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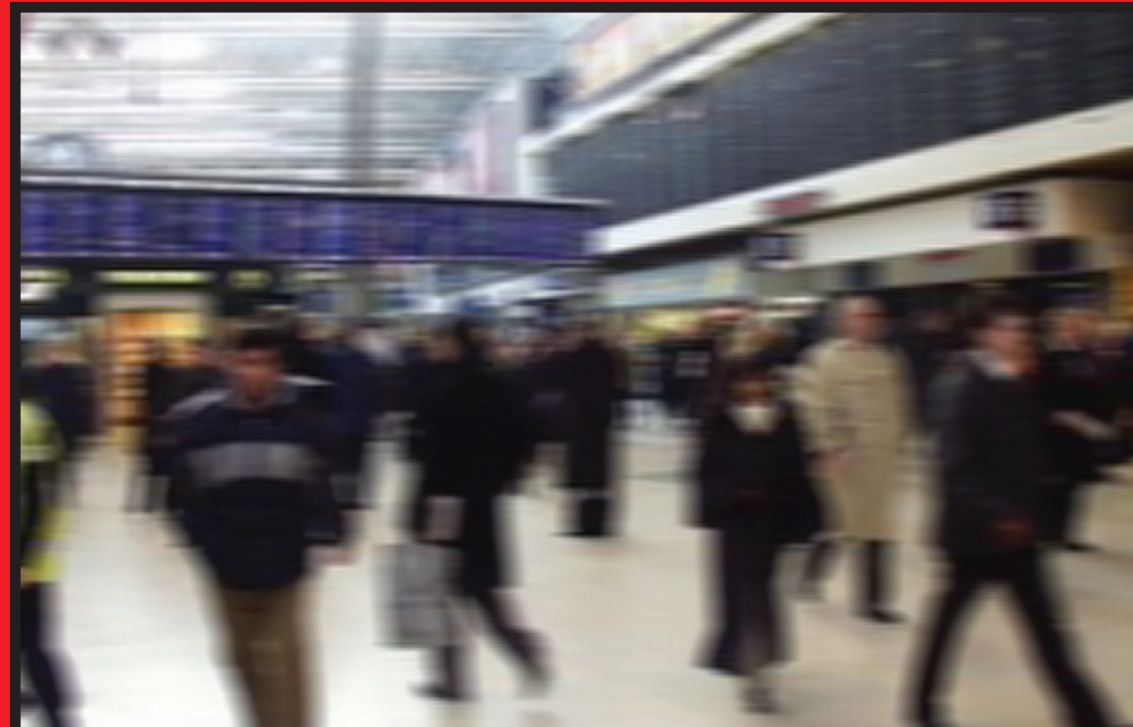
Scottish
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Party

Reclaim our railways

Show the rail profiteers the red signal

by Alan McCombes

Foreword: Bob Crow - RMT General Secretary



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FOREWORD

by **Bob Crow**

Privatisation has been a disaster for our railways. The network has been fragmented and services have deteriorated, yet the private sector continues to receive billions of pounds in subsidy and bank billions of pounds in profits.

All the evidence says that an integrated, publicly owned, publicly accountable railway will provide a better railway with better value for the tax and fare payer.

Scotland is crying out for an improved transport network run solely in the public interest. That is why the RMT warmly welcomes the Scottish Socialist Party's *Reclaim Our Railways* pamphlet.

This highly readable pamphlet contains the facts, figures and arguments necessary to persuade our politicians that public ownership is the right track for Scotland's railways.

I hope you find this an enjoyable and useful read, but most importantly that you will join the growing campaign to renationalise our railways.

In solidarity,



Bob Crow
RMT General Secretary

chapter 1

A DECADE OF CHAOS

Rory Bremner once did a sketch which involved a man sitting in a pub staring glumly into his pint.

“What’s up?” says his mate.

“I got my car stolen last night,” he replies. “And even worse, the guy who stole it came round to my door and offered to sell it to me.”

“But that’s theft,” says his mate.

“No,” the man replies, “that’s privatisation!”

When Thatcher first began her privatisation crusade, even former Tory Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan, was appalled.

“It’s like selling off the family silver,” he thundered.

By the time the Tories had finished looting public assets, it wasn’t just the family silver that had been sold off. The furniture was in the pawn and most of the floorboards had been torn up and sold off for firewood.

Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, more than 60 public companies were sold to private profiteers.

Gas, electricity, coal, airlines, bus companies, the railway system, the shipbuilding industry, even the nuclear power industry, are now owned by real-life Del Boys in Armani suits.

In England, even the rain that falls from the skies is bought and sold for

private profit. Only mass public protest prevented Scotland’s lochs being sold off to the ‘reservoir dogs’.

But the most outlandish privatisation project of them all was one that even Margaret Thatcher, the goddess of greed, never dared contemplate.

The mother of all privatisations was left to her successor, the deceptively mild-mannered John Major.



THATCHER AND MAJOR: agenda of privatisation

In the twilight years of the Tory government, the quiet assassin and his henchmen tore Britain’s once proud rail industry into a hundred bleeding fragments and fed them to the pin-striped piranhas of the City of London.

Even before the Railways Bill of 1993, which paved the way for rail privatisation, the industry had been systematically starved of funding.

Margaret Thatcher - married to an oil

tycoon - used to travel everywhere by chauffeur-driven limousine.

She boasted how she hated trains. Never one to bear a grudge lightly, she elevated her personal prejudice against rail travel into a messianic mission.

At the start of the 1980s, in the first wave of privatisation, Thatcher sold off at bargain basement prices British Rail’s most profitable assets, including hotels, shipping lines, land and property.

At the same time, investment in the rail industry was slashed to the bone.

In 1976, government grants to BR had

the lot for £1900 million - the price of a ten-mile stretch of motorway.

You couldn’t get a better bargain at the Barras.

Over the next two years, the rest of the industry was dismantled and put on the market.

A single unified industry was divided among hundreds of companies, each desperate to grab as big a share of the spoils as possible.

By the start of the 21st century, the rail industry was even more chaotic and fragmented than it had been at the start of the 20th century.

There were three rolling stock companies. There were three major freight companies, and a host of smaller operators.

There was Railtrack, which owned and controlled the basic infrastructure, including tracks, stations and signals. There were 25 train operating companies.

And on top of that, there were seven main infrastructure companies plus hundreds of engineering and maintenance contractors and sub-contractors.

The old British Rail was far from perfect. It was plodding and bureaucratic.

It was top down and ultra-centralised.

But at least one hand knew what the other hand was doing.

And at least it had some accountability to the people, via the elected government of the day.

The people who now ran the rail industry had plenty of expertise in making money.

But most of them were barely capable of reading a railway timetable.

“Of Railtrack’s 13 directors, only two had any experience in the rail industry. Their annual salaries were equivalent to a lifetime’s earnings for a train driver or a guard.”

accounted for 26 per cent of all industry revenues.

By 1994, on the eve of privatisation, that figure had slumped to 15 per cent.

Major carried the Tory vendetta against public transport one stage further. He thought the unthinkable.

First, in 1994, he sold off Railtrack.

Its assets, including 16,656 miles of track, 2615 stations and thousands of acres of adjacent land, had been valued in the BR Annual Report and Accounts 1994 at £6464 million. The Tories sold

HOW THE PUBLIC PURSE WAS PLUNDERED

Of Railtrack's 13 directors, only two had any previous experience in the rail industry.

Their annual salaries were the equivalent to a lifetime's earnings for a train driver or a guard.

And their masters were not the travelling public, but wealthy shareholders in London, New York, Chicago, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt and a hundred other cities.

They cynically put profit before safety. In the ten years following privatisation, the number of maintenance staff was slashed by half, from 31,000 in 1994 to around 15,000.

It would not have taken Nostradamus to predict the consequences.

After three major rail disasters in three years that need never have happened, even the Fatcat Controller of Railtrack, Gerald Corbett, was forced to admit that rail privatisation has been a disaster.

