2020 vision for Britain

A rail policy to get our country back on track

BRITAIN'S railway network is the backbone of our national public transport system. The Government should recognise and use this valuable asset. It has enormous potential to be more effective if suitable investment is made in infrastructure and its assets used to the full. At present it is operated with only short-term financial targets in view.

Watch words

Both the words "integrated" and "public" are anathema to the present British Government and many Conservatives, so it is important that any British attempt to create a sensible, integrated system is launched without these words. BritNet 2000 is just one possibility. Whatever it is called, a service must be created, with rail as the long-distance, dependable backbone, which would allow people to travel as comfortably and cheaply as possible from anywhere to anywhere in Britain – without the need to resort to the car, except in sparsely populated rural areas.

Ideally, trams, buses, Post buses, minibuses and taxis should be drawn into operating a national travel network. Bus companies must be required to co-operate if train service improvements are to provide optimum benefit to passengers. At present, a 50-mile journey from London can involve 35 minutes on a high-tech train, with three times that long spent getting to and from rail stations on inadequate local bus services, hampered by traffic and incompetent operation.

Frozen assets

The present Government's approach to infrastructure seems to involve blackmailing sectors of society to provide investment cash. It warns that if private money is not forthcoming, projects will not go ahead. Other than building new roads, the Government continually declines to decide what infrastructure is necessary, and believes it is politically unacceptable to borrow money or raise taxes for public transport infrastructure. Opinion polls have shown that even most car drivers disagree with this attitude.

A national approach

We need a national rail authority to plan for rapid strategic investment, within an overall transport policy. Neither of these exist at present because the Government fears interfering in what it sees as merely a market. There should be a guarantee now of no further line closures. Care and sensible expenditure (a tiny percentage of that spent on road building) would enhance the existing rail network. We recognise that private finance can help marginal activities on the rail network, but the strategy must be decided by a responsible Government as part of an overall transport policy.

Cheated by system

While the railways must be responsive to the market, they can bring enormous health, social and wider economic benefits which are given no monetary value in the present assessments.

Unlike road schemes, which are judged according to cost-benefit analysis, rail schemes are almost always required to provide an 8% rate of financial return on the capital invested. In certain cases, the Treasury might allow some "non user" benefits, like reduction of traffic congestion, but does so haphazardly.

An alternative to the juggernaut

The Department of Transport and the Goveiment have ignored the aspirations of the British public to shift freight from road to iil. Yet when it is given a fair chance, rail freight can have enormous beneficial enviromental effects. Our picture shows the first intermodal freight service from London Willsden to the continent through the Channel Tunnel in South London on 27 June 1994. Picture by Phil Caley

The real returns

The cost of abolishing the demand for an 8% return is said to be £500 million. No attempt has been made to quantify the health, social and economic benefits which would result, but they would be huge. There is enormous potential to improve Britain's rail services if this arbitrary figure of 8% is removed. It would immediately clear the way for electric InterCity services on the Midland main line from London to Sheffield and Nottingham for instance. This has been estimated to give a 7% return on capital. It is wise for new schemes to break even financially but social and health paybacks should count as part of the profits.

There is enormous pent-up demand for efficient and reasonably priced rail services. Many car drivers are now only too keen to leave their vehicles at home or in a secure station car park.

Railtrack and rail operators must guarantee a clear timetable, good connections, off-peak through ticketing, cross validity of ticketing, freedom to choose routes, national and local railcards, good facilities for the disabled, luggage and bicycles.

Building on success

Passenger transport authorities have been reasonably successful in developing rail services in their areas and, in the absence of a strategic planning authority for London, a PTA would be useful in developing a strategy for co-ordinated and efficient public transport.

In the light of the success of PTAs and the possible reorganisation of local government, it could be advantageous to establish a national network of PTAs which could take over regional planning for transport from county councils. For example, a PTA could be established for the whole of the East Anglian area.

