

JONATHAN BRAY



Here's tae us; Wha's like us?

Scotland's railway has become a symbol of the nation's ambition and bigger thinking - it's time that bus policy caught up

▶ Someone senior in the transport sector in Scotland told me recently that they didn't think that Scotland care that much about whether England is aware of some of the good things that Scotland is doing on transport. The peer group, benchmark and role models are now other medium size countries in North West Europe - not England. They care more about Scandinavia, not Surrey; Gothenburg, not Guildford.

There can also be a strange lack of interest south of the Border in what's going on in Scotland. A sense that everything is clouded by Scotland's different and contested status within the United Kingdom. One example is the general lack of awareness in the wider UK of how radical the ScotRail franchise specification is. So, whilst it is about a far better train service, at the same time it's also about something much wider and more ambitious. It's about how the railway can also change for the better the places it serves through delivering on its potential, among many other things, to spur urban regeneration, improve public health and boost tourism.

Two years ago I devoted one of these pieces to this topic (PT125) - how the third round of devolved franchising in Scotland had gone way beyond the usual focus on consumer benefits alone. Having had two recent wide ranging visits to Scotland for business and pleasure it seemed like a good opportunity to see how it's working out in practice, as well as taking a wider look at how rail fits into the

bigger picture of Scottish transport policy. But before taking a look at some of the wider ambitions (the success of which will be measured in years) it's train delays measured in minutes that have been getting a lot of attention in Scotland's politics and media.

Performance problems that trigger not much more than particularly grumpy faces on commuters on English regional services are the stuff of parliamentary debates and headlines in the papers in Scotland. Some of which was exacerbated by the end of Scotland's previous apparent immunity to Network Rail's failure to deliver schemes on time and on budget. These happy times came to an end with multiple problems with the electrification of routes in the Central Belt.



The attention being given to delay minutes is also a result of rail's symbolic role as a very public indicator to both citizens and visitors alike of the kind of country that Scotland wants to be. It's also because Labour's partial recovery in Scotland has made rail one of the tests of who is really to the left and who is not - and ultimately about whether this franchise will be the last.

Meanwhile, beyond the fire and the fury over points failures, Scotland's railways are cracking on with always being just that one step ahead, that bit more nimble, more assertive, more 'why not?', than elsewhere in the UK; something which will stand them in good stead wherever the ownership argument ends up.

There are lots of examples that I could give, but let's start with Transport Scotland's High Level Output Statement (HLOS). The Department for Transport's eight-page HLOS could be summarised as 'best not be too ambitious given what's happened recently, and we will get back to you on the detail'.

In contrast, Scotland's HLOS lays down the law about exactly how and why previous problems will not be repeated and what exactly Scotland expects for the considerable funding the country is putting into the railway.

So, electrification is not dead - it is just going to be done efficiently again.

Network Rail is going to deliver schemes on time and to budget, because there will be an apparatus to ensure that it does so.

The railway will become more reliable, but if England is happy to settle for that, Scotland isn't - journey times will also have to improve.

Network Rail will need to have Transport Scotland's permission to sell off rail land and "will be required to optimise the availability of redundant or underused assets, including land, for the benefit of the local community".

And so it goes on, right down to Network Rail being required to maintain the railway so that all trains can go anywhere through ensuring that linesides, platforms and tunnels are maintained in a way that provides the space for any train to pass through them.

On top of that Network Rail must ensure they pass through without branches scratching the paintwork: "Vegetation clearance on rural and scenic routes should be controlled and maintained so as to facilitate views from the train, and to prevent damage to trains (including those of charter operations) such as



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damage to paintwork and exterior finish.”

This is a good example of how on rail, Scotland lives up to the sentiments of one of its celebrated toasts – ‘wha’s like us?’.

ScotRail also has its own head of economic development, part of whose role is to pursue station improvements that can sit at the heart of wider renewal projects for the places they serve rather than being just standalone improvements for the stations themselves. Kilmarnock is a prime example of this ‘towns first’ approach - with the station a hub for local and community enterprise and projects, but also linked by an overhauled pedestrian walkway to the new Ayrshire College.

Meanwhile, the Borders Railway remains a rare example of a line reopening which was more than an engineering project - right from the start it was part of a much wider and integrated approach to making the most of its potential benefits to the local economy. Joint working between Visit Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, Transport Scotland and local authorities has led to international tourism promotional campaigns, new business parks, housing developments and support for local business. As a result, visitor numbers and spend is up, station buildings are being repurposed for the local community and business use, and more young people can now live in the Borders but still access work and education.

On my last trip to Scotland I had the pleasure of spending a day with Frank Roach who leads on rail for HITRANS (the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership), staying overnight in one of his converted carriages at Rogart station (where he owns the station buildings and former goods yard) on the Far North Line. Here too there’s a sense of ‘lets just push things a bit further and see’. So a study is underway to see if soon-to-be-redundant sleeping cars could be used to provide an overnight service from the central belt to the far North of Scotland. Meanwhile, the regular rolling stock will focus on providing a travelling experience which attracts tourists through being the best way to see the scenery with comfortable seats which line up with the windows, on-train catering which is more than a distress purchase and tourist ambassadors on board.

However, whilst Scotland has been prepared to spend big on roads, ferries and rail - the bus is a mixed picture. In Edinburgh, reinvestment



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of profits under municipal ownership has given the city a modern, intensive and high quality service which doesn’t suffer from the stigma and malaise that has set in like dry rot on many other urban bus networks in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK. In rural areas too there are operations to be admired. Out in the deep rural west of Scotland, and now spreading their wings more widely, West Coast Motors provides, in my experience, a classy service with well turned out vehicles and friendly drivers. Compare and contrast with my recent car-free trip to Orkney, where Stagecoach has taken a different approach to their local monopoly with a tatty fleet of ill-kept buses which the locals are less than enamoured with. School children reported mushrooms growing out of the roof of their grungy Stagecoach bus earlier this year, so I got off lightly with just water dripping on me on one trip.

But at least there is a bus service and travelling car-free is possible. Great tracts of the Highlands and Islands are now down to the barest minimum of public transport provision, none at all, or are reliant on

community initiatives. The danger is that whilst the roads are widened, and the ferries get larger to accommodate all those motor homes, staving off of complete car dependency will be down to predominantly single track railways with all the problems this creates for timetabling and reliability.

The better news is at long last Scotland is addressing its version of the 2000 Westminster legislation on buses which is all but useless as a viable route to bus franchising, as either threat or reality. It’s early days in the process, and the Westminster 2017 Act provides a good starting point, but as the Westminster 2000 and 2008 buses legislation shows, it only takes the insertion of a seemingly innocuous word here and a seemingly reasonable word there, and with a nudge and a wink the fix is in. It becomes legislation as ornamentation - rather than a practical tool for improving services in reality. We shall see, but Scottish bus policy does feel like it needs some of the ambition and bigger thinking that is continually being accelerated on rail. ■

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.