

Nationalisation of railway franchises does not solve many of the problems

Yesterday saw the government announce the takeover of the Northern Rail franchise by the government from March. They tell me the aim is to introduce private sector capital and management again on a new basis. They warned against expecting too much from taking over the franchise.

Too many delays, cancelled services and old rolling stock have blighted the service. Many of the problems were entirely outside the control of the franchise holder, and will be no more under the control of the government franchise manager.

The Spanish company supplying new trains failed to meet deadlines for deliveries, forcing the franchise holder to battle on with old stock.

Network Rail, a nationalised business, failed to lengthen platforms in time to allow delivery and use of other new trains.

Some of the delays were caused by Network Rail failures with track and signals.

The franchise holder had problems with the new timetables in 2018 which were required of it from the rail authorities.

Various rail franchises have difficulties in securing Trade Union consent to new ways of working. There is no guarantee the Unions will change their mind over these disputes once they are dealing direct with a government franchise manager.

The bulk of the railway is already nationalised. Many of the delays throughout the network are caused by track or signal failures in the nationalised industry, or in a few cases by people and even vehicles intruding on track or disrupting operation of the system.

Nationalisation is no easy answer, and in the case of Northern it does not suddenly resolve the big issues over train delivery and driver availability that are part of the problem.

The UK needs to improve its supply chain for the many of the new trains the big surge in rail investment will require, and ensure most of the work is carried out in the UK.

Getting infrastructure done

The government wishes to crank up the scale and pace of new infrastructure investment in the UK. Many agree we need better railway links, more road capacity, more schools, hospitals and houses given the rising population, faster broadband and more water and electricity supply.

The government inherits a very expensive large railway project. The costs has spiralled before much work has been done on the ground. The eventual completion of the project linking northern cities to the southern and Midlands sections will not be complete until 2040. That is in five full Parliaments time. Who knows what our needs will then be, what technology will then be available for personal transport, and what the size of the population will then be.

HS2 is a reminder of what is wrong with UK infrastructure procurement. It takes far too long. It is highly contentious with the public. It is ruinously expensive. The governments that back it and take the flak in the early stages for it do not enjoy the benefits of its completion.

The Taxpayers Alliance has now drawn up a schedule of many transport projects we could afford if we cancelled the big line. Some of these are ready to go, and some are very popular in their localities. They are all much smaller than HS2 but taken together could provide a lot of improvement.

In order to speed up infrastructure investment there are some rules the government could adopt that would make it easier. Backing schemes that are strongly supported in an area would assist. Offering compensation as part of the plan to those who will be inconvenienced or adversely affected by the development would be a great help in speeding projects and reducing opposition. If someone's house is close to a planned new rail line they should be offered enough money to be able to move if they don't like the noise.

It is easier to put in broadband, water and power investments than to put in new roads or railway lines, as they have much less impact on people. They are much needed and can attract wholly or mainly private finance to pay for them. The government needs to expedite permissions and licences.

Mrs Merkel and climate change

Last week the EU's effective political leader Mrs Merkel said she was worried by the big gap between the views of the establishment who see climate change as the gravest threat facing us and the climate sceptics who do not. She asked for a proper dialogue between the two sides, presumably to search

out some common ground or a way of respecting each other's positions,.

As someone who is lobbied strenuously by all sides, I remind the EU and governments that climate change scepticism is not a single doctrine or united group of dissenters against current policy. It is not traditional right or left, and may be motivated by many different considerations. So let us today consider some of the different forms of scepticism there is over this issue.

The first thing to grasp is most climate sceptics do not deny the underlying science which rightly asserts that CO₂ is a greenhouse gas. Nor do most deny that if nothing else changes and mankind pumps out a lot of extra CO₂ average temperatures will rise.

Some sceptics however argue that current climate models do not capture the complexities of greenhouse gases. Natural CO₂ exceeds manmade and that could vary in either direction. Volcanic activity can have a big impact on world climate. A view needs to be taken on the stability of various carbon sinks, including the oceans. Water vapour is a more common greenhouse gas than CO₂ so models need to capture variations in water vapour concentrations. That also gets the forecaster into wind directions and cloud formation, which we see have daily big impacts on the weather and over time can affect the climate, if new trends and patterns emerge. These sceptics either say you cannot gauge temperature direction from simply measuring manmade CO₂ or go further and argue other trends may be or are offsetting manmade CO₂.

Some sceptics point out that the sun is the main source of warming the earth, and that there needs to be more information about solar activity rates, as the sun itself produces variable output over time as well as from night and day and the seasons.

Some sceptics are unconvinced that there has been a linear increase in average temperatures during the long period of industrialising since say 1820. They raise issues about historical records, and about how you actually calculate an average world temperature, as well as pointing to periods in the published records when temperatures did not rise.

Other sceptics accept the predictions that manmade CO₂ will take temperatures higher whatever the other forces do. They ask whether it is not wiser and cheaper to spend money on adaptations where warming has adverse consequences rather than trying to wean China and the USA off fossil fuels in time to meet the needs of carbon reduction to head off the problem.

So I say to Mrs Merkel she needs to engage her experts and the EU in a new dialogue which examines these various strands of sceptic thinking and deals with them sensibly, rather than castigating anyone who asks questions. A lot of people are in the middle on this issue, seeking better information and guidance on the nature and scale of the threat. They are more likely to be persuaded by well informed people with knowledge and balance than by angry politicians asserting you either accept their version or are some kind of denier of the truth.

M4 King Street Lane – Bridge Concrete Repairs

I have received the enclosed response from Highways England about the M4 King Street Lane – Bridge Concrete Repairs.

I have stressed the importance of this route to a local traffic system under great pressure and asked them to think again about how they can minimise disruption.

Our ref: MPD 21542169

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP
House of Commons
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SW1A 0AA

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Regional Director, South East
Highways England
Bridge House
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Guildford
GU1 4LZ

23 January 2020

Dear John Redwood,

M4 King Street Lane – Bridge Concrete Repairs

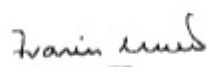
Thank you for your letter of 10 January regarding our bridge works on the B3030 King Street Lane.

Due to the extent and location of repairs required, fixed scaffolding will be installed under one half of the bridge whilst the other half will remain open. This will enable us to keep one lane of King Street open with traffic controlled by 24/7 temporary traffic lights during the daytime throughout the duration of our works. We will need a few full overnight closures of King Street to install and remove the traffic management and to switch the scaffolding from one side of the bridge to the other. A local diversion for these closures has been approved by Wokingham Borough Council.

As the works are likely to generate noise, we have carefully programmed activities to be carried out during daylight hours to avoid disturbing local residents in the evenings.

We appreciate the volume of traffic in this busy location and have been working closely with Wokingham Borough Council to best plan our works accordingly, including liaison with traffic signal specialists to discuss phasing of the traffic lights during peak hours. This will hopefully mean that disruption is kept to a minimum.

Yours sincerely

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Nicola Bell
Regional Director, South East

West Forest Sinfonia

I had the pleasure of attending the West Forest Sinfonia concert at Reading University Great Hall yesterday.

Philip Ellis the Conductor gave an excellent talk telling us about the harmonic brilliance of Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky who all figured in the programme.

The Orchestra performed the Cinderella Suite, , the latter scene from Eugene Onegin and the Rite of Spring with huge skill. The audience was impressed by the performance and gave warm applause at the end.

I would like to thank the organisers, musicians and all involved in producing such a memorable concert.