A 10-year investment programme should be agreed for the railways at national level and then efforts made at both national and local level to ensure that feeder services mesh into the rail network. Put simply, buses and trams should feed into stations but pedestrians and cyclists must be catered for as a priority – before the needs of car drivers are considered.

The way forward

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution has already recommended, among other things:

- A big increase in public transport investment over a 10-year period.
- An immediate start on increasing the loading gauge on the Channel Tunnel to Scotland route, so that lorries or trailers can be carried on rail wagons.
- Decisions at all levels of transport policy should be based on finding the best practicable environmental option.
- Expenditure on motorways and other trunk roads should be reduced to about half the present level.
- More bus lanes.
- Safe walking and cycling networks should be created.

The Commission also called for objectives and targets to be set:

Passengers

To increase the proportion of passenger-miles carried by public transport from 12% in 1993 to 20% by 2005 and 30% by 2020.

Freight

To increase the proportion of tonne-miles carried by rail from 6.5% in 1993 to 10% by 2000 and 20% by 2010.

Freight targets

The targets set by the Royal Commission for transporting goods by rail are very modest – 10% by 2000 and 20% by 2010. France for instance already sends 24% of its freight by rail, Germany 22% and Switzerland 40%. Freight can and must be switched from road to rail. For a trial period, at least to the year 2000, track access charges should be waived to allow rail business to recover.

In addition, a new form of grant should be devised and made available to companies switching traffic from road to rail, or using intermodal services with the long leg of the journey by rail.

Railtrack should be required to keep open and encourage the use of freight-only lines or, as a last result, mothball them for future use.

There should be extra grants for companies using rail for hazardous cargoes to reflect the safety and social gain. Rail-hauled domestic waste should be exempt from landfill tax.

The current freight facilities grants are miserly, involve companies in expensive preparation work and in almost every case, the applications get bogged down for excessive periods. The presumption should be to give the grant, unless there is clear evidence against.

The massive environmental gains from reducing road traffic should be the main concern. Attempts to quantify those benefits should not be based on misleading costings as used in the past and at present. There are also big cost savings to be had from reduced road maintenance costs.

The existence of Railtrack gives the Government an opportunity to direct public investment into the railway infrastructure. The Government should require that Railtrack, even if it is privatised, meets targets for increasing the volume of traffic by rail, rather than concentrating merely on financial return.

The community as a whole loses if Railtrack profits are maximised by reducing the volume of goods moved by rail. That is the disastrous policy which has been forced on BR and has led to most freight now going by road. Lorries do not pay for the massive social and environmental damage they cause.

Capital! The way for London to get ahead

More than 80% of commuters into London already sensibly use rail. This picture of Waterloo shows how vast numbers of people can be efficiently handled without pollution and congestion. Waterloo also provides an international service to Paris and Brussels as well as long-distance and suburban domestic trains. Picture by Phil Caley

Piggyback freight

A large percentage of road freight in Britain is carried on lorry semi-trailers. These trailers can themselves be carried piggyback on rail wagons. To carry high-sided trailers, some rail routes may need to be modified. For instance bridges may have to be raised by a few inches.

Road tractor units could then deliver trailers to a railhead where the trailers could be driven on to specially constructed rail wagons. The unaccompanied trailer could make the bulk of its journey by rail and be collected by a road tractor unit for the final delivery leg. This method is quite usual in Europe, particularly in Switzerland, which is determined not to allow road traffic to cause damage to the environment. The policy has been democratically approved by a series of referenda.

The Channel Tunnel rail link should be built so it can carry lorries piggyback on trains and with passing loops to allow its use for heavyweight freight trains. A gauge enlargement programme should be initiated to open up a core network of piggyback routes, with the first priority being routes to Scotland, South Wales and Ireland from the Channel Tunnel.

