

East Coast railway line reprivatisation 'baffling' - MP

Reprivatising the East Coast Main Line (ECML) has been called "absurd" and "baffling" by Middlesbrough's MP.

Labour's Andy McDonald told the Commons since the Scotland-to-London line became publicly owned it had been the only one in the country "which comes close to paying for itself".

The government has operated the line since 2009, when National Express handed back the franchise mid-term.

It intends to reprivatise the route by 2015.

Public ownership had produced greater profit "than any other previous franchisee on the line", Mr McDonald said.

Rail minister Simon Burns said privatising the route offered the "best possible longterm outcome", adding there was "something almost Alice in Wonderland" in preferring the days of British Rail.

Mr McDonald said journey numbers, revenue and customer satisfaction had grown since the franchise had been abandoned.

'More baffling'

"The question that I must ask the government, and members who oppose keeping the line in the hands of those who have managed it so well, is whether there is any evidence that would get them to drop their prejudice that private is always better than public?" he said.

Many UK rail franchises are run, wholly or in part, by the state-owned German, Dutch and French railway companies.

"The government's haste to extricate itself from running trains is all the more baffling since over half the rail franchises in Britain are, in fact, to some extent state controlled already," Mr McDonald said.

"It's just not the British state that's in control."

The ECML runs from London to Aberdeen, via Peterborough, Leeds, York, Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness.

Announcing the tendering process in March, Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin said franchising had been a "force for good in the story of Britain's railways, transforming an industry that was in decline".

The government said National Express would not be prevented from bidding to run any rail route, although the company said it had no plans to submit a new bid for the ECML.

RMT rail union general secretary Bob Crow said the company should be barred from bidding after "throwing back the keys and abandoning the major transport artery".

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