Current strategies in the railway passenger business in Britain
A critical appraisal

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This paper was first used as the basis for a presentation at a workshop on the business and economic history of railways at the Centre for Institutional Performance in the University of Reading. It was revised in the light of the discussion and other comments received later and has been revised again for the IRS&TH event. Many of the points are amplified as well as referenced in extensive endnotes. Some details remain to be checked, and further comments are welcome.

Preamble

Public discussion of the railway passenger business in Britain has in recent years been singularly superficial. The Department for Transport [DfT] confidently contends that franchising is the only possible model. The Association of Train Operating Companies [ATOC] has convinced itself that its members' success is entirely attributable to the marvels of private enterprise. The Office of Rail Regulation [ORR] rests secure in its belief in the virtues of the regulatory process. And buccaneers at the helm of owning groups lecture us about how grateful we should be for the investment and skills they have brought to a moribund industry[1]. Of course there is some truth in all this, but the future of the railway is too important to be left to the *parti pris* of these players.

Meanwhile most of the population treats the railway with indifference[2], an increasing number use its services but grumble away and debate is polarised around fares or HS2 or the legacy of Dr. Beeching. We could and should do better. This paper is a contribution to that process.

It does not discuss in any detail the controversy about franchises – the process-cost, their length, specification, incentives, risk-transfer and so on[3] – or the relationship between Network Rail and its Regulator or the lowering but seemingly unmentionable matter of Network Rail's unsustainable mountain of debt, but focusses on associated aspects of contemporary railway affairs, many of which receive less attention than they merit.

The railway in denial

The concept of our railway being in denial may seem odd. After all, traffic is buoyant, big projects are under way, franchising has been enthusiastically relaunched, commercial and technical initiatives abound. I do not wish to denigrate everything that is happening, for there is more that is positive and exciting than at any time in my 55-year association with the industry, but I do think some big questions should be asked.

We should be clear about the context. Although there are recent signs of a levelling-off, the quantity of passenger-kilometres travelled has nearly doubled from its broadly stable level between the early 1970s and the mid-1990s (though in some details the data is arguable[4] and the National Travel Survey puts the growth at only 70%). Train-kilometres run have increased commensurately (though that itself is significant). Rolling stock and stations have been improved and speeds and frequencies enhanced (though not consistently), and attention to customers is better than it was (though with notorious exceptions[5]). Yet all is not well, and my suggestion of denial rests on a conviction that many of the reasons for this are largely suppressed, consciously or otherwise. Let me put a series of propositions.

Proposition 1

That governance of the railway is now dominated by a politically entrenched ideology. This is a mere segment of the political and economic malaise afflicting the capitalist world, namely deep and patent structural weaknesses, if not failures, in the system accompanied by extreme difficulty in identifying alternative paths, let alone mobilising effectively to implement them. But if we focus for now on the railway we see
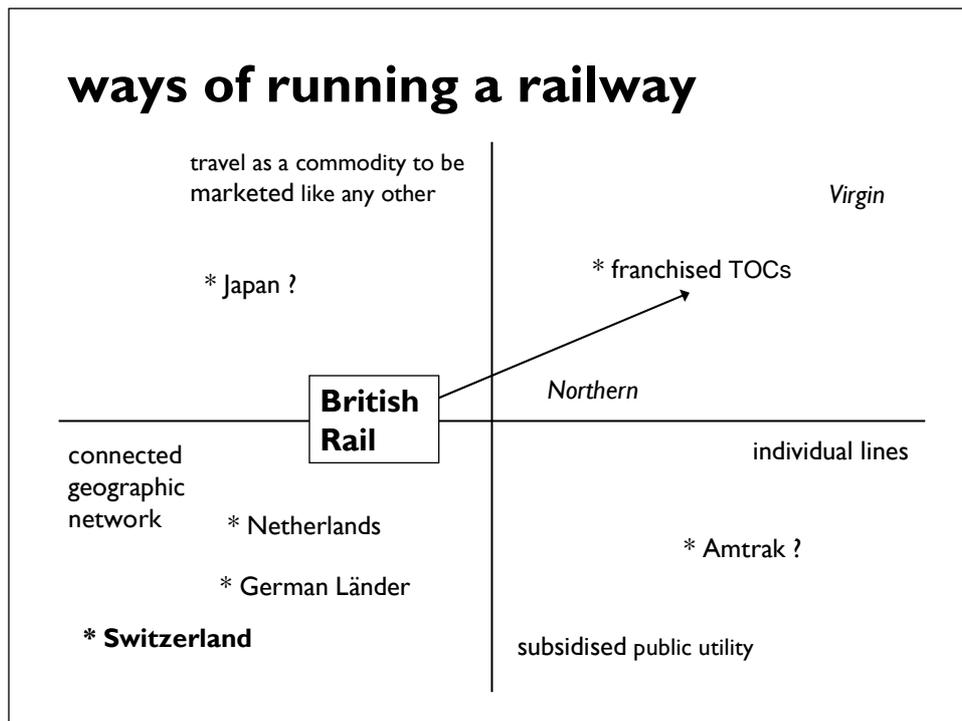
- ≋ the glib assumption that only entrepreneurial management and competition can deliver what 'customers' want, in wilful forgetfulness about what state ownership at its best did once deliver[6] and without evaluation of the societal implications of unquestioning consumerism[7];

- ≋ the reluctance of the governing and industry establishments to admit failure or contemplate other options, as for example the fact that the latest approach to franchising is at least the fourth attempt to get it to function properly since the Railways Act 1993[8], or perpetuating the system (as recommended by the Brown Review), in defiance of the well-argued case for examining the merits of concessions; and

- ≋ the imposition of the separation of infrastructure from operations[9], despite copious evidence of its inappropriateness in a technically-integrated system[10].

There are challenges to this powerful hegemony. In its Fourth Railway Package[11] the Commission of the European Union, exasperated by the uneven application and interpretation of earlier packages, is attempting to enforce the track / wheel separation and to promote ever-greater competition, but a Franco-German railway alliance (abetted by the Swiss) is fighting back in defence of unified institutions, albeit with internal separation of management and a modicum of competition. And interestingly, in Britain, however strongly ATOC may believe its member-TOCs to be loved by their customers[12], whenever the public is asked its opinion in polls or bloggers have cause to discuss the state of the railway there is a convincing majority in favour of reunification and some form of communal ownership[13].

It should also be noted that, although the Labour Party failed to resolve the inherent tensions during its period in office from 1997 to 2010 and is only hesitantly grasping the need for reform[14], others on the left are doing some thinking about how a publicly-owned railway with community-oriented objectives might be defined and created[15].

One way in which the fundamental issues at stake about the purpose of the railway can be evaluated is by means of a diagram that expresses the continuum between subsidised public utility

and treating travel as a marketable commodity on the vertical axis and the continuum between connected network and individual lines on the horizontal axis, and then attributes coordinates to countries and companies. The top-right corner locates the 'supermarket railway' represented by Virgin and the bottom-left Switzerland as the epitome of communal values. We need a national conversation about where we want Britain and its railway to sit in this space[16]. It will be especially interesting to see whether the Government agrees to further devolution of responsibility for franchising and if so whether it allows other bodies the freedom to modify the model by varying the current coordinates[17].

ways of running a railway

travel as a commodity to be marketed like any other

Virgin

* Japan ?

* franchised TOCs

| **British Rail** |

Northern

connected geographic network

individual lines

* Netherlands

* Amtrak ?

* German Länder

* Switzerland

subsidised public utility

Proposition 2

That the institutional structure of the industry predicates relationships whose consequences may be perverse or even malign. There are several.

** The EU concept of an infrastructure manager to whom independent operators of trains apply for access is the cornerstone of the division between Network Rail [NR] and the TOCs. However EU law currently only requires competition in this on-track form (as distinct from competition for franchises) for freight and international passenger services. Nonetheless the 1993 Act gave businesses the right to seek 'open access' to the British network to compete with the franchised operators. In practice this has been quite limited, but it has required attention from ORR that seems disproportionate to its potential benefits[18], and DfT is unhappy about its impact on the public finances while being reluctant to change the law[19]. Consultancies with attitude are only too ready to ferret for evidence that competition brings benefits, while less attention is paid to the financial distortions intrinsic to the system or to the loss of efficiencies that disjointed operations can be shown to lead to.

