

A big conversation on rail

OPINION: TIME FOR PM TO ACT

Tony Blair says he wants a big conversation about the future of Britain. So Alan Whitehouse has written him this open letter...



ALAN WHITEHOUSE

DEAR TONY

You say you want to hear ordinary people's views on the things that really matter to this country... health, education, law and order and, of course, transport. Transport will be the trickiest issue you have to deal with between now and the moment when you inevitably decide you have had enough and step down. And railways will be the thorniest problem in that trickiest of portfolios.

You could be forgiven for holding your head in your hands every time you see the press cuttings or the broadcast media coverage of the railway industry. You might already have reached the conclusion that the industry's simply a basket case, too far gone to pull back from the brink and that personal, rather than public transport is the way forward. You would be wrong.

True, railways do not look good at the moment. We have a network that, this year, is going to swallow well over three times the subsidy that British Rail received in its best year immediately before privatisation. Then, as now, the economy was on a roll. Plenty of people earning and plenty of people spending. The comparison between then and now, inflation apart, is a valid one.

So, you desperately need some good news from the railways. But it never seems to come. Train performance? Stuck in the doldrums with one company managing to run no more than 62 per cent of its trains on time.

Engineering excellence? No chance. Even when handed a stretch of the West Coast Main Line for five months, Network Rail and its contractors could not quite manage to hand it back on the agreed date and, even now, far from being fit for 30 years' service as promised, it is still getting overnight and weekend attention which both screws up passengers and diverts resources from the rest of the West Coast project.

Spanking new commuter trains for London's hard pressed commuters? Well, nearly. Some are there but plenty more are literally stuck in the sidings because the power supply

upgrades needed to go with them somehow didn't get done in time.

So why should you give the railways a red cent come the comprehensive spending review next year?

Two reasons. One: that snapshot of an expensive, dysfunctional railway is fast becoming outdated. Things are happening and it is getting better. Two: railways, believe it or not, are all we have to keep this country moving. We need to get them right and we need to get them right soon.

The heart of the problem is Railtrack. Before being placed in administration, Railtrack had become a bloated, complacent and ineffective organisation. Why its disaffected shareholders believe they are entitled to more compensation is a mystery. It was a company about to collapse anyway, under the weight of its own and its contractors' incompetence.

That legacy has cast a long shadow over its successor, Network Rail. The company has had a tough year and is even now only beginning to cotton on to the reality of the new, post-Railtrack railway. That the days, for example, of quoting £243m to upgrade the Blaenau branch to handle freight traffic when the real cost, according to independent experts, is about £4m, are over.

But change is coming. As Graham Eccles remarked, if the organisation can shed 600 people 'without skipping a beat', then the potential savings must be enormous. The regulator, Tom Winsor, is showing the way, demonstrating that there are efficiency savings of more than 30 per cent to be had by 2009. He believes even that may be a conservative estimate. He is probably not wrong.

The company itself is starting to do a lot of the right things. Taking maintenance work back in-house is the most high profile example. Signal design is back under the same roof.





Sooner or later, renewals work will join them. Why have teams relaying 600 feet of track in-house as maintenance workers, and teams relaying 601 feet of track at arm's length as renewals contractors? It is a purely artificial distinction.

Slowly but surely the fragmented and dysfunctional railway is being stuck back together again. Two or three years from now, you could be holding up Network Rail as an example of good practice in that grey 'third way' area between private and public sectors. We might even get to a position where Network Rail, acting on behalf of the state, provides a quality infrastructure platform for the train companies to unleash their entrepreneurial vision and creativity on, in the knowledge that the points won't fail and that the OLE won't come down.

Your big problem is that all this is happening at a pace that is far too slow to suit the electoral cycle.

Dealing with that will take political courage. If you agree next year to put significant amounts of new money into the industry, your detractors and opponents will accuse you of throwing good money after bad.

But there are few realistic alternatives. More short distance flights to replace intercity trains? I don't think so. We are just beginning to wake up to the pollution problems – including noise – which allowing ever-expanding airline schedules would bring. The aviation White Paper promises a lot, but it has yet to deliver.

A mega-roadbuilding programme that would at least get us moving again, leaving the issue of bigger and better traffic jams for someone else 10 years down the line? It's not an option.

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We all want more roads but we don't want them at the bottom of our gardens.

The environmentalists would be out tunnelling and building tree houses before the first sod was cut. And they'd be joined by plenty of Barbour-wearing middle-Englanders who would see their favourite view or village as far more important than six lanes of blacktop that someone else, not them, would get the benefit from.

The truth is that railways are the only low-pollution mass people shifter we have. That is why we need them. They have been unloved by politicians and badly neglected, especially over the last 20 years. You could reverse that process by announcing a long programme of TLC.

You will not be in office to see the results, but reforming our railways, setting right that period of neglect and decline, would earn you the place in the history books as a radical reforming prime minister that we both know you want.

Just do it.

Yours ever,
ALAN.