With the general public clamouring for renationalisation of the entire industry, even New Labour was forced to take action.

Unfortunately, the action they took was too little, too late. Instead of taking the logical course of action, the government timidly established Network Rail to replace the discredited Railtrack.

Network Rail is a classic quango.

It is unelected. It is unaccountable, even to the government, which has no control over its operations.

Meanwhile, the rest of the rail industry remains in the hands of the same old plundering profiteers.

They include Sir Richard Branson, who, in between running trains and trying to circumnavigate the globe in a hot air

balloon, sells CDs, mobile phones, airline tickets, credit cards, electricity, cosmetics, soft drinks, electricity and countless other products.

Then there's Scotland's own Brian Souter, the cut-throat Christian fundamentalist who certainly wouldn't have approved of Jesus running the moneylenders out of the temple.

His bus company, Stagecoach, became notorious in the 1980s for driving weaker competitors to the wall and grabbing control of lucrative routes.

But what really catapulted Souter into the Premier League of wealth and riches was the decision by the last Tory government to deregulate and privatise public transport.

Some people are still puzzled by the government's reluctance to bring the rail industry back into the public sector.

After all, that's what the public want, overwhelmingly.

But for New Labour, there are two words that dare not speak their name, at least not in the same sentence. 'Public ownership' is the ultimate obscenity.

This is not about pragmatism. It is about ideology. New Labour won't take the rail industry back into public ownership, not because they fear it would be a failure, but because they fear it would be a success.

An efficiently run, cheap public rail system would lay to rest once and for all the myth that 'private' equals dynamism and efficiency, while 'public' equals waste and incompetence.

And, who knows? The public might even start demanding the public ownership of the other utilities ripped off by the Tories, such as gas, electricity and coal.

Imagine an estate agent were to seize your home and sell it for a fraction of its true value. The new owner then rents out your former house.

Within a few years, he's made more money from your old property than he paid out in the first place.

A decade later, you're still being forced to pay the repair bills for a house you no longer own. You don't get a penny back in return - but the new owner keeps getting richer and richer.

Does this sound far-fetched? Could anyone really be so gullible? Could such a blatant rip-off take place in real life?

The answer is yes - and it's already happening.

Our railways were confiscated from the public by the last Tory government and sold for a fraction of their value.

Within a few years, the rail tycoons had recouped every penny they paid out.

A decade later, they're still piling up the profit.

And the public are still stumping up billions to keep the trains running.

One of the shrillest arguments to justify rail privatisation was that it would save the taxpayer money.

With private entrepreneurs in command, the railways would stand on their own two feet without the need for subsidies.

That argument was always bogus. A rail network is not a supermarket chain.

In our modern society, it is an essential public service, like the health service, the education system or street cleaning.

Not just rail passengers, but the whole population benefits from the railways. Many of the goods we buy in the shops, for example, have been transported by rail.

Every time we switch on the light, or turn on our TV or sound system, we are indirectly using the railways, because the coal that is transported to power stations such as Hunterston, Cockerzie and Longannet has to be carried there by rail.

Even our car journeys, ironically, are dependent ultimately on the railway network. Refined petroleum from Grangemouth is transported to the main distribution centres by rail.

Every day, in the Greater Glasgow area alone, over 100,000 passengers travel by train.

If that army of commuters were shifted onto the roads, the resulting congestion would bring the whole conurbation to a standstill.

Road deaths and injuries would multiply. The volume of insurance claims would soar, driving up premiums for motorists. Air pollution would reach intolerable

levels. The rise in respiratory illness would put the NHS under further pressure.

Hundreds of thousands of jobs are dependent on rail. They include those directly employed in the railway industry: on the trains, in the ticket offices, on the rail track, in the maintenance depots, in the admin offices, in the call centres answering train enquiries.

Then there are the taxi drivers whose main business revolves around railway stations; the newsagent shops and the snack bars; and the printers who produce the timetables and promotional leaflets.

Yet despite the central role of the rail network in our society, the amount of public investment in the railways over the last 30 years has been a pittance - especially compared to the Grand Canyon of disappearing public funds, the road network.

Detailed research conducted back in 1993-94 - later published in a paper, *The Great Road Transport Subsidy* - showed the total cost of road transport was just under £100 billion a year.

In contrast, the total contribution from road users, including fuel duty and road tax, amounted to just £15 billion.

While taxpayers were subsidising the nationalised railways to the tune of £1 billion a year, we were subsidising road transport to the tune of **£46 billion** a year.

When environmental costs were added, that road transport subsidy rose to a colossal £67 billion annually.

That meant that, in 1993-94, every man, woman and child was subsidising road transport to the tune of over £1000 a head.

In today's money, that figure would be nearer £1500.

The Great Road Transport Subsidy also estimated that in 1993-94 the price of petrol would need to have risen to £15 or £16 a gallon before the roads would pay for themselves - well over £20 a gallon at today's prices.

The row now raging over the planned M74 extension illustrates in flashing neon lights the absurd transport priorities of our politicians and business leaders.

An independent inquiry set up by the Scottish Executive came out against the idea of bulldozing this eight-lane monstrosity through residential communities in Glasgow's southside.

But the Scottish Executive has decided to defy the conclusions of its own inquiry and build a seven-mile stretch of road that will cost up to £1 billion - more than double the amount spent on the new Holyrood parliament.

In contrast, spending on rail services by the Scottish Executive over the past five years has been under £200 million a year. To put it in another way, one mile of urban motorway will cost more than the total annual rail spending by the Scottish Executive on 3000 miles of track, 3000 workers and 300 stations.

Almost 60 per cent of Glasgow's population have no access to a car. Projects like the M74 are designed to benefit motorists from the affluent suburbs.

Even then, it will merely shave around seven minutes from their journey time - or at least it will until the new stretch of urban road becomes yet another congested bottleneck.

Survey after survey shows that most people believe that spending on public

transport should have priority over spending on roads.

Many car owners would be prepared to leave their cars at home rather than endure daily gridlock if they had access to efficient public transport - especially if it worked out less expensive than car travel.

Across the UK, even excluding environmental costs, road transport enjoys 40 times the subsidy paid to rail - but carries only 15 times the quantity of passengers and freight.

Far from being mollycoddled, the rail industry has been starved of funds by successive Westminster governments, especially since the 1970s.

“When it comes to the rail industry, the braying voices which incessantly whine on about ‘waste’ and ‘profligacy’ suddenly seem to be struck down by a plague of laryngitis.”

But in a bizarre twist, since privatisation - which was supposed to save taxpayers money by eliminating the need for subsidies - the rail industry has gobbled up more money than ever before.

In the ten years since privatisation, UK train operating companies have been given over £10 billion in public subsidies.

Over the same timescale, private companies have siphoned off £7.7 billion in profits from Britain's rail industry.

Virgin Trains, for example, has received at least £1.9 billion in public subsidies.

In 2001-2002, it received over £600 million from the taxpayer. In the same year, it paid just £6 million in tax. That's because the company is effectively owned by secretive trusts in, cutely enough, the British Virgin Islands - a popular tax haven. No wonder Richard Branson wears a permanent grin.

Instead of gradually standing on their own feet, the rail companies are sponging up bigger subsidies than ever before.

Even allowing for inflation, the industry is now consuming three times the annual subsidy that it received in the year before privatisation; and four times the amount it received during the most successful years of the old, nationalised British Rail. The philosophers of the free market like to puff themselves up and pontificate about the importance of people “standing on their own two feet”.

Their vision of paradise is an unregulated free market with no government interference.

They ritually condemn “state intervention” in the running of the

economy. They rant against “public handouts” - for example to provide free school meals for our children.

But when it comes to the rail industry, the braying voices which incessantly whine on about “waste” and “profligacy” suddenly seem to be struck down by a plague of laryngitis.

WHY FIRST SHOULD BE LAST

Another central argument of the privatisation lobby is that the free market means competition - and in turn, competition means choice and variety for the consumer.

