

The railways are largely nationalised

It is misleading to say we can nationalise the railways and this will solve all their problems. The bulk of the assets are already nationalised through Network Rail. The state owns all the tracks, signals, most of the stations, trackside assets and the land the railway uses. The main reason for the high cost of rail fares and the high taxpayer subsidy is the high cost of providing the large infrastructure the railway requires, and maintaining and improving it.

Quite often the reasons for failures of service rest with the performance of Network Rail. The wrong kind of snow or leaves on the track, signal failure, bent rails, failure of station equipment are regular reasons why trains are late or cancelled.

The private sector part of the railway on most lines is the provision and operation of trains that use the railway. These too can lead to delays and cancellations. If you hear staff are on strike, or a train driver has failed to turn up, or the engine breaks down, that is the private sector part letting you down.

The private sector is very circumscribed now in what it can and cannot change on the railway. It has to run a timetable laid down by government. It is often unable to get train slots on the tracks to expand or vary its service. Many fares are controlled. It can change the catering and on board train offer, but does not control the arrangements for ticketing, waiting on stations and the general service provided for passengers when not on board.

Some parts of the private sector have failed to reach good agreements with their staff to ensure smooth running of the trains. Is there any reason to suppose if the workforce was nationalised it would be any easier to reach an agreement to use the Guards for customer support? Nationalised industries had poor records when it came to employee relations. Labour's In place of strife approach when in government failed, and Labour lost in 1979 following bruising public sector strikes.

There is plenty of scope to apply new technology to the railways to improve service and raise productivity. As there is also plenty of scope to grow usage of the trains, there is no need for redundancies. The present mixed model is struggling to bring about the changes that are needed. A fully nationalised model, on the evidence of past experience, would fare even worse.