** Franchises are in the hands of either large transport companies, mostly with roots in the bus industry, or European state-railway conglomerates. When the McNulty study[20] identified fragmentation as the explanation for some, or even a large part, of the high costs of running Britain's railway it could have recommended some form of reunification. Instead, partly for

ideological reasons but largely because the owning groups are so influential and could make legal trouble if they were deprived of their privileged position, it opted for adding to the complex structure yet more organisations optimistically designed to hold the system together. These included the Rail Delivery Group[21] and 'alliances' between Network Rail and TOCs[22] which have sanctified the status of these owning groups, despite their being, by definition, only transient possessors of rights and responsibilities for running a section of the railway. Through densifying thickets of legal agreements this is progressively making it difficult to modify, let alone dismantle the present structure, yet there is virtually no public awareness of what is happening – only loaded press releases about the wonders of the arrangements.

** Because the franchise system, in response to successive crises, has become so complicated[23] the cost of bidding has become very considerable. In turn this means that it is really only open to large companies with copious war-chests or to state railways anxious to show their commercial credentials or to compensate for the loss of regional contracts or freight business at home. This not only introduces corporate mind-sets to the railway – in the form, for example, of ruthless cost-cutting[24] or arrogance toward customers who transgress ticket rules – but even more importantly it closes the door on more diverse but less-well-endowed enterprises such as small innovative companies or local cooperatives that might run niche operations more effectively. Instead we are left with monoliths[25].

** Railway services are now managed, provisioned and delivered by a multiplicity of organisations and companies: DfT, ORR, Network Rail, the TOCs, the freight companies, countless suppliers and too many consultancies. That is not wholly undesirable, but it takes great effort to secure common goals rather than advantage to particular interests, and that is only now, belatedly, beginning to happen. Moreover there is another larger upshot, namely that the railway no longer has a single, clear voice to speak for it, as it did during the glory days of Peter Parker and Robert Reid I as chairmen of the British Railways Board. Indeed, not only is there no strong voice, but when something is said it tends to support the *status quo* because that is in the interests of too many of the players. After all, why would a firm bidding for a lucrative franchise want to propose that a concession system might be preferable ? Or a consultancy forego the rich pickings from HS2 by openly criticising the concept ? At its worst this relationship becomes complaisant, as in the case of companies following government stipulations over security measures even when they are demonstrably both a waste of money and an impediment to pleasurable travel[26].

Proposition 3

That the franchising system has locked us into a set of assumptions and policies with no real debate about their wisdom or desirability. This has many facets.

** The railway was necessarily divided in order to construct independent businesses. That not only sundered the single national network but has conditioned thinking to such an extent that politicians, DfT officials and railway staff often seem to have lost all sense of the railway as a whole and think only in terms of the arbitrary units they have to manage or work for – and there is virtually no printed or electronic material presenting the network as a national system[27].

** Enlarging the financial return of the business (in the form of a premium, or of a reduced subsidy) has become the primary expectation of the government and the principal objective of the successful bidder. That is not to say that monetary incentives do not have their place or that there is not an argument to be had about the scale of subsidy, but it is to note that wider public-interest objectives attract less attention or are deemed to be covered by a package of investment and service goodies written into a franchise contract in whose development the community has been allowed only a limited role[28].

** It has progressively become the norm in tendering to seek to maximise the premium from franchises that can be expected to generate a surplus, mostly the long-distance inter-city routes, in order to provide funds within the railway budget to support the losses of other franchises. This may be politically the most realistic approach, and may even have some economic justification, but it has never, to my knowledge, been formally tested and debated. That should be remedied, since by definition the practice means that market-share is not being optimised on inter-city services and that one set of travellers is supporting another whose social need for a railway service might reasonably be expected to be paid for out of tax funds.

** The mechanism that transfers a proportion of public funds designated for public good to private shareholders has until recently received remarkably little scrutiny, with no substantial evidence that it promotes more effectual management than could be achieved in other ways – while the Government is in irony-free territory in letting contracts to the state railways of other countries. The change of mood is attributable to thorough scrutiny following unremitting fare increases, to growing disenchantment with the privatised utilities generally, to some very active campaigns and to incredulity at the Government's determination to refranchise the popular and successful public-sector East Coast service[29].

** Each franchisee has become single-mindedly focussed on its own business. In terms of managerial attention to specific matters and of the company's responsiveness to its customers[30] that may bring benefits, but the price paid is high, for example

- ≋ in the biassing of the timetabling and ticketing systems against journeys involving more than one operator[31];

- ≋ in the multiplication of transient brands in place of British Rail's remarkably successful creation of a coherent corporate image[32];

- ≋ in the confusion it creates for travellers about who is responsible for what (which can lead to contempt for the system, especially when journeys go awry); and

- ≋ in the mismanagement of projects when the self-evident requirement for a network solution is transferred, *faute de mieux* but inappropriately, to a less-than-competent Government department[33].

Proposition 4

That the prevailing structure is inimical to free-thinking about development of the railway.

** Franchises generate a plethora of legalistic documents. This may in part just be a bureaucratic trend in keeping with the importance of protecting public expenditure, but it is also a response to a dilemma at the heart of privatisation. Large sectors of the railway serve communal purposes such as securing a base level of mobility for every citizen, drawing travellers away from congested and more environmentally damaging modes and supporting remote areas. Even profitable inter-urban services serve these functions to an extent. It is therefore unavoidable that state funding should be committed, while leaving the railway, or perhaps just the profitable bits, to uncontrolled market forces is plainly a political and social impossibility[34]. It follows that franchises must be highly specified, but of course operators then focus on delivery, albeit with some scope for local initiatives, rather than addressing bigger-picture possibilities[35].

** This tendency is reinforced by the relationship between Network Rail and the TOCs. It is NR's responsibility to operate, maintain, renew and develop the railway. That task is overseen by a regulator [ORR], since NR is a monopoly provider of railway infrastructure with a quasi-independent status. Regulatory practice is intensely formal and legalistic, and NR's approach to its work reflects this[36]. In recent years it has visibly improved its management and its project-delivery,

and documents being produced now in preparation for the next Control Period [CP5, 2014 to 2019] are full of both specific proposals for network enhancements and plans for more effective supervision of everyday operation and maintenance. Yet at their core, it seems to me, there is a big empty zone: neither DfT nor NR nor ORR have defined a vision of the service that they want the railway to offer[37] – and no operator has the scope or stature to do so either.

Let me set out a case-study. Franchisees are, understandably, keen to win favour with their local communities, and no one should decry the good that can come of this in partnerships to manage stations, in the Community Rail movement or in marginal improvements to timetables. Yet there is a downside. On the one hand no TOC is knowingly going to walk into the uproar that would follow a proposal, say, to close some poorly-used stations in the interest of users – and potential users – of the busier stations on a line and greater operational efficiency, however strong the net benefit of such a policy. So in too many circumstances there is real *stasis*, and at the worst a surfeit of preservational aspic[38]. On the other hand TOCs can gain credit by facilitating the opening of new stations, even though this may add time to the journeys of existing passengers: in theory the trade-off is supposed to be analysed, but there must be doubt whether caution on this count always outweighs local and political pressure[39]. Certainly there has never been, to my knowledge, a comprehensive systematic review across the network of either a programme of closure of truly marginal stations or of priorities for reopening or building new stations.

** A similar point concerns the links between railway services and coach and bus services. For many years these have been notoriously poor in Britain, despite pious intentions to address the weaknesses. This goes beyond the obvious benefit of better ordering of the physical interchanges and of timetables to the question of whether integration would best serve the public interest. Such an approach would include evaluation of the role that the road modes could play in filling gaps in the railway network. In its absence scattered and random moves are made from time to time by TOCs, but they have neither interest nor incentive to appraise any more general scheme[40].

** Then we come to timetabling. No one would deny the steady improvement in the service-offer, in terms of extent, speed and frequency, although it is not without blemish[41]. However, by standards that are now commonplace in mainland Europe, Britain's railway timetable remains dis-integrated. Examples abound of raw edges between the services of different operators, and my work in this field has highlighted an extraordinary lack of interest in the problem. Once again the explanation is largely institutional.

