

BRITAIN GOING OFF THE RAILS



AS a child I was once given a model train set. I can still recall the sense of incandescent anger I felt when, after three days, I still couldn't get near the thing because my father and various uncles were engrossed in "setting it up properly".

All I could see was an array of points and junctions, track and stations, spreading itself across the bedroom floor. But could I get my hands on the controls? Could I hell. A private present had become a public monopoly. And I, clearly, was not part of the management.

During the last week I reflected upon these events in a kinder light. My relatives were, after all, building a rail network. Time and effort were put in to ensure it really worked — that all parts of their little network were accessible to the trains I had; that the risk of crashes or bottlenecks was minimal and that bits of track that I had been short of magically turned up with the return of one relative or another.

They were, you see, building a network, not a single loop of track. None of them "owned" the network, but they all contributed to it because they wanted it to work as a whole.

John MacGregor's plans to - privatise British Rail. If he had suggested 50 separate local monopolies to my father rather than one integrated network, he would never have been allowed in the house, let alone anywhere near the controls!

Yet that is what Britain is in for — a transport nightmare, driven only by dogma and debt. Election promises have left the Government £50 billion in debt. They depend on selling up to £8 billion of public assets each year just to pay off interest charges.

They have become privatisation junkies, selling off assets to give themselves a quick (and all too temporary) fix. Sanity and logic have gone out the window and even their most uncritical industrial backers are standing a long way away

from this particular hare-brained idea. Let's go back to basics. What Britain needs is an integrated railway network, not a series of disconnected fragments. We need to be able to plan a complex journey across country without having to consult 50 different timetable books. We need to know that a concessionary fare scheme is a national one, not one which leaves you stranded in mid-journey. We need a network which supports regional and rural routes and not just inter-city lines. We need a national railway system which is safe, reliable, comfortable and cheap.

There are some fairly simple ways of providing this. Give BR the right to borrow against its own assets — to invest in new track, new rolling stock and better safety.

SHIFT the public subsidy from road to rail. For the money we've spent on motorway and major road extensions we could have electrified Britain's rail network ten times over.

Follow the lead of France and Japan and Germany: Subsidise fares and have government-led investment to expand rail networks and encourage a public (and environmental) shift to rail transport.

By now we should have an integrated national transport policy. Instead we are on the road to nowhere.

Lord knows how Mr MacGregor visualises his "free market" of railway operators. As a collection of Thomas the Tank Engines, trundling off to Beeston one day then Bournemouth the next as the mood takes them? Or as aggressively competitive airlines — 'Hi, I'm Carol. Fly me ... to Burton Joyce!'

Mr MacGregor's rail privatisation is an act of madness. He obviously missed out on a childhood apprenticeship in the principles of model railways. My family might offer him this but, if I know my dad, it would be years before he let the Minister near a Hornby Double '0' gauge, let alone the high prize of Britain's national rail network.

Perhaps my uncles were not so daft after all.