

COMMENT : NORTHERN FUDGE

When news leaked out that the Strategic Rail Authority was planning a review of rail services in the north of England – with the threat of fares rises and swingeing cuts to the timetable – the Government acted swiftly to dampen down the uproar. But the reprieve could prove temporary, as Alan Whitehouse, who broke the original story, explains

It seemed like a transport journalists' dream when, one morning last month, a trusted source called with a tip-off about a wide-ranging review of rail services across northern England.

And what a review! The benchmark, against which everything else would be tested, was the assumption that there would be no – that's right, *no* – local services at all in the vast area covered by the new Northern Rail franchise.

No option was to be ruled out, including replacing trains with buses, drastic cuts to the timetable, fares increases well above inflation and even station and line closures.

Two months after launching the Northern Rail franchise, with a promise of a consistent level of service for the next nine years, the Strategic Rail Authority was about to commission an independent firm of consultants to find a way of unpicking the deal.

The story was absolute dynamite – and even more so when the SRA confirmed its authenticity. It led the North's BBC regional TV news programmes that night and *The Guardian* carried the story the next day, followed by many other local and regional newspapers.

Then, less than two weeks later, a call came from the Department for Transport to say the terms of reference of the review had been changed. Ministers had looked again and decided that sweeping changes were now off the agenda. Instead, there would simply be some tinkering around the edges.

Taken at face value, it appeared to be a victory for the rail lobby. But a more detailed look at what is happening around secondary, or local, railways leaves less room for optimism.

Secondary railways cost a small fortune to keep open today compared to the British Rail era, whilst carrying comparatively few passengers. So on paper they deliver appalling value for money.

This is the problem at the heart of the Northern Rail franchise. Initially, there was a delay in signing the deal, allegedly because of Treasury fears over the level of public funding required. The franchise is one of the biggest and costliest on the network, with a £350m annual subsidy that buys the same timetable as before and no new trains.



The Railways Bill could be used to cut Northern Rail services

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Indeed, even as the franchise agreement was being drawn up the SRA was privately warning the Government that up to 25 per cent of the network was at risk of closure unless more cash was pumped into the industry.

Not long after came the leaked announcement of the review, followed by one of the more spectacular U-turns in transport politics. If the industry grapevine is to be believed, there is a lot of anger both at the SRA and in government circles that news of the Northern review emerged in the way it did. With an election looming, Ministers acted quickly to limit the political fall-out by dramatically reining back the review's terms of reference.

But this is no media victory – except perhaps in the short term. The Railways Bill is progressing through Parliament and looks likely to become law before the next election. It contains two disturbing proposals: abolition of the eight regional Rail Passengers Committees (RPCs); and the end of the right of metropolitan Passenger Transport Authorities to specify the size and shape of their own local rail networks. Both could have far reaching effects that will overshadow any Northern review.



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The RPCs act as the voice of the passenger when, for example, railway lines or individual stations are threatened with closure. They report to the Transport Secretary, either supporting or rejecting closure proposal. One of their most famous victories, now almost 20 years ago, was to reverse the decision to close the Settle to Carlisle line.

There is little doubt that

without the dogged fight put up by the RPCs the line would have been axed.

The Railways Bill will ensure that such a lengthy fight can never happen again. Under its proposals, the Transport Secretary will set criteria, known as 'Closure Guidance', by which lines proposed for closure are judged. Crucially, there will be no legal duty for the Transport Secretary to consult anyone over what these criteria should be.

A closure proposal could be initiated by a train operating company or a 'funding authority', which in practice is likely to be a Passenger Transport Executive. They will have to write to the Office of Rail Regulation setting out how the line in question is failing to meet the Transport Secretary's criteria.

The new Rail Passengers Council, with its one national committee, will have the right to hold hearings and make a report, but its voice will merely be that of any other objector, with its views going – like everyone else's – to the ORR, rather than the Transport Secretary.

The ORR will examine a closure proposal to see if it

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matches the Transport Secretary's criteria and, if it does, issue 'closure ratification'. It could, of course, dismiss the closure proposal for not meeting the criteria, but either way the voice of the passenger will be marginalised.

A great deal will depend on how closure guidance criteria are drawn up. For example, will Britain's obligations over CO₂ emissions be taken into account? And to what extent will the issue of social exclusion be considered?

The Kyoto agreement and social exclusion policy could be bypassed, as one easy way of deciding a railway line's fate would be to set the closure guidance criteria along the lines of 'any service requiring a subsidy of £x per passenger journey' or 'any station used by less than y passengers per day'.

Either way, the new rules would make closure so easy that the review of Northern Rail services – or any subsequent review – would become redundant.

And remember, the criteria for closure is decided by one person – the Secretary of State for Transport!

Metropolitan areas have traditionally had some protection from outside influences. They have raised local cash to keep local services running. Some have re-opened freight lines, added new stations and leased small fleets of trains. These rights are also under threat from the Railways Bill.

Suddenly, all this begins to look less and less like a victory and more of a fudge to put the inconvenient issue of secondary railways on the back burner until after the next election. That is hugely dispiriting, and not just because it means the future of these lines remains in doubt.

It is perfectly feasible to put together an argument for trimming the network. There are some nonsensical services that are only maintained to avoid triggering a formal closure proposal. There are stations, too, where the weekly passenger count fails to reach double figures. By keeping them open the railway is simply swallowing maintenance cash and lengthening journey times, and making rail less attractive to car users.

It might be that the time has finally come to get all these issues out into the open, even if that means facing up to the prospect of a smaller network that operates more effectively.

But the decision to water down the review of Northern Rail services means that the Government has flunked the latest test of its commitment to transport issues.

The railway is still swallowing cash at an unacceptable rate. The Treasury is still determined to do something about it. But no-one has the courage to make a decisive move one way or the other.