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TEXT SIZE

SNP in call for increased devolved powers for rail

**Damien Henderson**
Transport Correspondent

RADICAL reform of Scotland's railways is being frustrated by UK laws introduced when the industry was privatised nearly two decades ago, the SNP has claimed.

Infrastructure and Capital Investment Secretary Alex Neil called yesterday for "full rail devolution" to give Scotland's ministers complete control over the network and cut soaring subsidies which have risen to more than £700 million a year.

In an open letter to the UK Transport Secretary, Justine Greening, he attacked rail legislation from 1993 which split ownership of track and trains among separate private firms, as being "not fit for purpose" and at odds with the investment made in Scottish rail services.

His comments, ahead of an official statement later this week on the future of Scottish railways, angered opposition parties. They said he was putting the SNP's independence agenda ahead of passengers.

Mr Neil called it "perverse" that reserved legislation stopped the Scottish Government setting up a company to directly operate rail services but let foreign state-owned firms bid for them. "As the analysis of the various outcomes from our Rail 2014 consultation progresses, I am growing increasingly concerned and frustrated at the extent to which the legislative framework currently in place for rail across Great Britain constrains the options which we are able to consider," Mr Neil wrote.

"Domestic UK legislation, which remains largely reserved to the Westminster Parliament, is placing unnecessary constraints on our ability to look at all of the options for the provision of rail services that the people of Scotland have asked us to consider.

"I have come to the view that it did not fully envisage the extent to which the Scottish Government would invest in rail services, nor the role that railways would play in Scotland's social as well as economic wellbeing. Therefore, put simply, it is not currently fit for purpose."

His remarks imply radical proposals to re-integrate Scotland's railways and reverse the fragmentation of privatisation have been shelved ahead of the 2014 renewal of the ScotRail passenger franchise. However, it suggests they could re-emerge later this decade when it is renewed again, probably in 2019.

Officials at Government agency Transport Scotland have examined proposals to merge Network Rail, the not-for-profit company which oversees track and signalling infrastructure, with ScotRail, which operates more than 95% of passenger services north of the border. However, the plans were not featured in the Rail 2014 consultation issued last November.

Labour's Scottish infrastructure and capital investment spokesman, Richard Baker, said: "It is important that all options for the future operation of our railways can be fully considered, and since devolution further powers over railways have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. But Alex Neil can't hide the fact that [redacted] added trains, higher fares and closing stations and that is why so many people have been frustrated by the SNP's approach."

Scottish Conservative transport spokesman Alex Johnstone said: "The regulations governing rail franchises are an essential protection for rail passengers against a Government which would like nothing better than to take us back to the years of nationalised railways which were run for the benefit of the trade unions."

Scottish Liberal Democrat transport spokesman Jim Hume, said: "The SNP Government have once again shown that their only concern is independence. If this wasn't the case, the Cabinet Secretary would have highlighted this legislative anomaly much earlier."

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Ollie Bell, Glasgow

The comments from our politicians demonstrate why the UK rail industry is supposedly 30% more expensive than in the rest of the UK.

Alex Neil is (for once) correct. Labour actually agree but prefer to attempt to score cheap political points by suggesting something which simply is not true.

The Tories demonstrate again why they have been and will remain completely unelectable in Scotland. So out of touch with the reality of the situation it is frightening.

The Lib Dems are irrelevant but manage to get it pretty seriously wrong in the process.

Any kind of merger of Network Rail with ScotRail is privatisation by stealth and everyone knows that having the infrastructure in the hands of private companies leads to only one thing. Cuts, asset stripping under investment and compromised safety. Railtrack anyone !

A publicly owned not for profit railway out of the hands of the politicians where money raised by ticket sales is invested back into the infrastructure is the only way forward. And not a political football where the passengers pick up the tab to line the private profits of the fat cat train operators.

3 days ago

Ollie Bell, Glasgow

A publicly owned not for profit railway out of the hands of the politicians where money raised by ticket sales is invested back into the infrastructure is the only way forward. And not a political football where the passengers pick up the tab to line the private profits of the fat cat train operators.

Comments from the politicians here adequately demonstrate that they cannot be trusted with the strategic future of the rail industry and to protect passengers. Alex Neil (for once) is right...

3 days ago

Alastair Naughton, North East

Ollie: you're absolutely right! If anyone wants to see how a state-owned railway really works, they need look no further than across the Channel. In France the SNCF runs a highly efficient rail network, trains come every few minutes, travel is cheap and the TGV can get you from Paris to Marseilles in 3,5 hours. That would be unimaginable here.

2 days ago

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