

“Restore Your Railways” cancelled – thoughts

Q: “Should I sign the Campaign for Better Transport petition”

Background

Looking back a few years, schemes and desires for enhanced railway infrastructure provision faced a high hurdle to even get off the ground. There was no funding available for that initial step - the asking of "is this a good idea?" and getting it to towards the "shovel ready" stage for when a major funding opportunity came up to implement a good scheme.

The "Restore Your Railways" program of the previous government filled this hole, and has allowed a large number of schemes to be tested, some of which have gone forward. The Campaign for Better Transport tells us that the fund has already oiled the gears so they could turn and allowed the reopening of two railway lines and seven new stations ... BUT ...

Current Status

The scheme was a Conservative one, with (as I recall) a cutoff date for completion about now, and encouraged quite a few applications that were far more about supporting the local MPs, who had to sign off on the application, and failed the test of whether they would be cost effective and result in a better railway if implemented; everyone thinks their scheme is best.

So the new government was / is faced with a scheme under which a number of quick wins had been taken, and had - if it had carried on - the danger of generating a great deal of disappointment in quite a number of constituencies which were previously held by a Conservative MP but are now Labour or Lib Dem.

Wielding the knife isn't about saving money in spite of what you are told - it's about fixing what could have been a festering wound or a ongoing wounds in marginal constituencies for many years.

I can understand Labour taking a decision to close the scheme. It has a logic.

Intermission - concerns at RYR and its termination

Cutting the scheme with business underway has led to howls of anguish from schemes on the cusp. Until they know whether they continue or fall, that concern is natural and there is quite a degree of input being made to clarify the very messy and unfortunate cutoff.

I am also concerned at the lack of reference in the Labour party's 26 page plan for rail that talks of reliability of the network - that bit is correct - but does not cover appropriate service level, nor anything in network enhancement. Indeed I see nothing that commits to retaining current frequencies and does not rule out line and station closures. Historically, many lines were closed under Labour.

And the whole "Restore You Railway" name worried me - "Restore" has a historic feel and reference back to Beeching was not forward looking - it should be "Future" railway. For sure, experiences of the past count and provide evidence and infrastructure and undeveloped pathways for new railway lines but what we need is future not past, and a future world where we look at one UK network and not a network created by a mess of competing companies - Midland, Great Northern and Great Central all along the same valley. And we look to modern technology where a railway no longer needs to run along a route that is billiard table flat but can climb dip as, for example, HS1 to the channel tunnel does.

And look at the second word "Your" - is that the previous government not including itself but rather looking to be at arms length? For some, the communities need to be involved and wanting the public transport enhancement, but they also want and need the involvement of government.

Can I question "Railway"? Sure I can. Railway - or metro or light rail or tramway, or underground or subway, please, and the term railway suggests heavy rail when there may be other solutions.

The Route forward

I am asked to sign a petition from the Campaign for Better Transport (CBT). ""We're calling on the Government to reconsider its decision and to implement a nationwide programme of rail re-openings to help grow the network and bring all communities within reach of the railway and the benefits that provides. ""

I read that very carefully, and I am much more encouraged to sign than I would be to sign a simple "Bring back RYR". This is a request to do better - looking to the future for the benefit of communities. Having a route for schemes to be "triaged" prior to very expensive and detailed work, fitting into a national policy with local tuning, makes sense. For all we know, the government might already be looking at this - or cynically they might look to bring it in later in the parliament as good news prior to the 2029 general election. If you want a name - "Our Future Rail".

We need a scheme that has national guidelines and works with and enables what's needed for the next decades. And that includes NPPF, local and neighbourhood plan considerations as well as operational rail stuff. We need a scheme that tests ideas - initially "cheaply" (ha, ha) and allows elements to be fed back, updated and cycled "quickly" (ha, ha). If found justified to be fed into a program of such development with a professional implementation team doing one project after another, with skills carried over and setup and breakdown costs saved, and a tail of experts who have moved on to the next project callable back to snag the running job.

I've not talked volume. I've not talked GRIP or STAG. And I don't know what the government has in mind to replace RYR. In my view, it needs something to avoid the current system simply stagnating. And reading the Campaign for Better Transport's request for signatures carefully, yes, I can add mine. But adding a signature is just one drip in a flood of requests that need to be made as we shape our future railway. Read the Labour papers carefully, and they fit a model that provides a more reliable service of less frequent and slower trains than we have at present, on a reduced network. We need a better railway, but that model is not my description of it!

From a Wiltshire perspective

A new scheme with a level playing field makes sense. We have lost out by comparison to other counties over a very long period indeed - our last brand new station was in 1937 - that's Dilton Marsh. Melksham station was re-opened in 1985 after being closed for 19 years.

From memory, aspirations over the years, with various degrees of seriousness, have included and perhaps still do: Box; Bradford North to West curve; Corsham; Devizes Gateway; Gablecross; Holt; Hullavington; Petersfinger; Porton; Royal Wootton Bassett; Staverton Junction; Thingley / West Chippenham; Tramway from Salisbury Station to City Centre; White Horse Business Park; Wilton; Wylde Parkway.

And schemes short of new stations and section of line might include: Accessibility between platforms at Trowbridge; Double track through Tisbury or loop into stations there; Electrification schemes for virtually every line in the county; Loop or double track via Melksham; Platforms 1 and 5 at Salisbury; Signalling interval on Avon Valley; Signalling interval on Wylde Valley