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## Lines are open for Virgin to run routes to London



Helen McArdle  
News Reporter

Wednesday 27 March 2013

**VIRGIN Trains could be running both mainline rail routes between Scotland and London within two years after firms were invited to tender for the Government-run East Coast franchise.**

Sir Richard Branson's firm, which has operated the West Coast route since 1997, is among those tipped to enter a bidding war.

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin has announced plans to place the East Coast line back in private control by February 2015.

A Virgin spokesman said it would consider bidding for the route between Glasgow Central, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Kings Cross. He added: "We need to see the paperwork first, but it's something we would look at.

"There's a feeling we can bring a lot of improvements in customer service there we've already brought to the West Coast.

"When we took over the West Coast main line 16 years ago it was a basket case, but we've doubled its passenger numbers."

The Office of Fair Trading has already looked into whether there would be potential difficulties in a single operator running both of the main routes.

It concluded it would not be a problem, partly as operators of the routes would be more likely to be competing against airlines rather than each other.

It came as the Department for Transport (DfT) said the franchise date for the West Coast line will be pushed back from November next year to April 2017.

The route was at the centre of controversy after a 13-year franchise was awarded to FirstGroup, which beat incumbent company Virgin Trains, only for the contract to be abandoned as it emerged the bidding process was blighted by a string of errors by DfT staff. Control over the line was handed back to Virgin.

Mr McLoughlin announced the start of a contest for the East Coast as he outlined a timetable for all rail franchise arrangements over the next eight years.

It has been run by the state-owned East Coast Main Line since November 2009 after National Express pulled out.

Mr McLoughlin said: "This programme is a major step in delivering tangible improvements to services, providing long-term certainty to the market and supporting our huge programme of rail investment."

Passenger Focus chief executive Anthony Smith said it was "an important first step towards delivering stability for passengers, and much-needed and delayed investment".

Michael Roberts, chief executive of the Association of Train Operating Companies, said it would "ensure train companies, Network Rail and our suppliers can continue to provide the best possible deal for passengers and taxpayers".

However, rail unions attacked the East Coast plans. Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT, said: "Despite wasting hundreds of millions of pounds of tax-payers' money on the franchising circus - the Government has given the green light to a whole new wave of profiteering that will have the train companies laughing all the way to the bank."

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Gavin Sprott, Edinburgh

The original excuse for the franchising structure was that it would provide competition. Now Virgin has a green light to apply for both East and West coast routes. What kind of competition is that? All franchising has done is stuff the gullets of the train companies with our money, on top of all the waste that comes with the current fragmentation of the system. The whole thing is a disgrace. All these words from the government and train companies are just guff. They must think we the public are fools. And if we put up with this, I'm afraid they are right.

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