Most politicians and newspaper editors accept this glib assertion as readily as a five-year-old child accepts the existence of Santa Claus. Yet it fails to stand up to serious scrutiny.

Sure, someone can choose to get a cheap short back and sides in the traditional barbers on one side of the

street rather than go to the expensive hair stylist across the road. But as a general rule, the benefits of capitalist competition are wildly exaggerated.

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Shell, Texaco, Q8 and a few others. In the past, the petroleum companies used to run advertising campaigns suggesting that their product was superior to the rest. Esso for example claimed that it would "put a tiger in your tank".

But these days, everyone knows that a gallon of BP unleaded is identical to a gallon of Shell or Texaco unleaded.

It comes from the same oil wells. It's processed in the same refineries.

The only serious competition revolves around price - but even that is an illusion.

One company might offer cut-price petrol for a few weeks.

But as soon as they've attracted some regular customers, the price shoots back up.

Then there's the surreal commercial warfare waged between rival energy companies.

At one stage, it became cheaper to buy your gas from an electricity company and your electricity from a gas company.

But these temporary shifts in prices are a commercial ploy to grab a few more customers.

After the raid has been completed successfully, the bills suddenly soar.

Supporters of rail privatisation claimed that the dismantling of British Rail would lead to more choice and variety.

"In 1997, when National Express took over the ScotRail franchise, 94 per cent of trains arrived on time. By 2002-2003, that figure had slumped to 82 per cent."

That was more than just run-of-the-mill spin. It was a barefaced lie.

Railways are a natural monopoly.

They can be decentralised, devolved and democratised - and some of the most efficient railways in the world are run precisely along these lines.

But if you're standing at a local suburban railway line on your way to work, you can't toss a coin and decide at the last minute to hop on board a Virgin train rather than a ScotRail train.

If you want to travel from Glasgow to London by train, there might be a couple of options.

But virtually all train services within Scotland are operated by a single company.

Most people in Scotland believe that our railways are run by a company called ScotRail. That's the name that appears on rail tickets and timetables.

That's the name embroidered on the uniforms of ticket collectors and guards.

That's the name emblazoned on station entrances and platforms from Stranraer to Wick.

But there is no company called ScotRail. The name ScotRail is a franchise, the commercial equivalent of a flag of convenience.

From 1997 until October 2004, the ScotRail franchise was operated by Birmingham-based company, National Express. Once upon a time, National Express was the UK's publicly owned bus and coach company.

Then it was privatised by Margaret Thatcher for a £10 million pittance.

Now the company makes more than that every month.

In 2004, National Express had an operating profit of £152 million - up 17.9 percent from 2003.

According to the National Express's own corporate history, the company "expanded through the acquisition of businesses from national and local



THE TRAIN WITH NO NAME: no company called ScotRail exists. That name is a flag of convenience...

government and developed a strong reputation for transferring these companies from the public to the private sector in the UK and overseas".

In other words, National Express built up its multinational empire, not by taking risks, creating new markets and expanding employment, but by scavenging around for cut price deals and snapping up public bus and rail services.

During the seven years that National Express ran ScotRail, Scottish taxpayers handed over £1.5 billion to the company.

On top of that, National Express received lavish handouts from the UK exchequer for its other train operations in England, including Silverlink, Great

Northern, Central Trains, C2C, Midland Mainline and the Gatwick Express.

Yet last year, the company paid a total tax bill of just £9.2 million. No wonder company shares have shot up from £1.65 to £9.35 in just over a decade.

The £1.5 billion cost of subsidising the shareholders of National Express could have paid for the transformation of Scotland's railway system, including the reopening of old railway lines in the Highlands and Borders, and the construction of a new Central Scotland Rapid Transport Network with 50 new stations, 500 miles of track and 360 miles of upgraded lines.

Instead, we poured money into ScotRail and services deteriorated almost visibly by the day.

When National Express took over the ScotRail franchise in 1997, 94 per cent of trains arrived in time. By the end of

“Most customers would rather services were a little less frequent, or took longer...”

FIRSTGROUP SPOKESMAN

their franchise, that figure had slumped to 85.2 per cent.

A swift examination of the biographies of the board of directors of National Express illustrates why the Scottish railway system is today a shambles.

The chairman of the board made his fortune selling car phones. Only two out of nine directors have any previous experience of transport.

The rest have a background in banking, bookmaking, retail, oil and insurance. They know how to extract money from governments - but they don't know how to run trains.

From October 2004, the ScotRail franchise was transferred to Aberdeen-based First Group.

But this is no cuddly local business. First Group is a multinational corporation which made £190 million profit last year.

The company already controls one in five bus services in the UK and boasts of its transport empire in North America, which stretches from Canada to California and from Florida to Alaska.

First Group already operates four train companies in England - and has not exactly set the tracks on fire with its dynamism and competence.

Until recently, the company held the franchise for the Greater Manchester area - and managed to acquire an unfortunate reputation for unreliability.

For example, in late summer 2004, the company decided to launch a pre-emptive strike against autumn leaves on the line.

The cunning plan involved slashing services - by more than half on some routes.

And just in case the leaves decided to bide their time before jumping onto the line, the company proposed to continue its reduced timetable right into the depths of winter.

In a scintillating display of logic, a spokesman for First said:

“Most customers would rather services were a little less frequent, or took longer, if they were actually more reliable and punctual.”

The local travelling public were not impressed. One councillor said: “The excuse about leaves on the line is a load of tripe. For one thing, leaf-fall season only lasts a few weeks, but the new timetable will carry on long after that.”

First Group also has an appalling industrial relations record on its buses and trains. In 2002, it lost £1.5 million as result of strikes provoked by the company's unreasonable behaviour - including forcing train drivers to pick up litter at stations.

In the summer of 2004, 800 bus drivers employed by First Buses in Yorkshire joined a bitter strike over pay and working hours.

Drivers were fighting for a maximum working week of 40 hours and a maximum working day of eight and a half hours - not exactly an outrageous request from workers who are responsible for the safety of thousands of passengers each day.

In 2004, First also tried to axe hundreds of bus routes in rural Cornwall and sack over 100 drivers. At the time a company spokesperson explained: “Sadly we now find ourselves in a situation where many of our bus services are losing money... we simply cannot afford to let that situation continue.”

In other parts of England, First Group have effectively blackmailed local councils by refusing to run loss-making routes until the councils guaranteed big cash handouts.

The last seven years of ScotRail may have been a fiasco. But for the travelling public, and for those who work in the

industry, swapping National Express for First Group will be like swapping Vito Corleone for Michael Corleone.

When bidding for the ScotRail franchise, First Group emphasised its ability to create a more integrated system. As

“For the travelling public, and for those who work in the industry, swapping National Express for FirstGroup will be like swapping Vito Corleone for Michael Corleone.”

one of Scotland's biggest bus operators, the company insisted that with control of ScotRail, they could move towards combined bus and rail tickets.

There's no doubt that it does make sense for buses and trains to be integrated, with linked timetables and a system that would allow passengers to travel to their final destination with a single combined ticket.

Right now, First Group runs a huge chunk of Scotland's bus routes.

In the city of Glasgow, they dominate the bus lanes. With the ScotRail franchise, they will also run 95 per cent of Scotland's train services.

Will that mean greater integration, as the company claims? Perhaps, on routes where there are lucrative profits to be piled up, there will be little bit more co-ordination of bus and rail.

But even that potential benefit is heavily

outweighed by the dangers involved in allowing a single company to control most of Scotland's public transport.

The Competition Commission has already expressed concern over the future of bus and rail under First Group.

"We consider it would be profitable for FirstGroup to switch bus passengers from bus to rail by increasing fares and/or re-routing services and/or reconfiguring routes," said the commission months before the contract was awarded.

After the contract was allocated, the publicly owned Lothian Buses, - which in the past has accused First Buses of "predatory practices" - also sounded the alarm bells.

