



# POINTS AND SIGNALS: POLITICAL PIPE DREAMS

**In last month's Rail Professional Andrew Goodman bemoaned the rail policy vacuum from the main political parties. In frustration, he now presents some ideas of his own**

I already know that I'm not cut out to be a party political animal. In fact, I confess that, in all the time I've had the right to vote, I have put my cross against all of the mainstream parties at one time or another. The reality is that I've always been waiting for a party that neatly mirrors my own views – which is a luxury I'm never likely to enjoy.

So I wasn't exactly surprised when, last month, I put the rail policies of the main political parties under the microscope and came away feeling completely underwhelmed. With voters to attract, and the need to cultivate mass appeal paramount, it's obvious to politicians that the structure of the rail industry is of little interest to the public compared to a raft of other issues, such as national security, taxation, health and education.

But even if the public aren't throwing their hands up in despair about the parlous state of the trains, I can't help thinking that transport could be a vote-winner. Don't forget, it's an issue that has an impact on most people's lives. With roads at capacity for much of the day, and trains stuffed to capacity during the peak period, punctuality remains the holy grail.

So, given a blank sheet of paper, what would a winning manifesto for a pro-railways political party look like?

Well, as has been said before, 'we are where we are'. And that seems to suggest that we should separate railways policy into two areas.

First there is the 'making the best of what we have got' railway policy. And what we have now is an industry lacking any excuse for failing to deliver a boringly reliable service, day in, day out. In fact, it's gobbling up unbelievable amounts of public money

which, surprisingly, doesn't seem to be exercising the minds of the public as much as one might have thought.

So let's work with that notion and leave Network Rail in charge of its existing track utility tasks, reliant on the taxpayer, and just ensure it concentrates on the knitting and gets the job done. After all, if the taxpayer doesn't object, and a well-maintained and managed rail infrastructure provides a reliable and acceptable bread-and-butter level of service results, then you really are on to a vote-winner.

But, surely, the real political challenge is how to take rail forward so that it can truly be described as a transport system fit for the 21st century. This requires something more statesmanlike than political; something that voters can really buy into. New routes, better station facilities and trains that provide a fast and frequent service, seven days a week. Is that too much to ask for?

Well, I don't think so, although admittedly it bears no relation to the existing railway. Network Rail may be getting to grips with its brief and yes, train operators are

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investing in new rolling stock, but this only provides today's passenger with a more comfortable seat with which to contemplate increased journey times on congested rail corridors. In short, there is simply no realistic prospect of radical improvements when we are spending money on simply tarding up what our Victorian forebears left us.

To achieve the elusive 21st century railway, we must create extra capacity by building new rail infrastructure.

But how can that be done? Well, if the existing railway is to remain rooted in public subsidy, then the new railway must be free from it.

To do that, we firstly need to make the best of whatever family silver is left in the Victorian railway chest to fund the next

generation's railway. That means stripping responsibility for rail property away from Network Rail and, at last, making the most of land under its control.

For an example, take Clapham Junction. Just consider how much land is sitting within a short distance of the West End of London, occupied for most of the time by little more than a few trains. A new-decked Clapham Junction development across this massive site could create a complex of retailing, housing and leisure that could liberate serious money for the cause. But don't stop there; what about the other sites in London, languishing under the dead hand of railway ownership? It's the same story up and down the country. It's little short of a scandal that pressure for land to accommodate new housing remains so high when such large tracts of real estate, in key locations, remain under-utilised.

We could then use this pump-priming money to attract private companies to build brand new railways. And we should use the fact that making the most of these brown field sites is providing the seed corn to build new routes, to outweigh other

environmental considerations. Other European countries can build new railways; so should we.

And the final key to achieving the railway for the next generation is radically changing taxation.

Implementing a new land value taxation would not only raise additional funds, from linking tax to the rising property and land prices that the new railways would bring, but also provide the means to financially compensate those disadvantageously affected by the new infrastructure.

A political pipe dream? Possibly. But without the necessary vision, our hopes for a decent transport system for the next generation will be like smoke on the wind.

*Andrew Goodman is industry editor.*