

Jonathan Bray

Director at the Urban Transport Group

Jonathan joined the Urban Transport Group (then the Passenger Transport Executive Group) in 2003, and became Director in 2008. In addition to this role, in recent years he has been a visiting senior fellow at LSE Cities, a Commissioner on the Commission on Travel Demand, a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transportation, an Academician at the Academy of Urbanism, a Director of Good Journey CIC and a member of the UITP Organising Authorities and Policy Boards. Jonathan steps down as Director of the Urban Transport Group in April.

Sam Sherwood-Hale spoke to Jonathan Bray, Director at the Urban Transport Group about how rail transport has changed throughout his career, the nature of public vs. private, and some of the issues that rail reform will encounter



SSH: You joined the Urban Transport Group 20 years ago, when it was the Passenger Transport Executive Group. How have you seen rail transport specifically change in that time?

Jonathan Bray:

I think the recent golden age of rail is over. Rail's USP is getting large numbers of people rapidly into urban centres but the pandemic has hit commuting hard. On top of that, the current format of the railways doesn't work, isn't popular and subject to periodic nervous breakdowns like the one we are experiencing right now on TransPennine and elsewhere. The railways have also had a twenty year period where the Treasury investing heavily in rail – followed by the additional revenue support during the pandemic. And they've had enough.

One of the big changes in the last 20 years on rail has been the successful devolution of responsibilities for local and regional rail services in different parts of the country so it's been disappointing to see how that has been marginalised in the rail reform process which is far more focussed on who gets to play with the trainset. It's not been an outward focussed process looking at the benefits for different regions and cities or how it links to wider priorities like the environment, social inclusion and housing.

There's also been a remarkable lack of interest in how it all looks to the passenger on the platform. For example, why is there zero debate about bringing back an InterCity network which could compete with the airlines on a more consistent basis? It has been very much focussed on looking at ways to organise the railways to the satisfaction of different factions within the current management structure of the railways.

I also think that there's some 'Turkeys don't vote for Christmas' going on so officials aren't voting to devolve at speed because that reduces their influence and power. It's been disappointing because in large city regions the heavy rail network is far from the main form of public transport, it's part of what should be a wider, integrated public transport network alongside light rail and bus services. That's what people want in big cities – fully integrated public transport provision, but because the DfT is siloed by mode seeing this wider picture is often beyond them.

SSH: A report by the Urban Transport Group from a few years ago found that the greater the role of sub-national authorities in their respective area, the better their local station is. Which cities or urban areas do you think are a good example of this?

Jonathan Bray: If you look in West Yorkshire where I am now we've got examples of stations being transformed and staff put back. We've had more demanding specifications for cleanliness, security and accessibility. If you're sitting in Whitehall, you might not be aware of every place

you're in charge of. But if you're a counsellor representing these wards then you're accountable and more likely to pay attention to these details.

SSH: You've written previously about bringing back the Great bits of British Railways, like a single intercity network, do you have faith that will come to fruition?

Jonathan Bray: In the long run, common sense has a reasonable chance of prevailing and in the short term it makes sense to have an organisation like GBR providing a guiding mind. However, I think the recent speech by the Secretary of State is one step forward one step backward as we are back to where we are encouraging more operators to provide more services presumably differentiated by different fares. So how is that different to what we have now? How are we going to have simpler more integrated ticketing and more fares competition? How are we going to have a better planned and easier to understand rail network and a multiplicity of companies and brands? We are back to trying to create a pretend free market – which in reality is propped up by gazillions of pounds of public subsidy and a system of cost allocation that dumps the costs of 'profitable' operators onto regional and local rail services. So I'm sceptical at the moment about rail reform as I think the forces at play are more focussed on these introverted ideological and organisational battles.

SSH: Was there ever a period where this wasn't an issue?

Jonathan Bray: I think we've entered a strange stage where it's not public and it's not private, it's what you want it to be. It's all being driven by these nebulous nowhere land concepts rather than what it looks like for passengers who actually use the railways. I also wonder what is the point of going through a competition process for those contracts let under very tight specifications if it's going to be still the same staff and the same management – what are you gaining from that competition? It's the same people driving the trains, the same managers rotating through the industry, the same senior figures are always going to be there. I'm not sure this halfway house will stick in the long term, even when and if it finally gets defined.

SSH: Which way would you see us go?

Jonathan Bray: I would go for a nationalised intercity network, you get the full benefits of nationalisation when you do it properly because at the moment we're still stuck with all the interface costs and regulatory costs which makes the railway incredibly expensive to run. I would devolve local services and protect the interests of freight.

If you look at London which made the most of its golden era of government

funding and transformed its transport network – I'm not convinced the railways did that at the national level partly because of a structure that just doesn't work.

SSH: When you look back on the battle against rail privatisation more broadly, what were some of your worst fears that did come true, and some that didn't?

Jonathan Bray: The fear that didn't come to pass was big cuts in services. Partly because the high profile campaign forced concessions on service protection, partly because the Government was prepared to throw money at the privatised railway for ideological reasons, partly because the economic conditions were favourable for rail. The fear that did come true was that the structure would be expensive, bureaucratic and ultimately unworkable, and that means rail hasn't been able to take advantage to the full of its golden age of funding and government support and why its in such a mess now.

SSH: How does that type of engagement with the market compare to today, when you look at the commitments to a project like HS2 for example?

Jonathan Bray: Things are particularly difficult now because construction inflation seems to be higher than background inflation. I don't think the narrative around HS2 has been played very well. It's presented as a stand-alone infrastructure project that's sealed off from the rest of the rail network. I think it would have been better to sell it as a rewriting of the wider national long distance rail network and the nation's biggest urban regeneration project – which is what it would lead to. Make clear the knock-on benefits for places not on the route. I know a lot of the people in the rail sector think it's game, set and match to say it's about capacity and not speed, but capacity is an abstract concept that doesn't mean much to the average person. It should have been sold as a massive national project based on specific benefits to places on and off the route itself.

SSH: How do you think streets shape people lives, and is that something that has changed in the last 20 years?

Jonathan Bray: I think streets deserve more attention, you've got so many calls on street space, concerns around active travel, the things that people want streets to do more widely such as street cafes, anti-terror measures, climate resilience, access for disabled people, street beautification. At the moment people tend to approach streets with one single agenda after another such as cycle lanes then bus lanes, rather than taking a holistic view. Really the issue is resources for local transport authorities to build up the skills and capacities necessary to manage the trade-offs on street space in a way which builds public consent. 