First is the lack of a cultural tradition of paying attention to connectivity. Next is the Government's disdain for anything that might require a degree of central planning, despite the strong evidence from countries like Switzerland and The Netherlands of its positive societal and environmental benefits. But above all is the nature of franchises: relative to the value of management diligence in regard to their own TOC's activities, working with other TOCs can become a time-consuming and legal minefield[42] with uncertain financial outcomes, not least because the practice of sequential franchising locks each successive TOC timetable in a manner that constrains every later TOC timetable.

The problem is compounded by the institutional split between the infrastructure manager and the operating companies. To take four examples:

≋ Network Rail, faced on the one hand with a determined and self-confident freight lobby and on the other by disunited passenger operators trapped in the coils of the franchising process, may be inclined to allocate more capacity to the former than is really justified;

≋ it is plainly desirable that paths be optimised and one way of doing that is to ensure electric haulage of freight trains over difficult routes such as the West Coast Main Line between Glasgow and Preston, yet NR has no right to insist on this, leaving the freight companies to do as they please, which typically means continuing with diesel haulage[43];

- ⇟ where acceleration would assist in the design of an improved timetable Network Rail is tempted to assume that it must engage in engineering works, whereas it might be that trains with faster acceleration or higher maximum speeds could form at least part of the solution – but again neither NR nor anyone else has a clear remit to take an overview[44]; and

- ⇟ above all, simply cobbling together disparate track-access applications from operators is most unlikely to make the best use of increasingly congested tracks and stations.

To me and many others it is obvious that the only solution to this conundrum is to move to a planned national timetable and its operation by concessionaires[45], but this has such profound ideological implications that neither the Government nor the owning groups are inclined to address it, refusing even to undertake research into the potential advantages[46].

** Finally in support of this proposition we come to the question of longer-term planning. To an extent this is simply the previous issues writ large, but there is a telling additional point. We have recently had a superfluity of speeches and articles to mark the fiftieth anniversary of publication of 'The Reshaping of British Railways' [the Beeching report]. Commentary has run the gamut from informed research and attempts to emphasise the positive achievements of Dr. Beeching to rather sad *ad hominem* attacks and romanticism about country branch lines undiluted by realism. Yet nowhere amidst the campaigns to undo closures (I concede that some have a case for review) has there been any move by Government or the railway to take a hard look at the existing network and consider whether it is right for the next fifty years. We hear little about that because no one seems responsible, and hence we are in danger of allocating resources to reopening campaigns based more on emotion than on rigorous analysis[47].

Proposition 5

That the railway is not being managed as well as its cheerleaders would have us believe.

It is not my intention to indulge in an indiscriminate whinge about the state of the railway or how much better things once were, and I am often appalled by the biassed or ignorant presentation of railway stories in the news media. Equally however I am irritated by the stream of upbeat press releases from DfT, NR and the TOCs that are uncritically reported and too often do not reflect the real experience of travellers by rail. Here are some examples.

** Both the Government and the operating companies focus on the apparently high satisfaction levels measured in the bi-annual survey conducted by Passenger Focus. Less publicity is given to the data on perceived value for money, which is at a lower and more concerning level[48]. Moreover, only existing passengers are surveyed, so we have a far more limited understanding of why a great many people do not use trains. Have they had discouraging experiences when they have done so in the past ? Do they hold a generalised impression that fares are unreasonably high because too many Government and company actions unwittingly convey that message ? Is the quality of service too variable across the country and the lack of a strong national brand supported by a managerial emphasis on consistency a hindrance[49] ?

** Market-pricing of fares, as distinct from distance-based tariffs, started, be it not forgotten, under that exemplar of fossilised state bureaucracy, British Rail. Few would argue against its economic justification in differentiating market segments, extracting consumer surplus, smoothing peaks and filling seats on trains that would otherwise go unsold in a system that for sound technical and commercial reasons cannot avoid excess outputs. It is another thing altogether to have taken the system to a degree of complication that almost everyone except the TOCs themselves considers to be counter-productive[50].

Yield-management may help to fill the coffers of the private companies, but perceptions that it does just that are part of the problem. Procedures that can madden even experienced users with

multiple options; a scheme that has many quirks and barely-penetrable details; a construct that favours certain types of journey, disfavours others and distorts behaviour[51]; and a set of rules that can trap the unwary in an unforgiving process has passed from common sense into about as customer-unfriendly a system as it is possible to imagine – and no amount of tinkering with fancy websites can redeem it[52].

** When in 2000 the Labour Government was desperate to be seen to exercise some control over the privatised railway (and one can understand why they felt that need) it introduced the idea of measuring punctuality in the hope of demonstrating progressive improvement. Unfortunately the chosen metric was flawed (to be fair, it may have been all that was manageable at the time). This is the Public Performance Measure [PPM]. It records the percentage of trains that arrive at their final destination within x minutes of their advertised time, 10 in the case of long-distance trains and 5 for all others. That is an astonishingly sloppy approach for a supposedly advanced and precision-operated railway and hardly reflects the reasonable expectations of its users for punctual arrivals. Furthermore it is manipulated by the insertion of additional margin time, and it does not monitor either the experience of people alighting at intermediate stations or of those who may travel on two on-time trains but be an hour late at destination because of a missed connection.

ORR is nonetheless fixated on using the measure to incentivise Network Rail – despite marginal changes being statistically suspect and despite too the evidence that it has reached a level beyond which factors inherent in running a busy and complex railway make it very difficult to go[53]. There is at last a move to publish a more honest data-set that measures the proportion of on-time arrivals at all stations and weights them by the number of travellers involved, although it will still not use a proper sample of journeys to capture the real experience of individual passengers. The final irony of this situation is that there is a veritable mini-industry for attributing delays to the different players: insofar as this highlights root-causes and helps to enhance operating standards it could be a valuable exercise, but it is not clear to what extent this is realised and its bloated size is a corollary of the need to attribute compensation in a contractual environment[54].

** Any regular, alert user of the railway[55] soon becomes aware of the lack of attention to detail. Why this should occur is difficult to explain in an age of highly-focussed management. It may be that managers concentrate so much on selected areas, such as safety or team-building among their staff or projection of the corporate story that they neglect other areas. It is certainly not helped by the fact that many staff do not have long experience of railways or a deep commitment to the industry: the job-for-life culture had some downsides, but one upside was cultivation of a natural instinct for the way the system works.

It is tempting to construct a catalogue and one must therefore beware of overdoing the negatives, but equally that should not be a reason for ignoring carelessness, error and absurdity because, taken together, they influence public perceptions. Current issues include the excessive number of announcements at stations and on trains[56], the poor design of some websites and the location and content of the 'A to Z' departure posters[57].

Proposition 6

That the approach to planning has significant weaknesses that expose the railway to great risk. I have left this to last both because it feeds into any discussion of HS2 and because it encapsulates concerns arising from the other propositions.

Forecasting trends in travel demand is notoriously difficult. They are a function of significant economic factors (although some relationships appear to be less firm than was once thought), patterns of land-use (that are in flux), and social structures and behaviours (that are intertwined and fluid). Yet forecast we must, for a capital-intensive industry cannot afford major errors. The

question then is how well the responsible organisations rise to the challenge. At present they are not, in my judgment, doing at all well.

A large problem is expressed in that plural – organisations. DfT forecasts demand at an aggregate level, but the history and nature of the process strongly orients it toward planning roads, and the Department appears to undertake no modelling of comprehensive strategies directed to changing modal shares, despite its carbon-reduction and other environmental policies. ORR is only involved with forecasts insofar as they set the framework for Network Rail's plans. And train operating companies (the TOCs) have little interest beyond their territories, the comfort-zone of the markets they are already in and the horizon of their franchise.

That leaves Network Rail, which clearly has a responsibility both in general as steward of the infrastructure and in particular by its legal obligation to provide capacity for operators. Now NR has undoubtedly improved the range and intellectual underpinning of its methodologies in recent years, but at least three concerns need review.

