

# IN MY VIEW

# TIM YEEO



**Government interference is ruining our railways, argues Tim Yeeo, who says the Conservatives would allow the network to be run by industry professionals**

In 1998, when just one train in 10 ran late, John Prescott told the Labour Party Conference that the railways were a 'national disgrace'. Six years later, after endless restructuring forced on the industry by the Government and billions of pounds in subsidy from the taxpayer, the number of late trains has doubled to one in five. Whatever plan Prescott had in mind, it hasn't worked; and after five major rail reviews in seven years the industry is still plagued with uncertainty about its future. It deserves a period of stability.

Two years ago, Peter Hain, then Minister for Europe, admitted 'we have the worst railways in Europe', a verdict many commuters would agree with. But, despite this frank admission, the Government has still done little to improve the situation. Ministers have set targets and introduced policies that at worst have been unworkable or damaging and at best ineffective. They invented the Strategic Rail Authority, hailed it as a saviour and then four years later unceremoniously announced its abolition – even though the actual execution may now be a drawn-out and, for taxpayers, expensive process.

Alistair Darling has stripped the SRA of most of its independence, decreeing that any major decisions have to come through his office. Yet the organisation still exists as a lame duck, employing more than 400 people and costing £100m a year. This contrasts with the old Office of Passenger Rail Franchising, which in 2001 cost just £13m and employed 187 people.

I recognise that the structure of the railways created at the time of privatisation was not perfect. However, one huge benefit of privatisation has been increased investment in railways, something which would never have been achieved if the industry had stayed in

public ownership. This injection of private finance has led to a massive growth in passenger numbers. Eleven billion more kilometres were travelled on the UK's railways in 2003 than in 1995.

For all its flaws, some of which remain, privatisation was the right policy. There was no other way in which Britain could have been equipped with the modern, expanding services it needs in the 21st century. Even *The Guardian* noted in January 2004 that 'the Government has now been in power far too long to keep on blaming privatisation. Most of the time it has been managing by reacting to crisis.' The recent suggestions about renationalisation at the Labour Party Conference last month are an irrelevant and unhelpful diversion from the main task of bringing our railway network into the 21st century so that it carries more freight and more passengers as efficiently and reliably as the best railways in the world.

In their February 2004 report on the Future of the Railways, the House of Commons

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Transport Committee, chaired by Labour MP Gwyneth Dunwoody, concluded that 'the fundamental failure of the railway is one of government policy'. There is now barely-disguised panic at the Department for Transport about the lack of clear direction. No date has been set for the abolition of the SRA, or for the legislation needed to implement the changes Alistair Darling announced in his Rail Review.

Nobody knows when our railways will actually be left to get on with their job without the shadow of uncertainty hanging over them. Internal conflicts, clashes over remits and ongoing power squabbles with the DfT now

threaten to hold the industry back. As Tom Winsor reported, the Government has left the railways 'bruised and battered, reorganised and restructured, pressed and criticised'. The ongoing upheaval and state of flux which Labour has created demonstrates a clear lack of effort by the Government to remedy this situation.

So, what plans do Conservatives have to make our railways better? Conservatives offer the industry, and the travelling public, a series of practical, workable solutions. Firstly, we will abolish excess bureaucracy surrounding the industry – we welcomed the proposed demise



of the cash-guzzling and ineffective SRA, which of course should never have been established in the first place.

We will give more power to the Tocs so that they can have the stability they need to respond to the demands of their customers and tailor their services to the requirements of the market place, without being mucked around by yet another government review. We will make Network Rail more transparent and accountable and minimise political and civil service interference in our railways, allowing the network to be run by those who know it best – the industry professionals.

We will give the best performing Tocs longer contracts so that they can have the chance to invest more for the benefit of the industry, with the confidence that their investment will be commercially viable. Massive investment has already taken place in new rolling stock with results that passengers can see, and there is no reason why this approach cannot be extended.

At our recent party conference I unveiled our plans to improve the situation for the travelling public by renovating stations. The modernisation

of airports in the last 20 years has placed many at the cutting edge of service provision, with excellent shops, restaurants and work areas for travellers. By contrast, at too many railway stations outside London little has changed in the last one hundred years. They remain cold, dirty, desolate and in some cases unsafe.

I want the Tocs and Network Rail to work with private sector developers and retailers to provide stations that better meet customer needs. Almost every railway station represents a brownfield site full of potential for commercial and residential development in locations which have in-built transport links. Through planning agreements investment can be drawn in at no cost to taxpayers or passengers. The result will be cleaner, safer and more convenient car parks, new shops, waiting areas that can be used for working if trains are delayed, and longer platforms to increase capacity so that bigger trains can be used to cut overcrowding. In our first year in office we will identify a hundred stations with big potential for improvement and start the ball rolling with the Tocs and Network Rail to accelerate this process.

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Britain's railways should be the backbone of a modern, clean, efficient, environmentally-friendly public transport network. To do this they require vision, direction and stability. As a regular train traveller all over England and Scotland for many years, I am acutely conscious of how far they fail to achieve this goal. I am confident that, with the right vision from government and a stable background to encourage investment, the industry's management and staff are raring to go. That's what I want to let them do.

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