

West Coast fiasco report is ‘damning’, minister admits



Patrick McLoughlin David Jones/PA

Philip Pank, Transport Correspondent and Ruth Maclean

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A “damning failure” within the Department for Transport (DfT) has lessons for the whole civil service, the Transport Secretary admitted today as he published an official report into the West Coast Main Line fiasco.

Patrick McLoughlin told Parliament: “I do not hide from the seriousness of these findings. They make extremely uncomfortable reading for the department.”

He added: “There was a damning failure by the department and that must be put right.”

Even as he appeared to accept responsibility for the fiasco, Mr McLoughlin sought to shield ministers from direct blame for the failures that led to the collapse of the rail franchise system.

He said that an investigation by Sam Laidlaw, the DfT’s senior non-executive director, had found that ministers had acted in good faith in August when they awarded a 13-year contract to run trains between London, Manchester and Glasgow to FirstGroup.

Theresa Villiers, Rail Minister at the time, and Justine Greening, former Transport Secretary, had not been told about fatal flaws in the franchise model. Ministers had been given inaccurate information by civil servants, Mr McLoughlin said.

He said that the Laidlaw Inquiry found nothing to suggest that flaws in the bidding process had been repeated in other franchise awards and said that there was no evidence of bias against Virgin Trains.

Technical flaws in the bidding process were only discovered after Sir Richard Branson's train operator launched a High Court challenge against the Government's decision to strip it of the West Coast contract and to award a £13 billion deal to their rival FirstGroup.

The Transport Secretary announced this morning that Virgin would be allowed to carry on running trains on the West Coast until November 2014, when the franchise will be re-let on a long-term basis.

Mr McLoughlin said that he would appoint a single director general to oversee all rail policy and franchising decisions in the future.

Meanwhile, three civil servants suspended during the investigation have been allowed back to work. One of them, Kate Mingay, last week launched legal proceedings against the department.

Maria Eagle, Shadow Transport Secretary, criticised the decision to try to "pin the blame" on civil servants. She said that ministers had decided to redraw the franchise system and to introduce a complex "best guess" model based on economic forecasts 15 years into the future. She also said that ministers were responsible for sacking one in three DfT staff, which had left "no one in charge of rail".

"These were deliberate decisions taken by this incompetent Government," Ms Eagle said.

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nigel Brodrick-Barker

28 minutes ago

"The Transport Secretary announced this morning that Virgin would be allowed to carry on running trains on the West Coast until November 2014..."

How kind !

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Peter Evans

1 hour ago

The power grab by the civil service over institutions has resulted in similar cock-ups – notably with the health service computerised records fiasco, the armed services and, the very first of its kind, in the prison service. I wrote in 1980 in my book *Prison Crisis*: "The confusion and lack of morale which have helped to bring the prison service to the brink of disaster were predicted as long ago as 1963 by opponents of Whitehall's successful attempts, made then and subsequently, to gain greater bureaucratic control over the prison system." The book had a foreword by Sir Robert Mark, former commissioner of the Metropolitan Police.

The resulting loss of esprit de corps, forecast by *The Times* in 1963, has followed the civil service incompetence in government agencies, markedly in border control. The incompetent Serious Organised Crime Agency, a bureaucratic creation, has had to be replaced. It was an illegitimate creation of liaison between Whitehall and MI5, which then liked to be "regarded with deference", as I was told at an academic seminar. The public are not enamoured of executive control of the police, as shown by the recent election of police commissioners.

We shall see whether the executive gains statutory control of the press.

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Foreversideways

3 hours ago

Civil Servants cock it up, well nothing new there then. Sackings ? are you kidding absolutely no chance.

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Geoff T

2 hours ago

@Foreversideways No need for sackings, lessons will be learnt!

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