

Better railways?

The proposed reorganisation of the railways has at its centre a wholly admirable concentration on the passenger. We are told there will be a new accent on

- 1, Punctuality.
2. Cleanliness.
3. More comfortable seats – also a campaign of mine given the way GWR substituted less comfortable seats for more comfortable ones when it switched from the 125s to the new Hitachi sets.
4. Good wi fi availability

The aim is to allow the reconnection of places where closure of lines and stations by the former nationalised industry left places without service, and to encourage service quality improvements in areas like catering.

The issue is can the new structure deliver these straightforward and desirable requirements? Great British Rail, a public sector body, will have ultimate control of trains and track, timetables and service levels. They can use and harness a wide range of local community groups, local government partnerships and private sector companies to bid to provide and manage services.

I asked for some assurance that Great British Railways will have the powers and the will to innovate and accept challengers to the status quo. We do not want them delivering existing timetables and clinging to them when it would be possible to change them for the better. We do not want them delivering current levels and standards of catering or wifi or other on board services when we want new and better.

The government made several good arguments about the way rail travel shrank badly under nationalisation, with high fares, line and station closures, poor catering and poor punctuality. The Secretary of State reminded us how the privatised railway doubled passenger miles travelled after years of decline. Now we want something better that can adapt to part week commuting, new patterns of leisure travel and a more tempting offer to displace the car.