Intermodal freight

Containers are best delivered by road to a railhead where they can easily be transferred to rail vehicles for the long leg of their journey. Again lorries complete the journey. This system is commonly used throughout Europe and the USA. Lorries are wasteful in fuel, cause traffic hold-ups and damage to the road as well as being a danger if used for long journeys. In rural areas, taxis connecting with trains can be efficient movers of small pieces of freight, as Dutch experience has shown.

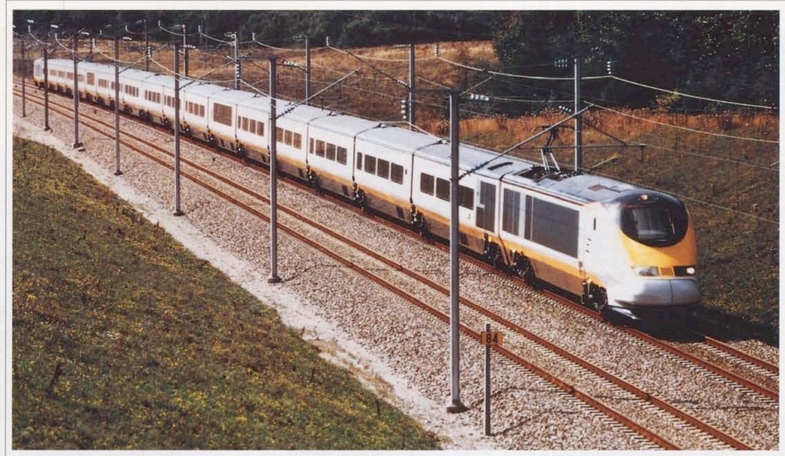
Light rail

The few British schemes completed since 1970 are successful, There is enormous pent-up demand for more but the Government refuses to give the go-ahead. A £112 million Metro scheme for Birmingham waited for approval for years, even though the planning and financial package had been prepared and approved by the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority. The "best tram in the world" is now operating in Sheffield, and Manchester's Metrolink scheme has attracted large numbers of car drivers. 40% of the passengers have left their cars at home and switched to the trams. Other light rail schemes could be quickly built and road traffic reduced if the Government diverted the vast amounts of road building cash into them. All over the world, new light rail schemes are being built. French examples include Lille, Nantes, Rouen and Strasbourg.

Economic vitality

Road building has been justified by claims that it stimulates economic activity and thereby creates jobs. There is no objective research to substantiate this claim but there is evidence that people and companies avoid areas that are "blighted" by roads. By contrast people and economic activity are attracted to areas with rail services.

Preliminary RDS studies of population growth in towns show that rail-connected towns grew by 11.1% over a 10-year period compared to 9% in towns reliant on roads.



A Star performer – but not in backward Britain

A Eurostar train in France where it runs at 185mph thanks to good trackwork and a 25kV overhead power supply. In Britain the same train rarely reaches 90mph on overcrowded tracks, with a third-rail 750 volt supply – and lack of vision in Government and Whitehall. The first high-speed TGV line in France, to Lyon, repaid the £1.5 billion invested in it by 1991, and France now plans over 15 years to create a 3,000 mile TGV network at a cost of £23 billion (the same cost as Britain's 10-year road building programme). Germany is building a 2,500 mile high-speed Inter City Express network and Italy and Spain have high-speed services already running. Picture: EPS

Learning from abroad

The Swiss

In Switzerland, a good partnership between public and private finance provides excellent integrated public transport. The British Government could learn a great deal from the Swiss who have instituted a policy to ensure that every city, town and village has effective public transport. Cities are linked by regular hourly express trains backed up by local stopping trains. At main stations, the trains connect with local trains, trams, buses and even post buses to ensure that every hamlet can enjoy an integrated service, through a combination of federal, local authority and private enterprise transport undertakings.

The Japanese

The 160mph Bullet trains have proved three times more productive than aircraft in terms of labour efficiency, five times better in investment terms and eight times better in energy use. They have played a key role in cutting costs and oil imports and in reducing pollution from transport.

