commons Transport Select Committee investigation, the Passenger Transport Executive Group put together a compelling case for more money, more resources and a greater sense of priority for the regional system.

In West Yorkshire, some peak-time trains routinely run with short formations; they are theoretically running with anything up to a 200 per cent load factor. In reality it means that some people just cannot get on board and have to be turned away to wait for the next train.

As hundreds of new Desiro vehicles arrive to join the Electrostars already operating South of Thames, reflect on the fact that, in West Yorkshire, peak use of the rail network has grown by more than 40 per cent. Its luckless users have seen the arrival of just 29 additional vehicles to soak up that growth. And more than half of these – a fourth car for the Class 333 units – are dedicated to the Leeds-Bradford-Ilkley-Skipton service.

Greater Manchester has similar problems with the Metrolink tram system. Officials there believe demand for the system 'is partially suppressed by the overcrowding'. In other words, people won't use it because they know it will be a ghastly experience at 8am or 5.30pm. Another chance to achieve modal switch from the car is lost.

As commuting distances lengthen and key cities become super-hubs for job creation (Leeds, for example, has a target of 40,000 new jobs over 10 years) the size and quality of the regional rail network is going to matter more and more.

Those campaigning for a better deal will learn how successful they have been early next year when details of the Northern Rail franchise begin to emerge. On the signals currently being given out, don't hold your breath.