

8<sup>th</sup> October 2012

Dear Mr Cooper & Mr McLoughlin,

You are both new to my missives on this subject.

I continue to despair about our railways. I worked in Belgium for twenty years and now travel frequently by rail in France. My Friday/Monday regional trains in Belgium were composed of nine cars so there was always plenty of space for passengers and luggage. My current journeys in France, whether by TGV or regional trains are always comfortable - a 21st-century experience.

Contrast our system, typified by my journey on the 18:27 Cross Country Manchester Piccadilly to Southampton service yesterday (7th October). The train was full (I believe) on departure and at each intervening station, the usual 'musical chairs' was played with boarding passengers having to ask seated passengers to remove themselves from pre-booked seats. At Birmingham New Street, the train manager asked standing passengers to "move down and inside the carriages to allow passengers still on the platform to board". The resulting melee saw passengers standing along the length of the carriages up to Leamington Spa (see photo) when some standing (or other) passengers departed. This still left carriages half-full of standing passengers until we reached Oxford.

I have been banging on to First Great Western about similar situations on many of their services, whether inter-city (Paddington-Bristol) or regional (Cardiff/Gloucester-Westbury/Salisbury and beyond) to no avail. (I appreciate that FGW has converted some former buffet cars for use on their HSTs but 'what a way to run a railroad' in the 21st-century).

Christian Wolmar and others in an article 'What a Way to Run a Railway' in this week's Sunday Times showed a bar chart comparing the annual public subsidy per head on the railways of the 'big five' European nations: UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain. If we compare France, which has an excellent, nationalised system with the UK, we find that the annual public subsidy in the UK, where we have a so-called privatized system, is TWICE that of France (£135.81 per head in the UK against £67.10 in France)! The article goes on to describe the shambles that is the franchising system; this and the other ridiculous aspects of our system - carriage/train leasing for example, where companies like FGW say they simply cannot procure any more carriages for their trains, is ludicrous. This is the 21st-century for Christ's sake - we should be

concentrating (as we should have twenty/thirty/forty years ago) on investing in a system that works, as France has done. Transaction costs, the franchising system, train leasing and so on has brought our railway to its knees.

But to get back to the particular problem with yesterday's train, why is Cross Country not providing sufficient capacity on this (and presumably many other) services? I would guess because, as I indicate above, our railway system is not fit for purpose.

Yours sincerely

Paul Turner

1<sup>st</sup> April 2012

Dear Mr Hopwood and Ms Greening,

Eight or so months on from our 'Dorchester experience' and your (Mr Hopwood's) 'in the hope that we can demonstrate that our service can be both comfortable and enjoyable to use' and 'To this end we are continuing to discuss various opportunities with the DfT and we remain very positive about what the future holds', when will this 'future' be with us?

Six years (is it?) into FGW's franchise and with government subsidy to the railways at between three and five times (at today's prices) what it was in the BR era, the service is abysmal.

Today's experience was on the short 11:33 Bath-Bristol (Salisbury-Cardiff train) service and the 13:10 Bristol - Bath return (train again headed for Salisbury). We had a tight schedule, heading off for Bristol Airport to 'pick up' family. In spite of the train arrivals board stating that the service was 'on time', it arrived at 11:35. There was an enormous crowd waiting to board the THREE cars. There was quite a wait while almost the whole train disembarked and then another long wait while the crowd boarded. I didn't time the departure but because of the throng, we must have departed at least five or so minutes late. Fairly small potatoes on a Sunday I suppose but the point is the number of carriages leading to the boarding scrimmage.

When on board, we had another 'Dorchester experience' (this goes without saying as there were ONLY THREE CARS). Once again I ended up in my favourite spot in the luggage rack with her majesty standing. I then gave up my 'seat' to a five-year-old who was standing with his Mum and a gentleman gave his seat to my wife. To while away the journey I lifted your Escape magazine from the rack. It had a feature entitled '24 hours in Cardiff' - the subtitle could have been 'And stand all the way on the train'. I counted twelve or thirteen standing in

our carriage and through the door/window, I counted and recounted sixteen standing in the vestibule/corridor. On the return journey, my wife and our grandson found a seat while myself, our daughter and granddaughter stood along with about seven others (by this time I had given up on counting vestibule numbers).

One can see why, some years ago, First Great Western was dubbed Worst Great Western. **And, again, when will the improved future arrive Mr Hopwood (and Ms Greening)?** I realise I keep 'banging on' about this but this should be (if there was any solution under our privatized system) something worth banging on about. To have such an appalling railway system/service in a western European nation in the second decade of the 21st-century is beyond belief. To try to gain a perspective, I referenced one of my many old railway books. In 'Steam Around Bath' by Mike Arlett and Ivo Peters I found: plate 188 - a 1963 photograph of the 5:35pm Salisbury to Cardiff train with SEVEN carriages and plate 189 - a 1961 photograph of the 9:10am (Sundays only) Cardiff to Portsmouth train with EIGHT carriages. Those were the days eh? But they still are the days in continental Europe. Whilst still working, I regularly caught a regional train (not an express) from Mons to Brussels Midi on a Friday evening and then returned on the Monday morning. The trains always consisted of NINE units.

