

Simon Burns, the rail minister with a chauffeur-driven car, lets the train take the strain

Sitting on a metal station bench and squinting into the inky pre-dawn sky, it seemed as if rail minister Simon Burns was thinking wistfully of the chauffeured car that once had sped him every day to work in Whitehall.



Rail minister Simon Burns Photo: Warren Allott

By Hayley Dixon

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Until last week Mr Burns had avoided the indignities of travelling by the railways he is charged with running, instead taking a department car 35 miles from his home in Essex to London at a cost to the taxpayer of £80,000 a year. He had argued he needed to work on confidential Government papers in private during his commute; a claim rejected by the Cabinet Office.

But, chastened by the exposure of his unusual arrangement on the front page of a Sunday newspaper, this morning Mr Burns chose to share the commuting experience of millions of Britons by travelling by train.



Leaving his end of terrace house at 5.30am without any official papers, Mr Burns walked through the freezing cold and near-deserted streets to Chelmsford station.

Despite glancing at his watch he narrowly missed the 5.40am train, which left on time, as he stopped to buy a newspaper.



With an 18 minute wait until the next train the platform was almost deserted as Mr Burns sat down and flicked through *The Times*, before picking up his book - *Five Days in Philadelphia* by Charles Peters.

It is an account of the 1940 Republican Party convention and how it propelled Franklin Roosevelt into supporting Britain in the war. FDR, famously, loved to travel by rail throughout his presidency.

The station quickly filled up with seasoned commuters who knew where to stand to wait in line for the doors.

When the East Anglia train pulled in Mr Burns joined the other passengers in a civilised queue to board, with no hint of the pushing and shoving that is often seen on some commuter routes.



The train - typical in its age and general grubbiness - was close to capacity. There were no free seats in standard class. Rather than take a seat in First Class, which carried only six passengers, the MP stood in the vestibule with four other passengers between two carriages near to the closed buffet bar.



His chosen spot allowed Mr Burns to feel the full force of the express train's bumpy ride and he stood with his loafers planted firmly apart to steady himself as other passengers were thrown off balance.

A telecoms worker who stood near Mr Burns in the shuttered buffet car said: "I have given up looking up for a seat now. I just stand."



The journey cost £34 for a day travelcard, which includes tube travel, £25.70 for a day return, or £43.50 for a First Class day return.

But as he did not stop to buy a ticket Mr Burns may have already purchased a seven day season ticket – costing £88.50 in Standard Class or £141.60 in First. Unlike most commuters, he is entitled to claim back the cost on his parliamentary expenses.

Mr Burns got off the train at Liverpool Street station and headed toward Westminster on the tube.

Mr Burns had originally tried to weather out the public dismay at his travel arrangements, and on Monday once again travelled in the £25,000 Toyota Avensis. He claimed his previous arrangements were made in “good faith” and not meant as a “snub” to rail passengers.

Local commuters welcomed the change of heart.

David Brigg, chairman of the local commuter group the Witham and Braintree Rail Users Association, said: “He is the local MP, he should use the train and suffer what we suffer on a daily basis.

“We want our MP to truly enjoy the disruptions so that maybe they will listen when we say that fares going up higher than inflation, based on performance, cannot be justified.

“He should join his constituents and all the commuters and if the train is giving us pain it is right that he should share that pain. As rail minister he should really understand the need for more investment.”

Based on the figures gathered by their own members around 13 per cent of peak trains on the Chelmsford line are late every year.

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