The USA

American researchers show that individuals can cut their own nitrogen dioxide emissions by going to work by train instead of car. They can virtually eliminate their carbon monoxide and particulate emissions. The Worldwatch Institute reported in its *Back on Track: The Global Rail Revival (1994)* that the unpaid social cost of cars is seven times that of trains. When social and financial costs are taken into account, the railway is almost always the cost-effective solution to transport needs. Rail's worth extends beyond mere farebox levels.

Action plan for Britain

Intensive care is needed for existing but neglected rail services in Britain. Railways have been on the defensive ever since being savaged by Beeching. Confidence could return to industry and customers if there was a guarantee of no further line closures.

There are many lines and stations at risk of closure or death by decay. Proper service level criteria must be set and enforced.

Disused rail tracks should be protected with a view to reopening.

Allowing housing development along rail routes gives more people access to public transport, is sensible in land use planning and improves the rail line's financial performance.

There are many examples throughout Britain of "Cinderella" lines which have the potential to relieve road traffic. Road pollution exacerbates asthma which affects 3 million people in Britain. But the real problem of road traffic is that it degrades the quality of life for everyone. Children cannot play outside, old people fear crossing the road and everyone is at risk from irresponsible drivers who take noise and pollution wherever they go.

Pedestrians should be able to walk in safety and comfort to bus and rail stations.

Cyclists should be able to ride in safety to rail stations and, outside peak hours, take their bikes on the train.

Road building money should be diverted to public transport, and improving conditions for pedestrians and cyclists by road calming.

The public transport user should come first, followed by the pedestrian and cyclist. If there is any road space or any resources left, the car user can be considered then.

Rail is the answer

Rail provides the transport answers without the environmental problems caused by road traffic.

High-speed diesels provide a good 125mph service from Paddington to South Wales and the West but these passengers should now be enjoying services equal to their European neighbours. The lines from Paddington should be electrified and upgraded to make way for the 185mph trains which are already running in France, Germany, Spain and Japan. Picture: John Wilber

Major projects

The following rail projects with international significance should be implemented immediately:

1. **Channel Tunnel fast link,** from Folkestone to London St Pancras, costing £4 billion.

2. **West Coast main line upgrading** all the way from London to Glasgow (for links to Scotland) and Holyhead (for links to Ireland), costing £450 million.

3. Creation of an **East-West rail route** using mainly existing track, from Harwich and Felixstowe, via Ipswich, Cambridge, Huntingdon, Bedford, Bletchley, Oxford and Didcot to Bristol, Cardiff and Fishguard. This would mitigate much of the furore over the planned Trans European Road Network route and require only 15 miles of new line.

4. **Midland main line electrification** from Bedford to Nottingham, Derby, Sheffield, Wakefield and Doncaster, feeding into the proposed Channel Tunnel terminal at St Pancras.

5. **Great Western main line electrification** from London to Bristol and Swansea, and Plymouth and Penzance, with links to Heathrow airport.

6. **Dornoch Firth rail crossing** to match the road bridge built with public funds and to give the North of Scotland a quicker rail connection to the rest of the rail network.

7. **Coastway electrification** from Ashford to Hastings and associated development of a long distance route from Ashford (Channel Tunnel connections) to Southampton, via Brighton and Portsmouth, avoiding the damage which will be caused by building the South Coast motorway.

8. Improved **rail access to major airports**, for example: Heathrow to the south and west, Braintree-Stansted to link Harwich and East Essex to the airport, Cambridge and the Midlands. Glasgow.

9. **Trans-Pennine electrification**, to help connections with Ireland. Both Liverpool-Manchester-Leeds-York and Manchester-Sheffield-Doncaster.

10. **Extension of electrification** between Preston-Manchester and to InterCity "extremities" such as Aberdeen, Holyhead and Blackpool.

Upgrading needed

Domestic new lines and upgrading requiring urgent action:

London CrossRail, costing £1.8 billion, bringing together the rail networks to the East and West of London.