** The first is the too-easy assumption that the unexpected and sustained growth in travel by rail since the mid-1990s will continue indefinitely. Intuitively that seems unlikely (the reasons for journeying and the time available for it are not unbounded), but it has taken hold partly because it suits the narrative that privatisation is a success and partly because it makes everyone feel good. Yet the assumption has been accompanied by remarkably little analysis of underlying causes. In addition to the impact of better timetables, quality improvements, marketing and pricing (none of which are the exclusive preserve of private companies, since BR was quite good at them too) these may include:

≋ the availability, at least until 2007, of a great deal of disposable income for discretionary spending among social groups for whom extra travel would be a commonplace;

≋ exasperation with road congestion and a degree of environmental conscience over unnecessary use of cars;

≋ a rise in the cost of running cars and curbs on the financial benefits of company cars;

≋ a marked decline in the status-enhancing role of cars among young people;

≋ the quality of the rail service connecting centres with a high proportion of 'knowledge-based' jobs and the possibility of using electronic tools on trains that cannot be used in cars;

≋ the growth of employment in London, where commuting other than by rail is almost infeasible; and

≋ the growth of the service sector, and particularly of financial jobs, in cities such as Edinburgh, Leeds and Manchester, coupled with the popularity of both inner-city living (which prompts leisure travel by rail) and of ex-urban residential areas (from which commuting by rail has London characteristics).

We know too little about the impact of each of these factors, and possibly others, to be sure about their continuance. At best that leads us to the possibility of over-provision if some of these changes have run their course or if the trends change again, at worst it predicts a volume of travel 30 or 40 years on that is simply not credible.

** The second concern relates to the possibility of fundamental social and economic shifts. To its credit NR has attempted to address this by constructing a set of scenarios based on alternative lifestyles and alternative economic models (such as greater or lesser involvement in global trade)[58]. However, the outcomes express a relatively narrow range of possibilities, they have not had a strong influence on actual planning (they appear to have played no part in the forecasts that supposedly support HS2), and they leave aside the not improbable eventualities of, for example, very large rises in resource prices as worldwide scarcity bites or catastrophic weather events

raising operating costs and prompting governments to discourage non-essential travel in order to reduce carbon emissions.

A reference to the freight business is worth making here. The railway industry has convinced itself that conveying freight by rail has environmental merit because it is relatively superior (on the balance of evidence regarding such factors as energy inputs and pollutant outputs) to conveying the same products by lorry. It never seems to be aware that in radical critiques of an inherently unsustainable economy (perpetual growth cannot happen in a closed system) it is the very fact of the production of certain goods and their movement over long distances that is being challenged. Waste in the food chain, the casual discarding of short-life plastic items and cheap clothing made in questionable conditions are typical themes. And a recent flurry of reports suggests that the apparently unstoppable transfer of manufacturing to Asia may be slowing or even reversing[59].

My point is not that practices will necessarily change but that since they may do it is important to explore scenarios other than ones of uninterrupted, extrapolated growth. That matters hugely in planning because the impact of more modest growth in the demand for track capacity would be quite different from that of a greatly-enlarged freight business, which is showing signs of needing substantial investment or some curtailment of passenger services[60].

** Finally, and linking to several points made earlier, almost all of NR's planning is based on projecting the existing network and its pattern of services forward. That obviously makes sense at one level, because they are based on a solid foundation of demand rooted in history and socio-economic geography and because they need to be nurtured. On the other hand there are manifest weaknesses in what we have. Even the simplest analysis of the railway as a network indicates that the slimming down from the Victorian heritage left us with a mesh of nodes and links that is still broadly appropriate in terms of the connectivity it offers for Britain's principal centres of population (whatever may be said about the variable quality of services on the links) – but equally that some critical links are missing[61].

Similarly, we know (although not as thoroughly as we should) that rail's modal share ranges from over 90% of some London markets to the trivial in some provincial markets[62], a fact that should be prompting evaluation as to its inevitability or the potential benefits of measures to change it. And it is plain that access-geography and hence market penetration is an unregarded issue crying out for research[63]. Much more should be done therefore to stand back and question the suitability of the network for its optimal future role before too much money is committed to conventional projects in the current rush to enhance and expand the infrastructure.

** These deficiencies in data, methodology and thinking are evident in spades in the proposal for HS2, a new high-speed railway between cities in northern England, the West Midlands and London.

The project did not emerge from a systematic study of scenarios, strategies and options. Instead it was initiated for essentially political reasons – 'me-too-ism' by comparison with other countries, a political wheeze to deflect calls for a third runway at Heathrow, and an understandable (but probably misguided) attempt to raise the economic performance of the English regions relative to London and the South East – and then justified by a belief that the West Coast Main Line will run out of capacity. This is arguable because it uses a single model of sustained growth, fantasises about business travellers doing deals when most recent growth is in the leisure market, focusses excessively on peak demands and does not investigate alternative schemes, including removing the distorting effect of certain ticketing policies[64].

These elementary errors were then compounded by the decision to establish a separate company, HS2 Ltd, to develop the project. Naturally it has no objective other than to build the world's best high-speed railway, irrespective of whether that is necessarily the best plan in the particular circumstances in Britain, and it is not much troubled about interaction between its line and the 'classic' railway – sometimes to the point of arrogance[65].

The result is not only a confrontation with people who would be directly affected by building HS2 and a disregard bordering on contemptuous for environmental considerations, but also continuing controversies about the route, the location of stations and connections with other lines, including HS1, frequencies and the service-pattern[66], and the impact on modal shares,. Nor does the confusion over objectives inspire confidence: if capacity was the original rationale why was the line called 'High Speed Two' and designed for the highest speeds in the world rather than as a means of relieving particular pinch-points[67] ? All this marks the project as seriously flawed[68]. And yet, while many issues await resolution and the process of Parliamentary approval has scarcely begun, very large sums are being spent on detailed planning. That build-up of momentum should be ringing alarm bells[69].

Conclusion

This is a weighty critique. I do not wish to suggest that all is woe, for there is much to value in the modern railway in Britain – new rolling stock, better timetables, rebuilt or refurbished stations and of course the growth in travel by train. However, if I have focussed on a number of matters that I believe to be problematic either already or in future, it is because I am worried by the tendency of the corporate interests to discourage debate by putting out a relentless flow of propaganda to the effect that everything is absolutely fine. It is not, and it is essential to open up the debate. After all, the railway is not and should not be a private fiefdom. It is our railway, the people's railway.

So what might the agenda be ? Here are my priorities[70]:

- ≋ create a tangibly-integrated national network, first for the railway and then for public transport as a whole;

- ≋ establish as a fundamental principle and presentational tool the concept of regular-interval, inter-connecting services running at the frequency appropriate for each route;

- ≋ aim primarily to increase rail's (and public transport's) share of the travel market rather than to stimulate new trips that would not otherwise be made;

- ≋ concentrate on what rail does best, replace marginal stations and lines with properly-linked buses and fill gaps in the rail network with associated coach services;

- ≋ enhance the poorer services toward the standard of the best before spending massive sums on the already good;

- ≋ reorient Network Rail's projects toward the delivery of the integrated timetable by means of selective enhancements such as doubling single-lead junctions and raising speed limits but also by better coordinating schemes with operators' rolling-stock plans; and

- ≋ set up a Public Transport Agency to plan, manage and champion the system in the public interest, including the timetabling function, and to administer its delivery through term concessions to a mix of public and private companies and not-for-profit cooperatives.

This list obviously begs many questions, including that of finance, but is intended to emphasise the need for a broader, more honest, more-evidenced-based, more realistic discussion than we are having at present. And you will notice that I do not mention renationalisation: I am not wholly opposed, but I think we can achieve our goals in different, more twenty-first century ways.

Endnotes >>

[1]   See for example Richard Branson: "We would love to get our hands on the East Coast. I think we could transform it" [The Journal, Newcastle, 27 Feb 13, www.journallive.co.uk/north-east-news/todays-news/2013/02/27/richard-branson-i-d-get-east-coast-trains-on-track-gallery-61634-32887504/#ixzz2WHAE9Tgs]. For an analysis of Virgin's corporate spinning see Aditya Chakrabortty. The truth about Richard Branson's Virgin Rail profits [The Guardian, 10 Jun 13, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jun/10/truth-richard-branson-virgin-rail-profits?INTCMP=SRCH, also Richard Branson's response and the subsequent exchanges]. Similarly, Moir Lockhead was lauded by the industry press for the way he built First Group, but it is evident that he grossly over-borrowed.

