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West Coast 'probably biggest failure since Poll Tax'

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FORMER transport secretary Andrew Adonis has branded the collapse of the West Coast franchise award as 'probably the single biggest failure in British public policy since the poll tax'. The House of Lords has also been told that the rail franchising system is probably 'irretrievably broken'.

The remarks came as the result of a question which had been set down by Baroness Royall of Blaisdon, who was calling for information about what the Department for Transport will do following its withdrawal of the West Coast franchise award to FirstGroup on 3 October.

She had also wanted to know what the costs will be, and whether other franchises will be affected.

Lord Attlee, representing the Government, insisted that the inquiries will be carried out with 'integrity'.

He said: "The Secretary of State has asked Sam Laidlaw to look into the procurement process with the support of independent advice. This review is due to provide findings by the end of October and it would be premature to speculate on them. A second review [to be run by Eurostar chairman Richard Brown] will examine the implications for the wider franchising programme. Both reviews will be published reports. If there are any questions about the thoroughness and integrity of Sam Laidlaw's inquiry, I shall be happy to debate these when his findings are made public."

But some of his questioners were not convinced.

Lord (Bill) Bradshaw asked: "Will the noble Earl think about the fact that the franchise process is probably irretrievably broken? Will he ask the Secretary of State to make a bid for room in the legislative programme in the next Session of Parliament, as I believe it is inevitable that this Act and its successors will have to be reviewed?"

Lord Attlee replied: "I do not believe that the franchise process is inevitably broken, but that is a matter for Richard Brown to review. Professor David Begg has been reported in the Financial Times as saying: 'Because of this procurement failure we risk becoming far too negative and throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We can fix this, we've done it before'. Wise words indeed, and the first and correct step is these two fairly quick inquiries."

Lord Adonis responded: "Is the noble Earl aware that Professor Begg is a non-executive director of FirstGroup and that therefore he is not an entirely independent observer of these events?"

"How can Sam Laidlaw, for whom I have the highest respect – he is an executive of great integrity – possibly be judged to be independent when he is a non-executive director of the department whose actions are the subject of an inquiry, including the actions of senior civil servants and Ministers who are with him on the board? Does the noble Earl not recognise that the findings of such an inquiry will always be tainted until they are properly and independently conducted and that independent review cannot take place under a non-executive director of the very department that has conducted probably the single biggest failure in British public policy since the poll tax?"

Lord Attlee maintained that both inquiries would be independent and open to scrutiny.

Meanwhile, all the West Coast bidders have been examining the first detailed feedback from the DfT about the West Coast process, although it is reported to have been 'heavily redacted'.

The feedback is based on a new report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers which was commissioned a few days before the award was cancelled, but it is not clear whether officials lost some of the data or failed to input it properly. The Daily Telegraph reports one insider as saying: "It looks like they ran the numbers and didn't save the results. PwC tried to repeat the outputs and it couldn't."

A DfT spokesman refused to comment on the implications, saying: "We are not going to give a running commentary on what went wrong."

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Tony Pearce, Reading

I can't believe there are people who think that Politicians running the railways are a 'Good Thing'. From the Labour Government implementing the Beeching proposals in the 1970s with indecent haste and not protecting trackbeds that we really need today, through HS1, WCML franchises and in my opinion as top recent cock-up - Edinburgh Trams. Disaster and money loss everywhere. The best models are Chiltern Railways and Freightliner. We could learn a lot from copying their business models.



Former transport secretary Andrew Adonis has branded the collapse of the West Coast franchise award as 'probably the single biggest failure in British public policy since the poll tax'.

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Isambard Brunel, Beeston

Adonis makes a good point about Prof Begg. But the biggest policy failure since the Poll Tax was the decision to invade Iraq.

Melvyn Windebank, Canvey Island, Essex

A new arms length body like BR should be created and take over functions currently done by the DfT (more like DAFT!) fact is renationalism would not only not work but it would remove the large private sector funds that are available to invest in rail if it is seen as being run correctly.

The recent alliance between Network Rail and South West Trains shows one way forward with perhaps the addition of the ROSCO to form a new London South Western railway which may at present involve Stagecoach but if new BR relet tender may switch to First but retain same name. The waste of money changing names from say Thameslink to FCC has to stop.

In the meantime a number of franchises are up for renewal and a way to overcome problems needs to be found. The simplest solution would be either extension of franchises or new short franchises based on old system!!

Bob Grundy, Lancing

Remember Robert Adley, chairman of HoC Transport committee and the only politician of the '90's who knew the first thing about railways? When he saw the privatisation plans he labelled it the "poll tax on wheels", but died before his committee could inject any sense into them. Adonis seems to be an admirer of his.

Stephen, Eastbourne

I think all rail franchising was a failure and no one else, even this country's former private railway companies and the Japanese who have private railways run a railway like this. This now proves beyond all reasonable doubt that this is not a way to run a railway! Period

I'm not going to start the renationalise the railways stuff either because if the DfT cannot even tender a contract properly then I wouldn't want them in charge with the Directly Operated Railways (DOR) company who by the way are no better than Virgin on the east coast mainline with the blandly named East Coast. The worst voted railway company is Southeastern Railway. But the company with the highest rise in complaints is east coast. This shows that the state is no better than a private company. Virgin was the next worst performer but it generated 277 complaints instead of east coast's 774 despite Virgin operating more trains.

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I wouldn't let the DfT turn on the light switch. Maybe them themselves should be scrapped and replaced with a new organisation I've noticed there are other organisations under the DfT like the highways agency DVLC etc... but no independent railways agency, (SRA) anyone? Maybe the BRB should be brought back independent of the DfT.

Quite rightly Virgin (whether you like the bearded man or not) were right to challenge this and in the very near future we will see the end of rail franchising.

A publicly ran railway could be on the cards but not nationalisation. For the simple reason is if the railway was nationalised it would have to cap in hand go to the treasury and with Network rail debt approaching £30 billion it would be the bad old days of BR again. I'm old enough to remember a lost service where no one gave a toss as they thought in ten years time people will use the motorcar etc... And it will all close! It didn't!

I propose either a return to real railway companies like London and North Western, Great western, Southern etc... That own infrastructure and trains or lease them but operate them as one company. You don't need so many either, five or six companies would do which are listed on the stock exchange and the government owning a golden share either a big 40% stake or the £1 golden share that vetoes all other shares to stop takeovers of national assets by any company.

These companies like the old big four can invest but be governed by a railways board independent from the DfT.

Billy Bell, Beith, UK

Too many cooks!

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