

JONATHAN BRAY



What I found on the conference circuit

In this time of seismic political shifts, the party conferences have become more interesting. New ideas for transport are emerging

► After a long period of the ‘narcissism of small differences’ in politics, with major parties clustered around a post-Thatcher, free trade settlement, suddenly everything has busted open in a delayed reaction to the banking crisis. Now, at one end of the spectrum, the left is resurgent, buzzing with ideas and awed and dizzy at the possibility of actual power. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, is a shift to the politics of ethno-nationalism, protectionism, populism and authoritarianism. Meanwhile, those who for years were at the solid centre of politics find themselves out in the cold, on shrinking electoral ground and hunting around for winning ideas again. Who would have thought a few years ago that Trump would be president of the US, we would be leaving the EU and Jeremy Corbyn would be leader of the Labour Party. Nobody, I would wager. But here we are. All of which makes the party conferences more interesting in general - but specifically the transport elements of party conference business. So here’s what I learnt for urban transport on the conference circuit.

Two futures for rail

Chris Grayling was expansive in setting out his thoughts on the future for rail at the RIA rail industry fringe. The transport secretary said that he first thought evolution not revolution was the right approach for rail but recent events have shown that this isn’t the case. The system is broken and needs fixing. However, the Rail Review will not be about all aspects

of the rail industry - it will be a “validation exercise” around different options for greater unification of tracks and trains plus a “guiding mind” for the rail industry as a whole. He would be “very surprised” if this isn’t the approach the review takes. “Something like the Strategic Rail Authority is needed” and “the DfT should do less than it does now after the review”. He referenced Japan, which has vertically integrated regional train companies, as one of the models for greater unification of track and trains. In the meantime, he trusts Andrew Haines, the new chief executive of Network Rail, to make very sure that his colleagues get their act together on timetable planning to avoid a repeat of recent fiascos.

The Rail Review will also look at where it is appropriate to extend devolution and where

it is not. He said extending the Tyne and Wear Metro and Merseytravel taking the Merseyrail infrastructure were good examples of where it is appropriate, and gave London taking over south east rail services as his prime example of where it is not appropriate. All of this boils down to Grayling being pro-devolution where it is about services within the area covered by the devolved authority and anti-devolution where a city region starts to take too many responsibilities for services in the surrounding shires.

Meanwhile, in Liverpool, there was some significant acceleration of Labour’s rail ambitions. The basic model remains as previously trailed with a new national rail body taking over Network Rail and franchises (but also allowing for devolved control over local and urban rail specification). However, this would be a slow motion process as it could take some time for all the franchises to fail or expire. The big change at the Labour party conference is that this process could now be sped up via a unit in the Treasury set up to find ways of renationalising utilities more rapidly. For rail, a fast forward renationalisation would, for example, enable the re-creation of a single intercity network again which could then be promoted and developed as a single entity. And this would not be a traditional corporate nationalisation a la 1945 because the big shift more widely at the Labour Party conference was towards the democratisation of the economy with more worker involvement in the management of industry as well as a greater share of the spoils. All easier to achieve with a publicly-owned body, of course - like the new national rail body.



Chris Grayling addresses the Conservative Party conference

“John Prescott said there’s no way you will get HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and Crossrail 2”

HS2 is not in the bag

Chris Grayling told a fringe meeting that no cabinet minister has said to him that HS2 should be abandoned or scaled back. However, there are a number of prominent ‘Leave’ figures - in and out of the cabinet - who have said it publicly or are known to be floating it privately. Grayling’s line was that (as far as any major project of this scale can be completely on target in terms of budget and timings) HS2 is on course, fully committed and it’s steady as it goes. But it’s clear that completing all of HS2, or not, is back in play as a wider political football. HS2 unease also surfaced at the Labour Party rail conference fringes where John Prescott, no less, said there’s no way you will get HS2, Northern Powerhouse Rail and Crossrail 2 as the costs are too great. Some bigger, bolder HS2 advocacy will be required if the case is to be re-made, and re-won.

Vote Leave for devolution?

One of the arguments made by some Leave advocates was that Brexit would mean powers exercised by Brussels should be repatriated to the regions rather than Whitehall. At the Conservative Party conference this theme made a modest comeback. Indeed, if and when a Brexit deal is done, it may be that attention will be given to how the next stage of devolution could cohere with the replacement of EU regional development funds into new and simpler funding streams for the regions.

About towns

For many years the dominant argument has been that all policy focus should be on cities, as they are where the economic action is. Now that hegemony is breaking down. Think tanks like Centre for Towns and Wigan MP Lisa Nandy have been challenging the implicit assumption (and were doing so across Labour Party conference) that the best it gets for towns is ‘trickle down’ of some growth from booming cities. The worsening plight of many towns is also seen as a factor in Brexit, the rise of the far right... and now electoral mathematics. This is all signified by the way that Labour’s new campaign ads no longer focus on their new core vote of big city students and their tuition fees. Instead, the imagery is rows of terraces and shuttered up small town high streets - the places which could decide the next election.



Preston: showing how decisions local public sector make can be used to support the local economy

As for transport and towns, UTG are currently finalising our own contribution to the debate with a forthcoming report called ‘About towns - how transport can help towns thrive’.

Preston

There is going to be a lot more talk of Preston as the exemplar of how the decisions that the local public sector make (local authorities, the health service, the education sector) can be used to support the local economy. This means making sure that local firms, which support the local economy and provide good local jobs, can be in a position to compete effectively for the contracts these big ‘anchor’ institutions let. This is what Preston has to some extent already been doing and what Labour wants to see more of. This also ties in with its towns and economic democracy agendas. To some extent this has already been filtering more

into the transport sector in recent years from the choices made on train catering on some parts of the rail network (most noticeably in Scotland) to the greater efforts now being made to ensure that everything from HS2 to the extension of the Midland Metro to the Black Country is seen as an opportunity to build local skills and the local supply chain. This trend towards favouring the local is likely to become more marked in the years ahead, whoever is in power. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.