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MPs split on blame for West Coast fiasco

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent

Ministers were to blame for the West Coast rail fiasco, according to a report by MPs published on Thursday.

The Commons transport committee report said there were “serious questions” about the roles of ministers and civil servants at all levels.

These findings are at odds with statements from both Downing Street and Patrick McLoughlin, the transport secretary, saying no minister was at fault for the cancellation of the contract to run the UK’s busiest intercity railway.

Mr McLoughlin in October scrapped the contract, which had been awarded to First Group, after “serious errors” came to light in how the competition was run. He took his decision just a month after he took over from Justine Greening, who is now international development secretary.

Despite a report by the National Audit Office in December, which said that deep cuts in staffing and rushed implementation of policy changes were key factors, the government maintained that fault lay with civil servants at the Department for Transport.

It pointed to a less damning internal report, conducted by Sam Laidlaw, chief executive of Centrica and a non-executive director of the department, which found officials had withheld crucial information from ministers.

Labour has accused the government of trying to protect three serving cabinet ministers from blame. Philip Hammond, the defence secretary, Theresa Villiers, Northern Ireland secretary – both previously at the DfT – as well as Ms Greening, were all involved in key decisions that were found to have contributed to the collapse of the West Coast competition.

“Embarking on an ambitious, perhaps unachievable, reform of franchising, in haste, on the UK’s most complex piece of railway was an irresponsible decision for which ministers were ultimately responsible. This was compounded by major failures by civil servants, some of whom misled ministers,” said Louise Ellman, the Labour MP who chairs the committee.

The committee of 11 MPs was, however, split on the findings, which were approved by a vote of five to three. The three dissenters, all Conservative MPs, took the unusual step of issuing a

separate statement, pointing out they did not agree with all the findings.

They cited the Laidlaw report as evidence that “ministers asked the right, penetrating questions”.

The report by MPs found that many questions were still unanswered and estimated that the costs of the fiasco, which resulted in the incumbent – Virgin Rail – continuing to run services for another two years, were already in excess of £50m and are “likely to be greater still”.

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