"As one of the small, local companies, it's obviously a concern that one business has 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the public transportation market - it makes us even more vulnerable," the chief executive of Lothian Buses, Neil Renilson told the *Sunday Herald* (13 June 2004).

Although there have since been some vague assurances by First Group that it will not slash routes or raise fares in order to force bus passengers onto the trains, there are no legal mechanisms to enforce these promises.

There is desperate need for a national integrated transport system in Scotland, combining rail, bus, ferry and internal air routes.

But a harmoniously co-ordinated public transport system will never be built by the private sector, whose essential driving force always has been, and always will be, greed.

To be fair, FirstGroup has promised £40 million of investment in return for the £210 million subsidy they will receive in their first twelve months from the Scottish Executive.

But if you're a commuter, don't be expecting cuts in fares, more frequent services or more carriages to ease congestion in the rush hour.

Much of that money instead will be spent on creating a new corporate image for ScotRail, with brand new company logos on display everywhere - just in case we needed any reminding that we're about to board the privatisation merry-go-round.

There is a biblical saying that "the last shall be first and the first shall be last".

The way the public mood is swinging, First may well be the last private rail company ever to operate in Scotland.

SHUNTED TO THE SIDINGS

On the south eastern edge of Edinburgh, a new park and ride station was opened a few years ago by the then Scottish Transport Minister Iain Gray.

Newcraighall Station takes its name from the adjacent former mining village. The station is a few hundred yards from the A1 and half a mile from Britain's biggest outdoor shopping mall.

The train journey from Newcraighall to Waverley Station in the heart of

record prices, the cost of petrol for an average car, including urban and rural roads, works out at around 10 pence per mile.

Pensioners, who make up most of the Newcraighall population, cannot afford to travel by train because there are no concessionary train fares available in the Lothians. Yet for most of the day, the trains run three quarters empty.

For a family of two adults and two children, the total cost of a short return journey from Newcraighall into the city centre works out at over a tenner.

Even if Edinburgh city centre congestion charges had been introduced, many motorists would still have found it cheaper to travel into town by car from the suburbs.

Train fares in Scotland and across the UK are ridiculously expensive.

The cheapest return train ticket from Glasgow to Aberdeen, travelling off peak, is £48.50.

This works out at 16 pence per mile. The same journey in a Renault Clio car, according to whatprice.co.uk, would cost 8.1 pence per mile in petrol.

That means that four adults sharing petrol costs would find it eight times

"Four adults sharing petrol costs would find it eight times more expensive to travel from Glasgow to Aberdeen by train than by car."

Edinburgh takes just 10 minutes. That's unless there's a cancellation - and there are frequent cancellations on this short suburban line.

Then there's the exorbitant price of the short journey into the city centre. The price of a single ticket is £1.80 - which works out at around 35 pence per mile. In contrast, even at today's

more expensive to travel from Glasgow to Aberdeen by train than by car.

Under privatisation, Scotland's rail system has been transported back into a bygone era. The journey on the flagship Glasgow to Edinburgh route now takes longer than it did 20 years ago. And that's when there are no delays.

“Overcrowding on trains at peak times is reminiscent of Hampden Park in the old days when huge crowds would stand shoulder to shoulder on jam-packed terraces.”

Over the years, ScotRail has devised a whole catalogue of excuses to explain away disruption of services: leaves on the line, snow on the line, cattle on the line, broken down trains, signal faults, track faults.

The overcrowding at peak times is reminiscent of Hampden Park in the old days when huge crowds would stand shoulder to shoulder on jam-packed terraces.

Because of the pressures facing underpaid, overworked, privatised cleaning staff, the trains themselves are generally filthy, with grimy windows and blocked toilets.

Compared to the state-owned railway systems across the continent of Europe, Britain has a Third World rail system. The contrast with Switzerland, for

example - reputed to have the best railway system in the world - is startling. Switzerland is a small country. Although its population is over 7 million, it is a much more compact country, concentrated into 4500 square kilometres, compared with Scotland's 7800 square kilometres.

Yet Switzerland has double the length of rail track and more than double the number of railway stations.

ScotRail boasts that it runs 2000 passenger trains a day. One Swiss station, Zurich, has 1400 trains a day leaving its platforms.

Each year, 62 million passengers travel from Scottish stations. Over 250 million passengers travel on the Swiss rail system.

Across the UK, less than one third of the rail network is electrified. In Switzerland over 99 per cent of railways are electrified.

The publicly-owned Swiss rail corporation also runs steam trains in the mountains as well as funicular railways and cable cars.

Across the country, even in the smallest villages, railway stations are the focal points of the community with cafes, restaurants and shops attached.

The country has the densest public transport network in the world, with 70 per cent of the population living within a five minute walk of public transport, and 97.5 per cent living less than one kilometre from a railway or bus station.

In the main cities of Zurich, Geneva and Basel, the vast network of suburban railways carry trains to and from the city

centres every 15 minutes. Switzerland, like most other European countries, understands the necessity of a cheap, efficient rail network.

The state-owned rail corporation, SBB, employs 33,000 workers - ten times more than are employed by ScotRail.

Even by the most elastic definition of the word, Switzerland could never be described as a socialist country. Most of the economy is privately owned.

Even on the railways, there are some minor private operators. But not even the most right wing politician would dare to propose the privatisation of the jewel in Switzerland's crown, the state-owned railway corporation, SBB.

Elsewhere in Europe, public transport generally, and the rail industry particularly, is light years in advance of the UK.

In France, for example, fares are 60 per cent cheaper than in Britain.

As a result, people in France travel by rail twice as frequently as people in the UK.

The quality of rail travel in France is also in a different league from the UK, with sophisticated rolling stock including double-decker trains on busy commuter routes and the acclaimed TGV high speed train routes.

These were first introduced in 1981, with the opening of the high speed Paris to Lyons route.

Now they have been extended across France, and even across national borders into Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, the UK and Italy.

Hundreds of kilometres of new extensions and new lines are currently under construction. Domestic air traffic in France has been decimated by the

competition from rail. In Britain, it is the other way around. Yet aeroplanes are by far the most environmentally damaging of all forms of transport.

Even though they are capable of travelling at up to 186 miles an hour, French trains are far safer than their creaking counterparts in Britain.

All are fitted with automatic train protection systems, which automatically apply the brakes when a signal detects that a train is approaching dangerously.

The impressive French railway system is entirely publicly owned, as is most of the European rail network.

Of the world's most developed countries, only in the UK, Japan and New Zealand is rail mainly in the hands of private corporations. And in New Zealand, so disastrous has the privatisation been that the government has now begun to renationalise the industry.



EUROPE: public transport in general, and rail in particular, is light years ahead of the UK

Elsewhere, there are some pockets of rail privatisation, mainly in Latin America. These privatisations were virtually imposed in the 1990s by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as part of the economic “restructuring” of the economies which were heavily in debt.

Privatisation of the rail industry and other utilities was one of the conditions by the international bankers in return for rescheduling of debt.

The result, invariably, was catastrophic. In Mexico, within one year, passenger numbers on the trains fell by 80 per cent.

In Brazil, over a four year period, passenger numbers were slashed by more than half. Over three quarters of the workforce was axed.

In Argentina, even the World Bank itself was forced to concede that the rail privatisation experiment had run into the buffers: "The most immediate and painful change for the system as a whole was the reduction in employment from 92,000 workers to about 17,000 in 1998.

"Politically, this is still proving to be a tough sell mainly because the fiscal goals have not really been achieved as expected.

"In spite of the privatisation and reduction of the required public expenditures in the sector, the government is still spending US \$400 million a year in subsidies, in addition to a commitment to pay for US\$6 billion in investment over the next 20 years."

When the World Bank issues such a downbeat assessment of privatisation, the Argentinean railways must be in one hell of a mess.

Maybe even in as much of a mess as the privatised railway system over here.

Private rail companies never have been and never will be charities dedicated to serving the public.

They are businesses dedicated to serving their shareholders.

And while the shareholders run our railways, we will be left in the sidings while continental Europe continues to speed forward into the 21st century.