[2]   Date from the annual National Travel Survey shows that only 8% of the population used a train in the survey-week and that outside London the share was typically lower still. It has been suggested by the RAC Foundation that about half the population uses rail less than once a year or never; it has not proved possible to verify this, but it seems plausible. For the 8% figure and its regional breakdown, see Jones, P and Le Vine, S (2012). On the Move: Making sense of car and train travel trends in Britain. London: RAC Foundation and others. Table 3.42 [http://www.racfoundation .org/assets/rac_foundation/content/downloadables/on_the_move-le_vine_&_jones-dec2012.pdf].

[3]   A comprehensive and critical account is given in a forthcoming paper by Gerald Crompton and summarised in his complementary presentation to this paper at the IRS&TH Workshop.

[4]   One problem is the definition of 'journeys'. It is based on the tickets sold, so when the ticket system encourages, as it often does, the purchase of multiple tickets for a trip that would previously have been made on one ticket the apparent number of journeys is artificially increased. Moreover, where a multi-stage trip on one ticket involves more than one operator, the number of 'journeys' is counted not as one but as the number of operators. In principle this should not affect the estimates of passenger-kilometres, but there are doubts about the accuracy of the calculations.

[5]   For example, there are persistent media stories of officious application of ticket conditions which the train operators seem to do little to counter, while brusque announcements that company-specific tickets of other companies are not valid on the train in question creates an unwelcoming ambience.

[6]   British Rail's research in vehicle engineering, culminating in the High Speed (diesel) Train and the Pacer units (which saved many services from extinction), development of the concepts of block trains and containerisation for freight, application of market-pricing and advance-purchase discounting to the setting of fares, high quality of industrial design and introduction of Solid State Interlocking signalling systems are among many significant achievements. And when the private companies list their innovations such as the use of electronic communications the implication that BR would not have done so is a-historical: the innovation has been enabled by technological advances, and BR's record suggests that it too would have exploited them.

[7]   The dominant style of promotions by the train companies is now about stimulating trips, even to the extent that one may receive an email with ideas of what to do at a destination *after* one has bought a ticket – as though the journey had no other prior purpose. It is very odd that a Government supposedly committed to reducing carbon outputs and to promoting public transport does not measure the extent to which the growth in rail traffic is a result of transfers from other modes, as distinct from traffic generated by marketing, ie. journeys that would not otherwise have been made at all (strictly of course any undesirable effects of such travel should be net of any caused by what the money would have been spent on). The concept that passenger trains provide accessibility to a wide range of activities (ie. that demand is essentially derived, not primary) is being lost and with it presentation of the convenience of the network.

[8]   Railways Act 1993 [chapter 43], Transport Act 2000 [chapter 38], Railways Act 2005 [chapter 14] and the Government announcement on 31 January 2013 about future policy following the Brown Review [https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rail-franchising--16].

[9]   Faced with the weaknesses of the traditional state railways in competition with road transport the European Economic Community conceived the idea that competition *within* the rail sector would stimulate change and a more successful challenge to other modes, which would be desirable on environmental grounds. This was first promulgated in the 1991 Council Directive on the development of the Community's railways [91/440/EEC]. The policy was influenced partly by those ideologically committed to competition *per se* and partly by misapplied analogies with the way in which roads, seaports and airports function – misapplied because the technologies are very different (see the next endnote). It is also significant that while the European Union persists with this policy it has wholly failed to eliminate inefficient charging for the use of roads.

10   A railway is a complex system, and a system in which parts do not interact properly with other parts will become dysfunctional. This is important in engineering terms, for example in relationships between the wheel and the rail, between the weight and dynamics of rolling stock and the track and track-bed, and between the power required to propel the trains and the power available in the electrical supply, but also in daily operating where independent decision-making by different players can reduce efficiency and effectiveness. When Network Rail and train operators issue enthusiastic press releases about the benefits of uniting their separate control centres one can alternatively read them as an admission that breaking up the railway system was a mistake. Some interesting examples are given in an article about the South Western Railway [Modern Railways, June 2013, pp.56-60]. The view that separation has given Britain Europe's best railway was put by Jim Steer in his recent Presidential Address to the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport [see Focus (the CILT journal), June 2013, pp.8-13].

11   http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2013:0025:FIN:EN:PDF.

12   In its 2013 report the Superbrands consultancy highlights state-owned East Coast along with National Express and Virgin but does not recognise Arriva, First Group or Stagecoach. Eurostar, majority-owned by SNCF, the French national railway, gained the Winner's accolade in the 'Travel – Bus & Rail Operators' section. See http://www.superbrands.uk.com/east-coast and http://d3iixjhp5u37hr.cloudfront.net/files/2013/04/CSB-2013-Official-Results-5FDb4O.pdf. In similar rankings I suspect that the state railway in Switzerland [SBB] would come rather higher [see http://www.sbb.ch/en/group/the-company/sbb-brand/ci-net.html].

13   See for example http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/columnists/privatising-east-coast-line-an-express-route-to-disaster.20622919. There is cause for critical blogs rather too often.

14   The party is too easily tempted to focus on populist topics such as increases in fares and curtailing the profits of the train operators, important though those are. It has however made clear its support for devolution of responsibility for franchising to regional bodies (but see endnote 17) and hinted at the re-creation of a single *InterCity* brand. It is often said that a commitment to renationalise the railways would give the party that proposed it a useful boost in its vote, though that is not necessarily the best solution and Labour would do well to be exploring the complex institutional issues raised in this paper and alternative structures (some ideas on which conclude the paper). The party also needs to note the threat to such a policy implicit in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/04/us-trade-deal-full-frontal-assault-on-democracy].

15   Co-operatives UK recently published an interesting report by Paul Salveson entitled 'Rail Cymru – A People's Railway for Wales' [http://www.uk.coop/rail-cymru], and Salveson has made the broader case in an article for the Chartist magazine, 'Socialising Transport - A Strategy for the Left' [http://www.chartist.org.uk/about/pamphlets.htm] and in a just-published book [Salveson, P (2013). Railpolitik: bringing railways back to communities. London: Lawrence and Wishart]. There is perhaps an over-concentration on secondary and branch lines and some unrealistic material about the value of reopenings, and correspondingly too little on how to manage the inter-urban network better and achieve a sense of a national system again, but it is a stimulating read nonetheless.

16   And not one conducted in consultation documents seen by few people, such as *Long Term Planning Process: Long Distance Market Study Draft for Consultation*. In this document Network Rail, in pursuit of the Government preoccupation with an (ill-defined) concept of 'economic growth', proposes to devalue 'visiting friends and relatives' journeys as not 'economically productive'. That has profound implications. In this world view shopping is of course productive. See www.networkrail.co.uk/improvements/planning-policies-and-plans/long-term-planning-process/market-studies/long-distance/, p.15.

17   Although the Scottish Government has a devolved responsibility for transport it remains subject to the Railways Act 1993, §25 of which prevents any public-sector ownership of franchises. In a Ministerial Statement on the ScotRail Franchise Renewal Programme in June 2012 the Minister for Transport in the Scottish Government hoped to "encourage bids from a wide range of operators, including not-for-profit operators". When the pre-qualified companies were announced on 1 November 2013 there was no sign of a newcomer, let alone a community-interest company, only of five of the usual suspects: Abellio [the state railway of The Netherlands], Arriva [owned by Deutsche Bahn], FirstGroup, MTR [whose roots are in the Hong Kong Metro] and National Express. See http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/rail/scottish-franchise-renewal-programme.

18   This is in part a consequence of the ORR's highly formal approach which obliges them to evaluate the effect of granting access rights in immense, esoteric and convoluted detail bearing little apparent connection with either rail strategy or real travellers – see the archives on the Hull Trains and Grand Central cases on the East Coast Main Line. At one point a company with no record, no backing and experience only in cleaning trains was being treated equally with the established and dominant operator [see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platinum_Trains].

[19] See paragraph 24 of the Secretary of State's Guidance to ORR in July 2012 and an earlier letter in response to an ORR consultation on on-rail competition
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/3642/sos-guidance-to-orr.pdf and http://www.rail-reg.gov.uk/pr13/PDF/on-rail_competition_dft_301111.pdf].

