

## DELAYS ON THE LINE FOR NEW NETWORK



IN one of the more memorable moments of his political career as leader of the Labour Party, Jim Callaghan reflected on the lessons he had learnt from the mess of his five per cent pay policy regime and the abandonment of its subsequent stage. He was addressing the Labour Party conference at the height of the party's anger over the debacle of economic policies, and took refuge in a cautionary tale.

It was about a Scotsman who died and was waiting to be allowed into the Kingdom of Heaven. When his turn came he was confronted by a stern-faced St Peter who told him he could not pass through the gates. "Why?" asked the Scotsman, and St Peter then went through a long list of the sins he had committed. The expression of surprise on the man's face soon gave way to one of humbled sadness. At the end he simply

muttered "I did nae ken"; and an unrelenting St Peter replied "well thae ken the noo".

Callaghan's acknowledgement that he too knew now how far he had sinned in the party's eyes has, at least, to be recorded in his favour. I wonder if there is ever likely to be a stage at which the current Government acknowledges the same about the bizarre mess they are making of our rail network as a result of their obsession with privatisation.

We are still in a position where there is no evidence that privatisation will bring new investment into the industry — for improving and extending the rail network and for modernising the rolling stock and engines. All the money spent so far on the process of privatisation would have been enough to pay for the complete electrification of the Midland line. Instead we see a slimming down of the service. Train frequencies become 'stretched' as particular trains quietly disappear in the Bermuda Triangle of timetable alterations.

My first direct experience of the rail privatisation regime came last week when I had agreed to speak at a public meeting in Blackpool. I bought my ticket as usual and was slightly surprised to see the signs on Euston Station welcoming me to "Rail Track", the new owners of the national rail network. The first stage of my journey was I in the fast-lane of Inter-City services. Like many others using this high-speed service to the north-west, I was also using a connecting service which would complete my journey.

I suppose it was inevitable. Something happened along the Inter-City line which forced the train to stop for 15 minutes before the blockage was cleared. All of the customer guarantees under the sun cannot provide a railway service which is free from such external disruption. The important question is — what happens next?

It was certainly the important question being posed to the guard as he made his way through the various carriages. "What was happening?" "How long would the delay be?" "Would I be able to make up the lost time?" These were the questions he was peppered with. Finally all of the questioning condensed into a single plea. Would he ring ahead to the key stations in front to see if the inter-connecting services

could be held slightly to take account of the delay?

"Well," came the guard's reply, "last week I could have done, but this week there's no point". The carriage was aghast.

Patiently, and with obvious embarrassment, the guard explained the new regime. It wasn't simply that Rail Track had taken over the rail network and had three different companies contracted to do its maintenance work; there were now 12 different Inter-City services and 25 separate regional railway providers operating around the country. They all had separate contracts and obligations to meet.

"But I have a ticket here for Blackpool" fumed a fellow victim. "When I bought it, it was on the basis of having a clear departure time and an equally clear arrival one. Surely the regional trains have as much of an interest in making the connections work as do the Inter-City services?"

"Not so," the guard replied. "The regional trains have an interest only in departing on time. If they were to wait for delayed Inter-City trains then they themselves would face a fine for every minute of their delay."

In barely contained anger, other passengers at least began quietly to explain the difference between arriving a little late and Very Late! The guard listened on helplessly. There was nothing he could do to bring back a degree of control over rail policy on connecting services. He moved on, presumably to repeat the process of running the gauntlet through the trains.

There are important issues that this raises for me, about how we view our national rail network. One way of seeing it is as a complex machine; of mechanical parts moving in synchronised turn in a pattern of ever-repeated movements. It is an image of efficiency which sparkles in the imagination. The trouble is that it doesn't relate well to the cock-up theory of life, let alone history. In fact, it is a very limited (and very male) way of looking at things.

It doesn't matter whether we have arguments about whether Britain has the wrong sort of snow, too many leaves in autumn, too much rain, too much sun. The fact is that delays will be inevitable. Machines break down. People make mistakes and get ill. Ask a woman to plan a system and they would probably begin from something that could adapt rather than one tied to narrow contractual obligations. This is the other model — of a national network of rail services which has some breathing space built into it; which looks at the workings of the system as a whole, not as a series of separate parts.

None of this sits well with the current obsession with fragmentation, market forces and disconnected 'profit centres' running the railways.

I sat in the carriage with ample time to mull about the fact that a national rail network, fit for the 21st century, is not about perfection and profitability, but about common-sense, comprehensive planning, comfort and public responsibility. It will be found in wise investment and an understanding of public transport services, rather than private car parks, will be the benchmark against which civilised life will soon be judged.

It is what I have voted for in elections for years and years. I wondered if I could say the same for my fellow passengers? Were they aware of the anger they expressed was precisely what they had voted for?

What? You didn't know?

Well ...thae ken thanoo!

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