Back in 1993 the Shadow Transport Minister, John Prescott - now Deputy Prime Minister - was unequivocal in his pledge to reverse rail privatisation.

He told the Labour Party conference: "Let me make it crystal clear that any privatisation that does take place will on the arrival of a Labour government be quickly and effectively dealt with, with the full support of the community, and be returned to public ownership."



HATFIELD: Balfour Beatty was charged with corporate manslaughter after the derailment in 2000

But that was in opposition.

In power, after opposing every single Tory privatisation, Labour suddenly decided that Thatcher and Major had been right all along.

They scoured around looking for assets that even the Tories had not

dared to sell. Air traffic control, for example. This was a step too far even for the House of Lords.

But not for New Labour, which faced down all opposition to sell control of the airways to the highest bidder.

The London Underground was another public asset partly privatised by Labour. The result has been a fiasco.

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee reported, in March

2005, that already, part-privatisation of the London Tube had cost the UK taxpayer almost £1 billion.

Even our schools and hospitals are no longer sacred. In Scotland, they are being sold off to bankers and speculators who will then charge the Government and local councils colossal sums of money to lease these facilities back. The Tory

name for it was PFI. New Labour call it PPP - which, for big business, stands for 'Profit, Profit, Profit'. But not even New Labour could resist the tide of public opinion following a series of horrific tragedies caused by the negligence and incompetence of the profiteers.

Before privatisation, rail unions had warned that putting private profiteers in charge of public safety would be as sensible as handing over control of the blood transfusion service to Count Dracula.

The Health and Safety Executive in 1993 had expressed concern that “companies with little or no previous experience of operating on the railway and managers with little experience of railway safety issues will enter the railway industry”.

Back in the nineteenth century, Karl Marx wrote of the devastating carnage on the British railways, then run by capitalist tycoons.

In Volume One of *Capital*, he describes how “in London three railwaymen - a guard, an engine driver and a signal man - are up before a coroner’s jury...

“A tremendous railway accident has dispatched hundreds of passengers into the next world.

“The negligence of the railway workers is the cause of the misfortune.

“They declare with one voice before the jury that ten or twelve years before, their labour lasted only eight hours a day.

“During the last five or six years, they say, it has been screwed up to 14, 18, 20 hours, and when the pressure of holiday travellers is especially severe when excursion trains are put on, their labour often lasts for 40 or 50 hours without a break.

“They are ordinary men, not Cyclops. At a certain point, their labour power ran out. Torpor seized them.

“Their brains stopped thinking, their eyes stopped seeing.

“The thoroughly ‘respectable British

Juryman’ replied with a verdict that sent them to the Assizes on a charge of manslaughter; in a mild rider the jury expressed the pious hope that the capitalist railway magnates would in future be more extravagant in the necessary number of ‘labour powers’ and more ‘abstemious’, more ‘self-denying’, more ‘thrifty’ in the extortion of paid labour power.”

More than a century later, a new generation of capitalist tycoons were washing the blood from their hands.

Like their 19th century corporate ancestors, they too received a gentle slap on the wrists from the courts.

If a motorist causes a death through reckless or careless driving, for example by falling asleep at the wheel, they are likely to receive a jail sentence.

The recommended sentence for causing death by dangerous driving, without any aggravating factors such as alcohol or drugs, is a twelve to eighteen month jail sentence. The offence also carries an obligatory two year driving ban.

But there is one law for people and another for profiteers.

After causing multiple deaths on the railways through negligence, private companies can expect little more than a stern ticking off.

If they’re unlucky they might get a paltry fine. Then they’re back at work on the railroads the next morning, doing what they do best: making money.

After the Potters Bar rail crash, when seven people were killed following a derailment, the maintenance company Jarvis rushed to pin the blame on vandals.

At a press conference, the company’s chief executive, Kevin Hyde, told reporters that there had been vandalism

sabotage on the line: “three acts of commission - three things done deliberately.” The company even produced photographic “evidence” to show that a set of damaged points had been tampered with.

The company were later forced to issue a grovelling apology.

The real cause of the crash was detailed in a report by the Health and Safety Executive in 2004.

Points had been poorly maintained. Securing nuts were absent.

“Rail unions warned that putting profiteers in charge of railways was like handing over control of the Blood Transfusion Service to Count Dracula.”

There had been no guidance or instructions for setting up, inspecting or maintaining points. There was insufficient maintenance.

Six months after the Potters Bar crash, a coal train is derailed in South Yorkshire when Jarvis engineers divert the train onto a stretch of line with a missing track.

Judge Robert Moore, who presided over the inquiry, said that only good fortune prevented a disaster.

He pointed out: “As every child with a train set knows, where there is no track there will be a crash.”

Another six months later, in the

summer of 2003, Jarvis are involved in upgrading work on the West Coast Main Line. An investigation discovers 23 different locations where the work is negligent. A later audit reveals that Jarvis’s maintenance records have been falsified.

A few months later in November 2003, another derailment, this time at King’s Cross. Fortunately the train is travelling slowly so no-one is killed. Once again, negligence by Jarvis is the cause of the accident.

So what happened to the culprits?

Nothing. No jail sentences handed out to the Jarvis directors for their reckless contempt for people’s lives. Not even a fine. Under public pressure, the company did hand back its maintenance contract on the rail track.

But, incredibly, it is still involved in track renewal.

And what about Dr Jekyll, or rather Mr Hyde, the chief executive of Jarvis who blamed vandals for the Potters Bar disaster?

Along with the other five directors at the time of Potters Bar, he’s just shared an £807,000 bonus for services to the company during the year the crash took place.

Unfortunately, Jarvis is not the only company operating in the railway industry which has repeatedly displayed a cavalier attitude towards public safety.

In October 2000, Michael Mungovan turned up for a nightshift on a stretch of track in south west London.

Michael was a student who had taken the job with Balfour Beatty to help him get through university.

It was his third night at work.

He was ordered onto live rails in the

dark without a torch or proper training. Michael was killed instantly when he was hit by a 50mph train.

After a four year battle, the case finally came to court in September 2004, Judge Stephen Kramer said that Michael's "untimely and tragic death resulted from the unsafe systems of work operated by Balfour Beatty and McGinley Recruitment Services."

The judge told the Old Bailey that Balfour Beatty's record was "not good in this sphere". He fined the company £150,000, plus £18,144 costs.

If you say it fast enough, £168,000 might sound like a lot of money.

But for Balfour Beatty, it works out at half a day's profit.

It's the equivalent of a worker on the average wage being convicted of causing death by dangerous driving - and being fined £40.

When Judge Kramer described Balfour Beatty's safety record as "not good", he wasn't exaggerating.

Balfour Beatty was charged with corporate manslaughter after the Hatfield derailment in 2000 which killed four people. Several carriages had come off the tracks because of a broken rail, which Balfour Beatty and Railtrack had failed to fix.

But the trial collapsed in September 2004, because the prosecutors were unable to prove that the company directors had "consented or connived" in the failure to mend the track.

As *Guardian* columnist, George Monbiot, pointed out:

"A board can avoid prosecution by demonstrating that it hadn't the faintest idea what its company was doing.

"Neglect can thus be used as a

defence against the charge of neglect." (*The Guardian*, 5 October 2004)

Meanwhile Balfour Beatty continues to make money hand over fist from government contracts. Its vast portfolio of PFI and PPP projects include in Scotland the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, the Strathclyde Police HQ, the St Andrew's Square Bus Station in Edinburgh and the National Swimming Academy in Stirling.

And despite its past failures to ensure the safety of the public and its own workforce, Balfour Beatty is one of the main companies involved in track renewal in Scotland.

Companies like Jarvis and Balfour Beatty were originally brought into the rail industry as contractors for the late and unlamented Railtrack.

After seven deadly years, Railtrack had become a byword for reckless incompetence.

Even New Labour, running years behind public opinion, were finally forced to take action and liquidate the disgraced company.

It was perhaps too much to expect that they would actually renationalise Railtrack.