[20] Realising the Potential of GB Rail – Report of the Rail Value for Money Study, May 2011 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/4204/realising-the-potential-of-gb-rail.pdf].

[21] See http://www.raildeliverygroup.com. The RDG has been criticised as both constitutionally improper (because it accords significant influence over policy formulation to large commercial players – and excludes passenger interests) and ineffectual. It has recently (24 Oct 2013) been announced (with no prior public discussion) that it is merging with the section of the Association of Train Operating Companies [ATOC] that represents those parties (as distinct from the sections that manage national systems such as Railcards and the divvying up of revenue). This may alleviate the second problem while exacerbating the first. See http://www.raildeliverygroup.com/assets/files/2013/11/RailDeliveryGrouppressrelease24Oct2013.pdf. Christian Wolmar offered a pungent critique in his column in Rail, 734 (30 Oct – 12 Nov 2013), pp.42-43.

[22] For the most developed alliance see www.southwesttrains.co.uk/thealliance.aspx.

[23] For a sense of this see
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/191925/franchise-competition-map.pdf.

[24] A recent example was the vote in favour of strike action by Northern Rail staff over the company's use of lower-paid casual workers for what the union believes are core functions such as ticket inspection (scrutiny by agency people is notoriously cursory) [http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2013/05/28/northern-rail-strike-sack-agency-not-workers]. Another aspect of the mind-set is the preoccupation with property rights: control of access to stations erodes their status as part of the public realm.

[25] The Government has stated its intention to broaden the range of players and held a "Rail Opportunities Day" on 22 May 2013, but how realistic this is remains to be seen. Simon Burns, the then Minister of State for Transport wrote in the Daily Telegraph on 24 Apr 13: "The new franchising programme means tremendous opportunities for innovative, dynamic companies who want to prosper from our railway by delivering excellent services for passengers. We want to encourage new entrants and inject new thinking into the industry" [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/transport/10013563/Rail-franchising-is-not-broken-it-just-needs-an-injection-of-new-thinking.html]. There are fine words in the East Coast Invitation to Tender, but see endnote 17.

[26] Ostensibly the ticket-operated barriers introduced across the network in recent years are for the purposes of revenue protection, but no reliable evidence of the problem or that they are the most appropriate solution has ever been published. Observation, and knowledge of the limitations of the checking software, cast serious doubt on their efficacy, and many, installed at considerable expense, are often not in use [see http://www.rail.co.uk/rail-news/2013/east-coast-trains-removes-barriers-to-travel-at-kings-cross-as-network-rail-apologises-for-poor-performance/]. This is why it has been suggested that the real purpose is to channel passenger movement in such a way as to ensure the best results from CCTV cameras. The rash of silver bollards installed at entrances to larger stations is a response by the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure to a distinctly limited threat. They are patently excessive in scale, yet the industry has accepted the cost with no public debate. Security for international trains through the Channel Tunnel is understandably rigorous, but it is debatable whether the measures now applied, which have grown incrementally since Eurostar started running, are proportionate to the scale of the risk. In a surprising but welcome submission to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee inquiry into the EU's Fourth Railway Package proposals Eurotunnel were quite outspoken about the burden [http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmtran/writev/ec/m7.htm, ¶2.8].

[27] This is exacerbated by the frequent changes to franchise boundaries (some of which are designed to facilitate the process at the expense of detriment to the service-offer) and by the practice of renaming a franchise when it changes hands. At the last renewal the Scottish Government insisted (rightly, in my view) on imposing a national brand rather than allowing the operator to use its corporate brand (but then spoilt the point by devising the tautologous slogan "ScotRail – Scotland's Railway".

[28] Passenger Focus, representing the industry's users, has been arguing for greater influence and may be given it under the revised franchising arrangements.

[29] See http://www.bringbackbritishrail.org/ and http://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/keep-east-coast-public. The text of the prospectus is hardly impartial, implying that East Coast has been badly managed and that only a white

knight from the private sector can revitalise it. It was alleged in a Parliamentary debate on 12 November that a number of positive statements were deliberately removed before publication [Hansard, column 206WH].

30   This term was introduced by British Rail in lieu of 'passengers' in an effort to train its staff to be more considerate and helpful and to remind them who ultimately pays their salaries. Its usage has been strengthened by the ethos of private operators but continues to be criticised. And the companies still have Passenger (or Passenger's or Passengers') Charters.

31   Most marketing is for journeys within one company's sphere, and presentation of a national network of train services has largely disappeared (the 'National Rail' brand has little meaning and is barely known other than for the enquiry website). Connecting services get little or no attention in the timetable pamphlets and leaflets produced by each operator – which are an incoherent riot of styles. And the on-line ticket systems often do not offer the sum of two or more advance-purchase tickets for a multi-operator journey, so that a user unfamiliar with the process may be asked to pay nearly twice as much for a through ticket as for two tickets bought separately – and hence may decide not to travel by train. It is unclear whether the misleading quotations are a matter of deliberate policy or whether they occur simply because pricing has become so complicated that the algorithms cannot cope.

32   Notable examples were the unified 'InterCity' and 'Network South East' brands that achieved remarkably high recognition in a short time before they were destroyed (in an act of ideological vandalism) and the now-iconic double-arrow symbol. The latter (in the ownership of the Department for Transport) remains the official marker-sign for stations, but its use is erratic. A huge version has appeared in the London Underground concourse at King's Cross St. Pancras, but its meaning is unclear and is compromised by being accompanied by the Network Rail logo.

33   The most egregious case is the Intercity Express Programme [IEP]. This began, reasonably enough, when DfT recognised the absurdity of four inter-city operators pursuing independent solutions to the need eventually to replace the InterCity 125 diesel trains. However the project took on a life of its own as the Department's design ideas diverged from those of the operators, to the point where it is believed that few in the industry want the trains that have been ordered (but note that no one has spoken out in public). A critical review and call for a reappraisal was expertly sidelined by a stubborn DfT. The saga may end happily with technically excellent trains that prove as popular as the 125s, but the auguries are not good. For a running commentary see Roger Ford's 'Informed Sources' columns in *Modern Railways*, and for the review see http://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/documents/Foster_IEPReview2010.pdf.

34   The idea continues to be floated by right-inclined institutions such as the Institute of Economic Affairs, by some Conservative members of the Transport Select Committee and by the Office of Rail Regulation [for the latter see the reference at endnote 19]. One report (by the Centre for Policy Studies) has recommended opening up the East Coast Main Line to multiple Open Access operators, without apparently understanding the consequences for travellers of such fragmentation or the inefficiencies that would be introduced into pathing (competition would be nullified if operators could not choose their own rolling stock, running times, station calls and turnrounds) [see http://www.cps.org.uk/files/reports/original/130321100013-railssecondchance.pdf].

35   Before the collapse of the West Coast Main Line franchising process the Conservative Government, with enthusiastic support from ATOC, was proposing greater commercial and operational freedom for the franchisees. It was never made clear what this might entail, since changing timetables without disruptive knock-ons is difficult, flexibility with unregulated fares already exists and cutting services could quickly rebound on politicians.

36   Whether it needs to be quite so cumbersome is another question. ORR's 'draft determination' on Network Rail's output and funding for the next Control Period runs to 815 pages, which represents an awful lot of second-guessing – and the final document to 959 [http://www.rail-reg.gov.uk/pr13/PDF/pr13-final-determination.pdf]. As Roger Ford points out this is some four times the length of the equivalent document when NR was just beginning the recovery from the collapse of Railtrack [see http://railwayeye.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/orr-draft-determination-exposes.html].

37   This might be expressed in terms of geographic penetration (minimum standards by size and type of community) / connectivity / journey times (absolute or relative to other modes) / effective frequency / the time-span of services (first/last, including weekends) / modal-share targets in different markets / greater equality of provision between the regions of Britain. The prevailing philosophy of leaving decisions to operators in the market may deliver improvements meeting some of these criteria, but outcomes are haphazard and leave many discontents. Planning documents from Network Rail reflect this in that they express no overarching objective other than to ensure that operators' requirements are met, thereby running the risk that projects may be mis-specified when measured against long-term plans. In Switzerland a combination of statutory rights and requirements, a stronger public purpose in the planning of services and a detailed timetable concept for many years ahead around which investment is ordered

appears to yield better services and higher satisfaction. A formal comparative study would be an interesting and valuable project.

