

Nationalisation of railway franchises does not solve many of the problems

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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