It might have been the logical step to take - but New Labour has always been driven by ideology rather than logic.

And at the heart of New Labour ideology is pathological fear and loathing of the public sector.

So instead, they set up Network Rail - a curious hybrid described by the government as "a private company without shareholders".

The government has no control over the new company - presumably so that the government can wash its hands of

any blame whenever anything goes wrong.

The New Economics Foundation - a think tank generally supportive of "not-for-profit" organisations - is scathing of the structures over Network Rail.

The foundation criticises what it calls "a closed loop of accountability - the directors are accountable to members who are effectively chosen by directors."

The end of Railtrack has not signalled the end of death on the rail track.

In February 2004, four railworkers were killed on the West Coast Main Liner in Cumbria when a runaway wagon careered four miles along the track.

It had not been properly secured.

Then in September, a maintenance truck killed two railworkers employed by the track renewal contractor, VGC.

A week later, on the fifth anniversary of the Paddington disaster, the Paddington Survivors Group reported that there had been 164 near misses on the railway between August 2003 and August 2004.

Despite the incompetence of the private profiteers, rail travel remains a far safer form of transport than car travel.

But the sheer scale of rail travel means that a single error of judgement or oversight can cause carnage.

Following the Ladbroke disaster, Lord Cullen insisted that rail safety should be

truly independent and free from economic pressures.

Yet in its new Railways Bill the government has proposed transferring rail safety out of the hands of the independent Health and Safety Executive.

Safety regulation will instead be transferred to the Office of the Rail Regulator - the body which already acts as the financial and performance watchdog of the industry.

Rail unions and safety organisations have rightly lambasted this move and warned there is a serious risk that safety could be compromised if it becomes tangled up with economics.

By all means leave accountants in charge of the balance sheets.

But rail safety should be thoroughly regulated by an organisation whose sole concern is to protect the lives of railworkers and passengers.

Moreover, the big decisions about safety should be taken with the full involvement of the real experts - the train drivers, the signal technicians, the guards, the track workers, the station masters.

And these workers should not be general dogsbodies whose main role is to maximise profits for faraway shareholders, but respected and well-paid public servants, employed by the people to serve the people.

GETTING SCOTLAND BACK ON TRACK

On rail ownership, there is a gaping gulf between the politicians and the public.

In 2001, a Scotland-wide System 3 poll published in *The Herald* newspaper found that 64 per cent of people wanted renationalisation of the rail network.

Three years later, an identical poll was conducted by System 3. This time, the figure had risen to 67 per cent.

Even more strikingly, the proportion of people opposed to privatisation had plummeted from 20 per cent to just 13 per cent.

“Richard Branson of Virgin Trains was knighted by New Labour and is a close adviser to Tony Blair.”

For most ordinary people the case for public ownership is open and shut.

But not for the politicians, especially of the New Labour brand.

When delegates at the 2004 Labour conference backed a resolution calling for “an integrated, accountable and publicly owned railway,” government

ministers rushed out press releases dismissing the vote.

Gordon Brown claimed that rail public ownership would cost £22 billion. “If we had this money, we would use it to build schools and hospitals”, he insisted.

Where this £22 billion figure comes from, no-one seems to know. The figure was immediately disputed by the rail unions, who suggested the Chancellor had got his sums just slightly wrong - by exactly £22 billion!

By bringing back into the public sector the rail franchises as they expire, the train operating companies could be taken into public ownership at zero cost.

Indeed, by stemming the flow of cash into the bank accounts of private shareholders, the Chancellor could actually save hundreds of millions of pounds more.

It’s not for financial reasons that New Labour opposes public

ownership.

For all his tight-fisted notoriety, Gordon Brown is capable of displaying touching generosity on occasion.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq, he was asked how much he would be prepared to spend on the war. “As much as it takes,” was his carefree reply.

The Iron Chancellor appears to be made of plasticine when he is dealing with the rich.

Prem Sikka of the Accountancy Department of the University of Exeter has shown that, every year, wealthy tax dodgers syphon £85 billion from the UK exchequer. But the Chancellor prefers not to go there.

New Labour’s passionate, born-again zeal for private ownership can be best understood by perusing the list of company donations to the party over the years. The list is as long as a George Bush pause.

And lo and behold, among the hundreds of companies that have donated cash to New Labour, we find Prism Rail Group, which was later taken over by National Express; Connex Rail, owned by French multinational Vivendi; Freightliners Ltd; and the now defunct Railtrack.

Then there are the personal links between private rail bosses and New Labour politicians.

Richard Branson, for example, whose commercial empire includes Virgin Trains, was knighted by New Labour and is a close adviser to Tony Blair.

With New Labour, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats all in the pockets of big business, the private rail shareholders can sleep soundly.

In Scotland the balance of forces is different.

There are six Scottish Socialist MSPs, seven Greens, and five independents; all sympathetic to public ownership of rail.

Even the SNP, Scotland’s main opposition party, has in the past called for the public ownership of rail services.

Up until now, it has not been legally possible for the Scottish Parliament to bring the rail industry north of the border into public ownership.

But under the Railways Bill, sweeping new powers have been transferred to the Scottish Executive. These were spelled out in the 2004 White Paper, *The Future of Rail* which states that “planning, specifying, letting (including signing), managing and financing the contract for services operating under the existing Scottish passenger rail franchise and any other Scotland-specific franchise will in future fall to the Scottish Executive.”

This means that the Scottish Parliament will have the legal power to transfer the franchise for ScotRail to a new publicly-owned rail company.



BRANSON: rail boss in bed with New Labour

When the ScotRail franchise was awarded to First in June 2004, neither the Scottish Executive nor the Scottish Parliament had the legal power to take rail services into public ownership.

That option was closed.

But now the rules are about to change. Under the new rules, it will be entirely legitimate, legally and politically, for the Scottish Executive to cancel the

franchise forthwith and bring all ScotRail staff and assets into to the public sector.

There is already a precedent elsewhere in the UK for this action. In the south east corner of England, three years before the franchise was due to expire, South Eastern Trains were brought back into the public sector at the end of 2003.

The private rail operator, Connex, had been stripped of its franchise after failing to meet tough financial targets set by the Strategic Rail Authority.

The company did not receive a penny compensation.

Naturally, First Group would object to losing the franchise. Its directors would howl from the rooftops that the company had been treated unfairly.

It would probably even get the support of some politicians and newspaper editors in its quest for justice.

But most reasonable people would immediately spot the irony.

“Any move towards public ownership should be accompanied by a radical new structure for the industry.”

There is an old proverb that says “those who live by the sword should be prepared to die by the sword”.

First Group itself made its millions by ruthlessly driving its minnow competitors off the road after bus deregulation.

The directors of the company know full well that the battle for control of

our roads and railways isn't a gentle game of cricket on the village green.

It's a cut-throat, no-holds-barred war without bullets. And in fighting that war, the Scottish government has to put the interests of the public first and the sensibilities of private shareholders last.

Ultimately, the Scottish government holds the ace card in any dispute over the franchise. In fact, it holds almost two billion ace cards, because that's how much the Scottish taxpayer is due to hand over to First Group in subsidies over the duration of its franchise.

Technically, the granting of licenses to railway operators will still have to be approved by UK ministers. Despite the transfer of powers to Holyrood, Westminster could try to block any move to public ownership by refusing to grant any new publicly-owned rail company a license to operate.

But Westminster would pay a heavy political price for such blatant obstructionism.

It would be a political miscalculation to rival the Poll Tax.

Any Scottish government that set out to restore rail back to the public sector, where it belongs, would be guaranteed massive public backing on both sides of the border.

Any move towards bringing the Scottish franchise back into the public sector could and should be accompanied by a radical new structure for the industry. The fiasco of rail privatisation should not arouse nostalgia for the good old days of British Rail. Certainly things were better then they are today.

But the centralised, monolithic and bureaucratic structure of BR was no way to run a railroad, or any other industry for that matter.