[38]   Probably the classic case, as I have often argued, is the Barnstaple line, a 63 km branch from the Great Western Main Line at Exeter. Although trimmed of extensions beyond Barnstaple and of some associated lines it retains exactly the same set of eleven intermediate stations as when it was built, many of them among the least-used stations on the network, either because they are remote from the communities they purport to serve or because the local population is small. On the other hand the catchment of Barnstaple and the towns of north Devon for which it is a railhead is of the order of 70,000 – a non-negligible number. The geography is such that journeys by rail between this area and the rest of England involve a detour via Exeter, hence the need for the branch trains to run as fast as possible or for the connection to be made at Tiverton Parkway or Taunton by rail-linked coaches. Instead the line continues to be run as a slow local service, with a limited and thus rather pointless number of calls at the least defensible stations. It is the failure to face up to the question that is so unsatisfactory. Interestingly, the 'reformers' have established their own group and are pursuing a quite different policy from that of the line's users' group which is predominantly a defence of the *status quo*. See respectively http://www.ndptu.org.uk/ (offering some carefully considered positions) and http://www.tarkarail.org/index.html.

[39]   The Exmouth branch has acquired two new stations in recent years and is about to acquire a third. Two new stations are proposed close to Leeds on the outer-suburban services to Ilkley and Skipton. And in York local enthusiasm for reopening a long-closed station in a northern suburban village is untempered by recognition that stopping merely-hourly inter-regional Scarborough <> Manchester trains there will be neither desirable for the longer-distance market nor an attractive offer for people travelling to the City centre. Two important elements of this phenomenon are, firstly, that getting the railway to run trains is politically easier than delivering the often-more-appropriate solution of a good bus service, which would require action to constrain the use of private cars, and secondly, that although local authorities may be called upon to contribute to the capital cost of rail schemes, the extra revenue spend that usually follows is justified on wider-benefit grounds and therefore subsumed in national funding.

[40]   In Cornwall a local bus company, Truronian, made sterling efforts to run a bus route serving Helston and the Lizard peninsula as 'the Helston Branch Line' in conjunction with the railway at Redruth (there had once been an actual branch, from Gwinear Road), but since it was absorbed by First Group the arrangement of connections has deteriorated, despite the trains being run by another Group company, First Great Western (the latter's erratic timetable does not help). Another frequently-cited case of badly-managed connections is the link with buses serving Lyme Regis at Axminster on the Exeter … Salisbury line. For the original Helston vision see http://www.cornwall-centre-of-excellence.org.uk/t34.htm and for a snapshot of what has happened subsequently see the chat-blog at http://www.firstgreatwestern.info/info/12920_Who_Runs_the_16_10_Redruth_to_Helston_Bus.html.

[41]   See endnote 37 for a summary of reasons why this is so. The lack of a vision, as distinct from welcome but uncoordinated advances, is compounded by two peculiarly British features. One is the propensity for minor variations in timings to percolate across the timetable, sometimes for technical knock-on reasons, sometimes because of undisciplined managerial action in pursuit of some economy or perceived customer interest, and sometimes (it seems) to satisfy Network Rail's whims. Unlike other countries Britain has no strong restraining tradition that specifies the operating and marketing advantages of a high degree of regularity, despite the vision of Sir Herbert Walker in introducing pattern timetables as part of the marketing of *Southern Electric*. The other, and related, feature is that Britain, with its tradition of multiple and self-serving private operators that British Rail never entirely eliminated, has not embraced, and perhaps not even understood, the concept and value of a truly-integrated national timetable of inter-connected public transport.

[42]   Modifying a franchise agreement to re-specify a service may involve fraught negotiations with DfT, including financial adjustments. Rightly or misguidedly, companies must be wary of infringing competition law (which tends to be an ass when it comes to coordinating public transport). The sclerotic ORCATS revenue-distribution scheme may well be incapable of apportioning gains from better connections in a manner that reflects either costs or managerial effort. And securing better timetabled connections has little value if in real time a connection fails because separate performance regimes override common sense in not allowing trains to be held for slightly delayed arrivals. There may also be wider considerations. The companies running the East Coast Main Line have struggled with the question of how best to serve the prosperous territory between York and Harrogate: is it by connections with the only-hourly branch trains composed of mediocre rolling stock incompatible with the East Coast quality image or is it by encouraging access by car, which faces problems of congestion and limited car-parking space ?

[43]   *Modern Railways*, Aug 2013, pp. 16 and 19. This conflict of interests also affects the controversial 'Electric Spine' scheme.

[44]   The author is designing a British *Taktfahrplan* and in initial work in Scotland has directly encountered these issues. One case is a plan for the Inverness … Aberdeen line for which Network Rail proposed infrastructure works costing no less than £203 million, with no discussion of different rolling stock and a timetable plan that wholly ignored the important connections at each end of the route. See http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/files/documents/reports/116647_-_100906_-_ANI_GRIP2_Report.pdf.

[45]   In a presentation to the Railway Study Association in October 2013 two much-respected senior managers (Chris Green, and Sarah Kendall, Network Rail's Route Director for Wales) outlined this case, and particularly the capacity-optimisation point. In subsequent correspondence with the present author Green commented that the moment for a 'guiding mind' timetable must come.

[46]   The Department did fund a study under the Foresight programme from 2000 to 2003 (of which the present author was the project manager); the research scored well in academic terms and demonstrated the potential benefits of more systematic timetabling, but DfT has never followed up the work despite frequent proposals that it should do so, including one at the time when the railway's formal process was plainly floundering in the planning of a new timetable for the East Coast Main Line [a summary of the results of the project is at http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100203063442/http:/www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_science/document s/page/dft_science_033473.pdf, pp.34-35]. More recently PTN invited Norman Baker (then the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport) to review the issues after he had published a document proposing stronger policies on coordination [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142539/door-to-door-strategy.pdf]. His reply ignored PTN's criticism of the very superficial analysis and proposals, failed to understand the institutional roots of some dire examples of poor connections in the current rail timetable and fell back on platitudes. However it is reported that ORR has asked NR to undertake some work of this kind in preparation for the Periodic Review in 2018: whether it need take that long is a moot point [*Local Transport Today*, 624, 14 Jun 13, p.10].

[47]   For two examples see endnote 61.

[48]   In the most recent survey (Spring 2013) 82% of passengers were satisfied with their journey overall, but only 42% were satisfied with the value for money of the price of their ticket [http://www.passengerfocus.org.uk/research/ publications/national-passenger-survey-spring-2013-nps-main-report, p.10].

[49]   The railway collectively has never adopted the intense focus on common standards of design and presentation that give M&S or Body Shop or Sainsbury or the John Lewis group the edge. BR began to achieve it in the best parts of the business sectors immediately before privatisation destroyed them. The better franchisees are coming closer, but, I would argue, let down by the fracturing of the national railway.

[50]   The Government issued a document for consultation entitled Rail Fares and Ticketing Review in May 2012. The consultation closed at the end of June 2012, but no announcement of its conclusions was made until 9 October 2013. One may surmise that the review highlighted a fundamental problem, namely that if services are provided by nineteen different franchisees, each encouraged to pursue its own commercial strategies, then multiplication of fares and rules is bound to arise and to bewilder passengers – and hence that the radical solution to impose some common practices would be rejected by the companies because of the threat to their profits. Certainly what was finally announced was a mouse: the crowd-pleasing narrowing of the 'flex' on commuters' fares and a trial on one route (why is that needed ?) of removing the anomaly that some single tickets cost nearly as much as the matching return (thereby inhibiting the common preference for an advance ticket outward and a flexible ticket for the return). The discredited system thus remains largely untouched. Matters are made worse by the undoubted use of 'confusion marketing', the same source of distrust as has affected the domestic energy market. The consultation is at https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/rail-fares-and-ticketing-review and the Government conclusions at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249001/fares-ticketing-next-steps.pdf.

