

The nationalised railways fail passengers

All too often the largely nationalised railway lets us down. On frequent strike days there may be no trains. On other days there may be delays and cancellations. There are bad weather days when service is impeded or cancelled.

The railway has lost its big five day a week commuting business. It used to overcharge this captive audience whilst discounting much of the leisure and pleasure business it used to try fill the off peak trains. It is having difficulty adjusting to a two three days a week in the office model, and to the more flexible hours of many. It is reluctant to make more changes to handle events and leisure travel more enthusiastically.

Before lockdown the average fare was £6.27 and the average subsidy £3.73 per ticket. Since lockdown the average fare has fallen to £6.12 and the average subsidy gone up to £7.51. So subsidy has doubled whilst the value of the fare has gone down. Why do taxpayers have to pay for people often with more income and leisure time than them to get cheap tickets?

I was on the committee that reported on how to privatise the railway. I disagreed with the majority report which proposed the system they adopted. They recommended splitting track ownership from trains and wanted a monopoly track company for the whole country. So Railtrack was born. It was nationalised by Labour. As I expected the monopoly track company did not perform well, though it was a bit safer than BR. It was nationalised following a bad crash brought on by track failures. As a monopoly it was more interested in revenue from existing assets than in evolving and growing the network.

Today we need railway management who can analyse current trends in commuting, leisure passenger travel and above all freight. We need a new pattern of use geared to maximising use, increasing revenues and cutting subsidies.

I will discuss the model I urged based on track and train together in line or regional companies facing competitive challenge in a later piece.