The boards of the old nationalised industries were cumbersome and top heavy. They were also easily manipulated by central government for political ends.

The bitter year-long miners' strike of 1984-1985 was not fought against a private company, but against a nationalised coal board run by an autocratic axe-man handpicked by the Tory government of the day.

Back in the 1960s, when 5000 miles of rail track were torn up as a result of the infamous Beeching cuts, the bosses of British Rail played a despicable role.

They used every accountancy trick in the book to demonstrate the unviability of routes.

Like Thatcher's British Coal henchman, Ian McGregor, the rail chieftains of the 1960s and 1970s were political puppets whose main mission in life was to balance the books.

Placating government ministers was always more important than serving the public.

A genuinely democratic rail industry in Scotland can never be built by private owners.

But neither can the railways be the property of central government, to be managed from on high by a clique of anointed bureaucrats.

The railway workforce, the rail users, central and local government - all should be involved in planning and delivering rail services.

An overall board of trustees could be established to oversee a new socially-owned Scottish rail corporation.

The board might include, for example, ten representatives of local and central government; ten representatives of the various rail unions; and ten others representing passengers, freight users and environmental organisations.



ON TRACK: rail workers and users should be involved in planning services

The Scottish Parliament should also fight for this new public corporation to have full control over the rail track.

If the train services are to be run democratically by a new publicly-owned Scottish rail company, it would make no sense to leave the rail track under the control of Network Rail. Instead, the new company should take over the Scottish functions of the unaccountable directors of Network Rail.

This in turn would allow the creation of a fully integrated and democratically-run rail system from Berwick and Gretna Green to Thurso and Kyle of Lochalsh.

In itself, a publicly-owned and democratically-run rail system in Scotland

would be a giant step forward from the chaos of privatisation. Management would be more accountable to the general public. Instead of being gobbled up by distant shareholders, any future surpluses would be used to improve services and cut fares.

But public ownership would only be a start. To even begin to raise standards to the levels of continental Europe, the Scottish rail network needs investment on a scale which would at least match the resources now devoured by road transport.

In 2002-2003, identifiable road spending in Scotland by national and local government in Scotland - including road building, road maintenance, road

Even after decades of cutting and slashing, the railways remain at the heart of our economy.

Yet we spend a pittance on our railways. Of the total wealth produced in Scotland (GDP), less than 0.3 per cent is invested in rail services. In other words, for every £300 of wealth created in this country, less than £1 is spent on our rail system. Under London-rule we will continue to be lumbered for decades to come with a ramshackle, Third World railway system.

Hamstrung by a fixed budget from Westminster, the Scottish Parliament can shuffle around some of its resources.

But it is powerless to generate the large-scale investment our railways need.

There may be some light at the end of tunnel. If pro-independence parties win a majority in the next Scottish election - and that is a possibility - the door could then be thrown open for full economic and political independence for Scotland.

Independence in itself won't solve any of Scotland's problems.

But it would provide the nation with the freedom to make its own decisions on taxation, public ownership and allocation of resources.

And with a strong Red-Green presence within a future independent Scottish Parliament, the pressure would immediately build for a revolutionary shift from road to rail, and from private to public transport.

In the meantime, there are ways of generating public funding for new rail

projects that lie within the scope of the existing Scottish Parliament.

A land valuation tax, for example could be targeted on property speculators and landowners and be ring-fenced for public transport projects.

This would involve a special tax on land and property values above a certain level - for example, £500,000.

As the value of their land and property rose, these wealthy land and property owners would be required to pay a fixed percentage of their unearned wealth in taxation.

If the tax was set at the same level as top rate income tax (ie 40 per cent) a property speculator whose land increased in value by £1 million in a year would be liable to pay £400,000 in tax.

Potentially this could pay for whole raft of new public transport projects.

In his paper, *Transport Without Subsidies*, Dave Wetzel, the vice-chair of transport for London, describes how a London property developer, Don Riley, estimated the impact on property prices of the new Jubilee Line on the London Underground.

Riley admits that, while construction workers were risking their lives in dark and dangerous tunnels, his own wealth was increasing by the hour even as he slept.

By the time the extension was completed, property values within a half mile radius of the new stations had risen by £13 billion.

Yet the total cost of constructing the line was just £3.5 billion. Riley himself argues that he should have been forced

to stump up some of his this wealth, which was generated by the construction of the railway. Instead, the taxpayer footed the bill, and the construction workers sweated blood, while the property speculators grew richer.

Central London is an extreme example of crazy property values. But the same principles apply in Scotland.

In 2004, Edinburgh City Council scuppered a plan to reopen a 12-mile stretch of the South Suburban railway which was closed to passenger traffic in 1962. The line runs in a loop from Abbeyhill to Morningside to Slateford through some of the most congested parts of the city.

The project was rejected on the grounds of the £15 million short-term capital cost.

Yet the project could be at least part-funded by taxing rising land values on sites adjacent to the closed stations.

Even within the devolution straitjacket, Scotland could begin to move forward towards a 21st century rail system.

But that will require the courage to confront the coalition of vested interests that will act as a roadblock to progress. These include the private rail companies; the New Labour government in Westminster; the road haulage industry; the oil tycoons; the PFI pirates with their lucrative road contracts; the landowners and property speculators who grow silently richer from hidden public subsidies.

It's a battle that we can no longer avoid or postpone.

The stakes are too high.

“Scottish independence would provide the nation with the freedom to make its own decisions on taxation, public ownership and allocation of resources.”

lighting and traffic management - totalled over £800 million.

In the same year, Scotland's railways received barely a quarter of that sum.

In the past, whenever there has been industrial action by train drivers, guards or signal staff, panic sweeps the nation. Businesses are disrupted.

Roads are gridlocked. Politicians and newspapers denounce the striking workers for the chaos they are supposed to have caused.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Up until the 1960s, Scotland was criss-crossed with a dense railway network, with stations and halts in almost every accessible village and suburb.

These days are gone. Society has changed.

A 21st century rail system would bear little resemblance to the old British Rail in its heyday of coal and steam.

Yet other changes have taken place in society which will force us to create a new Golden Age of rail.

When Tory and Labour governments of the 1960s slashed and burned Britain's rail system, car culture was in the ascendancy.

The decade of the sixties saw car ownership double across the UK.

New trunk roads and motorways were bulldozed through central Scotland, turning parts of inner-city Glasgow in particular into concrete wastelands.

The car industry was thriving, becoming the biggest employer in the Midlands. Even Scotland opened its own car factory at Linwood. In contrast, rail travel was generally viewed as an antique relic of a bygone age.

Just as trains had replaced stagecoaches in the nineteenth century, cars and lorries would vanquish trains in the late 20th century.

When Beeching announced his massacre of Britain's rail network in 1963, his report, *The Reshaping of British Railways*, was warmly welcomed by most of the media as an exciting leap into the future.

Especially enthusiastic was the left-of-centre press, including newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Observer*.

There were many progressive advances during the 1960s and 1970s. But there were also dreadful social crimes committed, which can be seen more clearly now with the benefit of hindsight.

The proliferation of high-rise flats across the Glasgow skyline, for example, appeared at the time to be a modern solution to the problem of slum housing.

Equally disastrous, in retrospect, was the decision to starve the rail network down to a skeleton.

During the 1960s, no-one had heard of the term 'global warming'. No-one knew the extent of the damage caused by carbon dioxide emissions. No-one realised that each gleaming new car running off the production line was an environmental timebomb.

In cities like Glasgow, respiratory illness was rampant even then.

But that was caused by factory and household chimneys belching smoke into the atmosphere.

No-one bargained for the fact that the new Hillman Imps and Austin Rovers would poison the atmosphere with even more deadly chemicals than the old industrial chimney stacks.

Nor did anyone anticipate the congestion crisis that would eventually engulf our cities, with high-powered cars crawling along our urban roads at the speed of 18th century stagecoaches. Or the vast acreages of land that would have to be colonised for car parking.