[51]   Perhaps the most serious is that the stringency of the rule that an advance-purchase ticket is only valid on one chosen train means that travellers have to allow a more than ample margin for delays on connecting services. This perversely adds to perceived journey times (into reducing whose on-train component so much effort is invested), renders high frequencies (such as Virgin's 3 trains/hour routes) less convenient, creates anxiety and may deter some journeys. This is little-researched and operators seem oblivious to it, but Passenger Focus and others have argued that, at the least, advance tickets should be valid on a group of trains. The huge emphasis on advance tickets has eroded the sense of a 'walk-up-and-go' service by creating the impression that all journeys have to be pre-booked.

[52]   For the case of fares for multi-operator journeys see endnote 31. Another problem is that for all their alleged sophistication the yield-management algorithms seem unable to avoid creating an abrupt change in load factors (the percentage of seats occupied) between the so-called 'peak' trains and the first train on which off-peak tickets are valid. This notoriously affects the 19:00 London King's Cross to Edinburgh Waverley and the 19:00 London Euston to

Manchester Piccadilly. And this is not dismissible as a technical matter, since the overcrowding is quite illegitimately used to bolster the argument for more capacity, especially by building HS2. For examples of the complexity of the rules and the way in which even railway staff do not always understand them see Barry Doe's *The Fare Dealer* column in *Rail* magazine.

[53]   See the chart 'Performance 2002-2013' at www.networkrail.co.uk/about/performance/. Suspicion is growing amongst operators that the pressure to run more trains to cope with demand is leading to a level of capacity utilisation that is detrimental to reliability.

[54]   For evidence of the bureaucratic monster that fragmentation has bred see http://www.delayattributionboard.co.uk/documents/minutesofmeeting/2012/95_12%20DAB%20Minutes%2010_07_12 %20FINAL.a.pdf.

[55]   And particularly including greybeards like the present author.

[56]   Some of the supposedly informative announcements, such as reading out long lists of calling points for standard-pattern local trains, are simply unnecessary. 'Security' announcements have probably become counter-productive by virtue of tedious repetition, but there is a suspicion that the companies persist with them because having made them covers the company legally in the event of an incident.

[57]   My critique of websites and the posters is in *New Transit*, Jan/Feb 2013, pp.40-41. The key points are the curious and misleading advice on timings when crossing London (and the damaging impression thereby given that journeys take longer than they actually do for most travellers), the random siting of the A to Z displays (no one seems sure whether they are meant as a sales tool – 'from here you can travel at these times to X' – or as reassurance to passengers waiting on platforms), and the capricious and often unhelpful information that is presented (for example, showing occasional through trains to a destination but not the more relevant regular service by connection). And what is perhaps even more worrying is that there has been no response to a provocative article.

[58]   See https://www.networkrail.co.uk/Long-Term-Planning-Process/.

[59]   See http://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/bathroomscom-moves-25-of-manufacturing-to-the-uk-216540811.html.

[60]   Whether freight, which already only bears its marginal cost, could bear the cost of some of the supposedly essential investments is another question, which should only be answered in favour of a subsidy if the social and environmental benefits can be reliably shown to justify it.

[61]   By far the most significant is that between the East Midlands and the Northampton – Milton Keynes area, precisely the corridor served by the over-crowded M1. Why the railway has not modelled the potential of closing that gap (which would be an extremely modest project compared with HS2), and maybe similar ones elsewhere, while allowing itself to appear sympathetic to marginal reopening cases is something of a mystery (for example, Skipton … Colne, which its champions describe as 'strategic': see *Rail*, 725, 26 Jun 13, p.13].

[62]   The London share is commonly believed to be well above 50%, the 90% figure is not implausible for the fastest and highest-quality routes for travel to/from Central London and is suggested in a recent report by Greengauge 21 [http://www.greengauge21.net/wp-content/uploads/Travel-market-demand-and-the-HS1-–-HS2-link-Greengauge21.pdf]. At the lower end sketchy evidence is drawn from occasional studies and simple interpretation of ticket data that does seem to be generally consistent (for regional aggregates see the reference in endnote 2). The fact that we do not know for sure (and see also the next endnote) is itself symptomatic of the state of transport policy in Britain. No systematic matrix has ever been constructed, and to do so by a third party would need resolution of two difficulties in respect of rail data, one that statistics on ticket sales are deemed to be commercially confidential (which might be considered indefensible in the light of the scale of support for a public industry from public funds) and the other that point-to-point ticket data has become a poor guide to real demand because so many journeys now use more than one ticket.

[63]   Chances of history and geography have left a number of towns with an adequate service for travel to the relevant regional centre (albeit often rather slow because only all-stations and no semi-fast trains are offered) but no service at all in other directions. It is not known, because nobody seems to ask the question, what effect this has on attitudes towards using rail: does it diminish the appeal of even the suburban service, how much use is made of alternative railheads and do people simply assume that they will use a car ? Examples are Sutton Coldfield (a good line to Birmingham but no link with the north-east other than by a detour via Birmingham), Bromsgrove and Redditch (ditto for central Birmingham but with poor links to the south-west) and Bury (Lancashire), marooned at the end of a tramline. See also endnotes 37 and 38.

[64] For one of the loading myths see endnote 52. Counts by critics of the scheme (after HS2 Ltd refused to release data) suggest that WCML load factors generally are nothing like as problematic as Network Rail suggest, especially if viewed from the perspective of radical measures to change various circumstances rather than passively accepting a 'predict and provide' policy. In particular, it is evident that Virgin's restrictions on carrying commuters into and out of Euston (by not stopping at, for example, Milton Keynes southbound or only picking up northbound), which are not replicated on the other main lines, is contributing to overcrowding on the London Midland services. And is it conceivable that demand will grow so strongly as to fill Virgin's three lightly-loaded off-peak trains/hour on the Manchester and Birmingham routes – and more.

[65] For HS2 Ltd to respond to criticism (even if itself not that well researched) by referring to the project as 'absolutely vital' and based on 'undeniable facts' is unacceptable – the questioning is wholly legitimate, especially when spin is becoming increasingly evident in Government and HS2 publications [see *Modern Railways*, October 2013, p.9, also http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/road-and-rail-transport/10423076/Lies-at-the-heart-of-case-for-HS2.html]. Likewise, the HS2-enthusiastic editor of *Rail* does himself no credit by dismissing the concerns of experienced railway people who are publicly questioning the arguments. And the claim [reported privately to the author by a reliable source] that Network Rail has evaluated the case for HS2 alongside an assessment of the benefits of a British *Taktfahrplan* is simply untrue. For the general problem of optimism bias in 'mega-projects' see the many works of Professor Bent Flyvbjerg at http://flyvbjerg.plan.aau.dk/pubmegaprojects.php.

[66] The plan is based on the ability of the signalling to accommodate 18 trains/hour. Since no other railway in the world presently runs more than 14 and since considered opinion in France is that 15 is the absolute maximum this looks like heroic optimism about the development of advanced signalling controls. The problem is that if it cannot be achieved then the business case is gravely weakened and many of the promises to northern cities cannot be fulfilled – after £50 billion has been spent. Meanwhile the proposed post-HS2 service on the classic routes is looking decidedly unattractive for cities and towns that will not directly benefit.

[67] In the autumn of 2010 the present author was invited by Greengauge 21 to design a timetable for the West Coast Main Line and HS1 taken together for the opening of Phase 1 from the proposed junction near Lichfield. The reason was that HS2, obsessed with its own perfect railway, was showing no interest in how capacity released on the classic line would be utilised. Greengauge had realised that this was politically inept. However it was things learned during that project that turned this author from moderately-convinced supporter to outright critic of HS2. For the timetable plan (on *Takt* principles of course) and subsequent critiques of HS2 see the PTN website at http://www.passengertransportnetworks.co.uk/index.html.

[68] The considerable cost of the infrastructure at Ashford International and Stratford International on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, now known as HS1, has never been and may never be justified by the use that operators may make of the two stations, a mistake plainly attributable to a lack of a clear purpose forged into a timetable plan in advance of construction.

[69] For a different approach see New Economics Foundation [nef] (June 2013). High Speed 2: The best we can do ? Creating more value from £33 billion. London.

[70] For a community-rooted and complementary vision see 'The Aachen Declaration' of the Campaign for Real Rail (!) at http://www.paulsalveson.org.uk/2013/10/13/illustrated-weekly-salvo-115/.