

Railway delays – nationalisation did not and will not cure them

Southern Rail has delivered a very poor service for months thanks to a Union dispute on the line. Northern Rail is now delivering a bad service thanks to mismanagement of a new timetable designed to provide a better service. The one criticism that is unfair is the criticism that says of the problems the North is now experiencing happened in the south they would get fixed. They were not. There is an equality of misery around the country with cancelled and delayed trains not concentrated in one part.

The government and the Transport Secretary are well aware of the problems, and wants things to get better. There has been no shortage of financial resource into Network Rail in recent years. There have been endless government responses to poor performance by elements of the rail industry when they let the customers down. Ministers can only intervene when Network Rail and a train operating company have failed to meet targets and promises. Day to day the operating companies and Network Rail run the trains, make the decisions and are answerable to the public. In each case it is important to see what has caused the problems and to ask what could solve them.

In the case of Southern it is reminder of the poor labour relations we often experienced in nationalised days. Then Union action threatened the whole network, where today it is more likely to be concentrated on one or two lines or companies. The nationalised tube has shown that nationalisation does not eliminate labour disputes.

In the case of Northern the main problem was the inability of Network Rail, the large nationalised part of the current railway, to provide the train slots and track capacity they promised for the train operating company to deliver the revised and improved service. They delayed responding to the new timetable proposals, then replied late with a different and more limited pattern.

The senior personnel at Network Rail are paid very high salaries, miles above the pay of the PM and Transport Secretary, for doing public sector jobs with access to huge sums of public money. We need more investigation of how and why Network Rail has let us down again with the advent of this new timetable. Why didn't they say earlier in discussions that the new timetable was too demanding? Can we at least have the satisfaction of knowing that some of those (7 Executive Committee members) paid more than £300,000 a year for making Network Rail work will face a financial penalty for the failures?