Ironically, our economically divided society has acted as a safeguard, preventing the congestion and pollution crisis from turning into a full-scale calamity.



FUMING: global warming is accelerating alarmingly, largely due to consumption of fossil fuels

In areas like Glasgow's Easterhouse housing scheme, just one in five of the population have access to a car.

Globally, the paradox is even more stark. Global warming is accelerating at an alarming rate, largely driven by the gargantuan consumption of fossil fuels by the hundreds of millions of cars and

lorries on our roads. Yet just 15 per cent of the world's population own 85 per cent of the world's cars.

Socialists have to face up to the dilemma that redistribution of wealth would press the fast forward button on the global warming crisis - unless radical action is taken nationally and globally to get traffic off the roads.

People in the advanced world will always own cars - but one of the biggest challenges society faces across the advanced world over the next decade is how to slash car use.

Central to the fight to save the planet will be a new global rail revolution.

In Britain, surveys have shown that

40 per cent of car drivers would switch to rail, while only 3 per cent would switch to buses.

The advantages of a rail system which is run efficiently include comfort, speed and smoothness.

With new wireless technology, people can even use laptops and communicate by email while travelling by train.

Buses, in contrast, can be frustratingly slow.

Especially since the cost-cutting measure introduced some years ago to get rid of conductors, buses can spend up to half their journey time

standing still at bus stops.

During rush hours, they are frequently held back by car congestion.

It is not just passenger transport that needs to be shifted en masse from road to rail. In the 1950s, 50 per cent of freight shifted in the UK was moved by rail. By the late 1990s that figure had

slumped to just 5 per cent. Even worse, the proportion of road freight carried by juggernauts - lorries over 25 tonnes - rose sharply during the 1990s to reach 75 per cent of all road freight by 1998.

The hidden cost to the public of this shift, first from rail to road, then from standard HGV to juggernaut, is incalculable.

A juggernaut inflicts 50,000 times the road damage caused by car. And the sheer scale of these steel monsters means that they are capable of carnage.

Freight juggernauts are also a grossly inefficient way of shifting goods.

Every night, lorry loads of shellfish leave West Highland ports such as Mallaig and Oban bound for the fishmarkets of Paris Milan and Madrid. The following day, they return home empty.

Many major businesses have a single supply centre in the whole of Europe.

Every day, convoys of juggernauts travel thousands of miles back to base to reload. It is estimated that at any given time, half the lorries on our roads are carrying nothing heavier than fresh air.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Scotland played a pioneering role in developing transport. The city of Glasgow created a tram system that later became a template for hundreds of other cities across Europe and America.

In the first decades of the 21st century, Scotland could once again be at the cutting edge. And at the centre of the coming transport revolution has to be the rebuilding of our rail network.

That doesn't mean reopening every line or station that was closed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Demographic patterns have changed, and a new rail network has to be geared

towards 21st century life. Yet in an interesting twist, the population trends of the 1960s and 1970s - which were used to justify rail closures - have begun to shift into reverse gear.

At that time of the Beeching report, rural areas such as the Highlands and the Borders were becoming steadily depopulated.

People were gravitating more and more towards the large urban centres.

But now these urban centres are under strain. Population pressures in cities like Edinburgh and Aberdeen have led to housing shortages and runaway property prices.

As a result, many people of working age are moving out to the suburbs and the semi-rural hinterlands. Districts like West Lothian, Midlothian and rural Aberdeenshire are experiencing a population boom.

Edinburgh's commuter belt now stretches as far south as the Borders as far north as Perthshire.

The result is that some rural and suburban roads are feeling the strain of congestion.

And in a further twist, because these outlying commuters are forced to drive to work, the city centres become more and more congested, with parking spaces at a premium.

That demographic change is also being driven by technology.

The communications revolution of the last decade has triggered a revival of areas that were once depopulated.

People and businesses no longer have to operate from the centre of big cities.

But across most of Scotland, there are no railways remaining. There was once an extensive rail network in north east

Scotland with numerous branch lines along the coast and across the interior of the region.

That area is now booming as the population spills across Grampian from Europe's oil capital, Aberdeen.

Other areas that were decimated in the post-Beeching era were the Highlands, Galloway and the Borders.

After many years of prevarication and procrastination, it now looks as though work will start in the near future to reopen the old Waverley rail line.

Even then, it will stop short at Galashiels with the southern part of the Borders left out on a limb.



FRESH AIR: what half the lorries on our roads carry

Galloway remains an almost forgotten outpost, a scenic part of Scotland which is off the beaten track of the main tourist routes towards the north.

There is no rail link between Galloway and the rest of southern Scotland.

Nor is there even an east-west link within the region, between the main town, Dumfries, and Stranraer - which handles a huge volume of freight and passenger traffic to Ireland.

But it is in the densely populated Central Belt that Scotland's rail

revolution should be set in motion. Professor Christopher Harvie, a long time rail campaigner, has set out an ambitious Central Scotland Railway Plan consisting of heavy and light rail stretching from Dundee in the north east to Ayrshire in the south west.

It would be based around a high-speed 30 minute electrified rail link between Glasgow Central and Waverley Station.

It would involve the opening of 50 new stations and 500 miles of new track plus 360 miles of upgraded lines.

With 15 minute rail services across the network, it would be possible to travel between any two destinations in Central Scotland within one hour.

A publicly owned Scottish railway corporation could also be the driving force for new light rail/tram systems in Scotland's four big cities, with ten minute services, along the lines of those already operating successfully in scores of cities across Europe.

In addition, the ambitious ideas put forward by the transport pressure group, Transform Scotland, could be turned into a reality within a decade.

Their proposals include a network of inter-city routes with double tracks, an initiative that has the potential to cut an hour off the journey time between Glasgow and Inverness. They have also suggested establishing non-stop sleeper services between Scotland and the main cities of continental Europe, to compete with the airline companies; and a rail tunnel under the Forth to relieve pressure on the Forth Bridge bottleneck.

All of this and more could be set in motion if Scotland had the powers to take control of its own resources.

Even in the short term, it would be financially viable to introduce a radical new pricing policy on our railways, with free travel for children, pensioners and people with disabilities.

It is absurd that a car journey costs an average 10 pence per mile in petrol, while train journeys can cost three times that amount.

A maximum fare of 10 pence per mile at today's prices would help shift thousands of people from road to rail.

And it would easily be affordable: the total amount collected in fares by ScotRail last year amounted to under £200 million.

But we also need a vision to work towards over the next decade and beyond. Scotland has one third the land mass of the UK, and less than 10 per cent of the total population.

Parts of our land suffer congestion and overcrowding. Other parts of our land contain some of the most remote and isolated communities in Europe.

The geography and demography of Scotland dictates the necessity of a fully integrated, publicly owned, super-efficient, easily affordable public transport system linking together trains, trams, buses, mini-buses, community taxis and air services to the outer islands.

Democratic public ownership, not just of our railways, but of our bus, ferry and air services, is a necessary precondition for a world-class, public transport system.

There will always be a role for small, privately owned transport services.

Taxis, for example, would continue to be owned and run privately - though there is a case for additional community and council-run taxi services connecting with railway stations.

At local level, some small bus companies might continue to play a useful role.

But those transport services that do remain under private ownership will have to be relegated to a subordinate role.

A future Scottish transport network will be based mainly on public ownership, not for dogmatic or ideological reasons, but because market economics cannot deliver the services we need.

Our buses and trains are not bookies shops on wheels, whose success or failure is measured by profit and turnover.

Like our schools, our hospitals, our parks, our community centres, their function is not to make money, but to serve the people.

And like our schools, hospitals, parks and community centres, they should be owned by the people.

The private owners of our railways have already been tried in the highest court in the land - the court of public opinion.

The verdict has been overwhelming. Guilty. Of negligence. Of incompetence. Of greed.

Their day has gone.

It's now time to go back to our departure point and start our journey all over again.

Reclaiming the railways will be the first stop en route to our eventual destination: a transport system that can stand comparison with the best in the world.

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