

Privatising the railways was a disaster. It's time to renationalise

Passengers are paying a fortune to travel in overcrowded trains, so Labour, like the Greens, should seize the initiative



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'The solution the Green party is proposing is for our railways to be brought back into public hands, with passengers having a greater say in the development of the system.' Photograph: Bruno Vincent/Getty Images

"No direction", "dithering", "rudderless". Ed Miliband isn't the first opposition leader to hear this kind of language as an election looms, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that his MPs are queuing up to offer him friendly encouragement to fill the policy vacuum.

Clearly, it's not easy being in opposition, knowing that every policy announcement can and will be used against you by the government and a hostile media. But that's why politics requires courage.

Labour now has some fantastic opportunities to get behind progressive policies that would resonate with its traditional support and with voters. One in particular is about to pull into the station. With the dreadful news last week that rail fares will go up by an average of 4.1% next year (and sincere sympathies to you if you're one of the many

passengers who will be hit much harder than that), it's surely time for Labour to accept that privatisation of the railways was a disastrous failure that it should have reversed when it had the chance.

With the prime minister's former speechwriter, Ian Birrell, leaping to the defence of privatised services and talking about record levels of passenger satisfaction, surely now is the time for Miliband's team to sign up to a policy that would genuinely distinguish him from the coalition. The shadow transport secretary, Maria Eagle, sounds as if she wants to head in that direction. She recently criticised the government's determination to re-privatise the East Coast service, calling it "bizarre and dogmatic". East Coast, she noted, makes one of the highest payments to the public purse, receives the least subsidy and is the only route on which all profits are reinvested in services. So why doesn't Labour go the whole way?

The Rebuilding Rail report, published last year by Transport for Quality of Life, offers a superb analysis of the mess Britain's railways are in. It finds that the private sector has not delivered the innovation and investment that were once promised, that the costs of back-room staff have massively increased, and that the costs of train travel rose by 17% between 1997 and 2010 (while the costs of travelling by car fell). It conservatively estimates that £1.2bn is being lost each year as a result of fragmentation and privatisation. The irony is that some of the biggest profitters are the state-owned rail companies of our neighbours: Deutsche Bahn, for example, owns three UK franchises.

Birrell seeks to paint opponents of privatisation as dewy-eyed nostalgists. But the modern, efficient, clean, affordable services enjoyed in other parts of Europe offer a much better blueprint than our own past. The solution the Green party is proposing is for our railways to be brought back into public hands, with passengers having a greater say in the development of the system. The government would take back individual franchises when they expire, or when companies fail to meet their conditions. The enormous savings generated could and should then be reinvested in rail infrastructure, and to reduce the soaring cost of fares.

My private member's bill sets out the process to make this happen, and is due to have its second reading in October. I've written to Maria Eagle asking if Labour will get behind it. As a policy for Labour, it's unlikely to play well in the Mail and the Telegraph. But I suspect many of their readers – particularly those reading their papers while jammed up against a fellow commuter on an overcrowded, overpriced train – might be more receptive. And certainly there are many rank and file Labour MPs, many of whom are already backing the bill, who are desperate to see their leader prove himself as the conviction politician he says he is.

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