Thameslink 2000 costing £260 million, expanding the already successful Thameslink services between Bedford and Brighton, increasing the journey opportunities six fold.

Chelsea-Hackney Tube line, a north-south Metro costing £2.8 billion.

Glasgow crossrail

Electrification

Electrifying the following routes would make train operating cheaper and more efficient and would offer passengers much better services:

Bristol-Birmingham-Derby

Birmingham-Coventry-Nuneaton-Leicester (Birmingham-Coventry is already electrified)

Stoke-Derby-Nottingham

Reading-Oxford-Coventry

Glasgow and Edinburgh to Aberdeen

Birmingham and Leicester to Peterborough-Ely-Norwich

Uckfield line

Marks Tey-Sudbury

Ipswich-Felixstowe

Network expansion

The network could be expanded by reopening closed and freight-only lines.

Some lines like the Robin Hood line in Nottinghamshire and the line to Maesteg in Mid Glamorgan have already reopened and proved highly successful. There is great scope for more reopenings. For example:

Bedford-Sandy and Huntingdon-St Ives to provide an Oxford-Cambridge service

Walsall-Brownhills to give a Nottingham-Wolverhampton service

St Andrews-Leuchars to give Edinburgh-St Andrews service

Edinburgh suburban circle

Bathgate-Airdrie

Edinburgh-Galashiels

Stratford upon Avon-Honeybourne to give London-Stratford service

Braintree-Stansted Airport to give Colchester-Peterborough service

Uckfield-Lewes to give third main line to Sussex coast

Bere Alston-Okehampton to give Exeter-Plymouth service

Harrogate-Ripon-Northallerton to give Leeds-Middlesbrough service

Bangor-Caernarfon to give Caernarfon-Crewe service.

Northampton-Wellingborough to give Milton Keynes-Peterborough service

Freight-only line to Wisbech could be reopened for passengers

Freight-only line to Ashby de la Zouch could be reinstated for passengers

■ Report by John Barfield and Ray King
Railway Development Society 9.95

Join us

RDS is an independent, voluntary body. You can join and help the campaign for better rail services. Send £12 for one year's membership to Elisabeth Jordan, 13 Arnhill Road, Gretton, Corby, Northants NN17 3DN.

Or send a donation. Make cheques payable to RDS.

2020 VISION

RAIL – THE HEART OF ANY PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM FOR THE 21st CENTURY

First class traveller

Award-winning fashion designer Marie-Bernadette Callan is one of many to choose the train for her business trips. She supplies Harrods, Selfridges, Bruce Oldfield and other outlets with luxury accessories made from marine leather.

"Train travel gives me confidence," said 26-year-old Marie-Bernadette who lives near Durham station on the East Coast main line. "People on the train are always so friendly and helpful. I have met some very useful business contacts travelling by rail.

"I travel all over the country by train. it certainly beats the constant harrassment of driving," said Marie-Bernadette who does use her car when she has heavy displays to transport. "Travelling by train is a necessity for my business but it is also a luxury. I much prefer it. It is quicker, more comvenient and you can work comfortably, even in standard class," said Marie-Bernadette who was BR's Young Business Traveller of the Year for 1994-5.

"It's comforting, safer and so much better to arrive for a business meeting relaxed. It has helped me transform my business. It is now a limited company and I have been able to stage shows in Paris."

She says the quality of rail travel is already good but she is worried about the effects of privatisation, particularly if it puts up the cost of travelling. She said: "Price is always a key issue for me. I try to plan ahead so I can take advantage of cheaper Apex and Super Apex tickets."

She is particularly impressed by the quality of service on InterCity Great Western services to Bath, Bristol and Weston-super-Mare.

Travelling to manufacturers in the North West, she is a regular user of TransPennine services via Stalybridge and St Helens which are "not particularly fast". But she insisted: "It still beats travelling by car."

RDS