This is, of course, a rhetorical question but where did we go so wrong?

Yours sincerely

Paul Turner

To: wirepuller@hotmail.com  
Subject: RE: Britain's Railways  
Date: Mon, 18 Jul 2011 10:26:21 +0100  
From: MarkHopwood.FGW-MD@firstgroup.com

Dear Mr Turner

Thank you for copying me into your email to the Wiltshire Times and I apologise for the delay in getting back to you.

I was really sorry to read that you and your wife had such a disappointing journey with us on your return from Dorchester to Bradford on Avon and that you have such a poor impression of our general operation.

For the term of our current Franchise we committed to delivering an investment programme of £200 million into improving our service for our customers. This included various improvements to the 210 stations that we operate, incorporating the installation of an entirely new and more modern passenger information system, and a complete refresh of the interior of our West of England and London Thames Valley fleet of trains. We've also made significant improvements to our reliability and punctuality. We've also been committed to paying £1.13 billion to the Department for Transport.

With passenger numbers continuing to grow quite quickly and steadily, providing sufficient capacity to keep up has become a significant challenge, not just for us but for all Train UK Train Operators. Unfortunately simply buying or hiring more in is not the simple solution it would appear.

Last year, we were pleased to reach an agreement with the DfT to secure additional vehicles to replace those we had on a short-term lease and which were due to be handed back. We'd been working hard to get these vehicles for a very long time and meant that we could retain our existing levels of capacity, but it's not enough. To this end we are continuing to discuss various opportunities with the DfT and we remain very positive about what the future holds.

I appreciate the chance to explain our position but once again, I am sorry that you had such an uncomfortable journey. I've sent you some complimentary tickets as a gesture of goodwill, in the hope that we can demonstrate that our service can be both comfortable and enjoyable to use. They will be valid for travel anywhere on the First Great Western network.

Yours sincerely

Mark Hopwood

10<sup>th</sup> July 2011

Dear James,

Thanks for your response (letter dated 5th July) to my email below.

However, I find your letter astonishing.

In your first paragraph, you say: "the railways are privatised and are not really a matter for Government". I can hardly believe that an MP could make such a statement for these (self-evident) reasons:

- Britain's railways are an integral part of the nation's transport infrastructure. As I said below, the Government is subsidising the 'privatised' railways to the tune of £5 billion (or so) of taxpayers' money. How can this not be a matter for the Government? Does the Government have no long-term strategy for Britain's transport systems? You appear to be applying an American model to transport infrastructure - a privatised free-for-all. But we are not America; the modern, integrated, well-invested, well-run, low fare-cost transport systems of our European neighbours are those that we should be following (and following is the operative word as we are many decades behind thanks to lack of investment by government). If we do not make such long-term investments, we will be condemning future generations to a gridlocked road network at the cost of manhours lost, fuel wasted, environmental damage and so on. It is essential that we commit now to a long-term strategy with appropriate investment and not tinker around the edges as your letter implies - "increased passenger contribution is inevitable at least in the short term, until the root problems of high fares can be properly addressed", "a review of the structure of fares", "regulated fares rising in future broadly in line with RPI", "to develop a wider package of rail reform measures", "industry coming together", "putting railway finances on a more sustainable footing" etc - with the greatest respect, this is all short-term woolly thinking. The problem with British Rail was lack of investment from government yet government is now investing (far more) in a railway model that has not worked and is not working.

Your subsequent paragraphs concentrate on: 'the price of train travel', 'rail value for money', 'regulated fares rising', 'lower costs' and 'fare rises'. I did not mention rail fares or the cost of rail travel once in my email. Why are you replying to an email I did not send? Either you did not read my email or you are deliberately avoiding addressing the very serious, long-term issues that beset our railways.

Yours sincerely

Paul Turner

From: Paul Turner <wirepuller@hotmail.com>  
To: <markhopwood.fgw-md@firstgroup.com>  
Cc: "James Gray (New)" <jamesgraymp@parliament.uk>, A Grover Wiltshire Times <agrover@newswilts.co.uk>  
Date: 17/07/2011 11:33  
Subject: RE: Britain's Railways

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Jason,

Thanks for the response.

However, it's all very well Mr Hopwood being 'aware' of my email but what is his response to the issues I have raised?

It appears that from Mr Hopwood's lack of response and Mr Gray's (MP for North Wiltshire) response (not seen by you), but lack of appreciation of the issues I have raised that there are two 'trains' involved here. The first is the runaway train - we have a railway system that is not fit for purpose but no matter how much the public complains, there is no stopping this appalling ideological mess that is our privatised railway. The second is the gravy train - commuters stand every day, pensioners sit in luggage racks, families with small children stand in vestibules yet Mr Hopwood and his like continue to enjoy increasing remuneration packages (a not insignificant amount of which is linked to 'performance' - please correct me if I am wrong).

Some railway, some democracy, some country!

Yours sincerely

Paul Turner

To: wirepuller@hotmail.com  
Subject: Re: Britain's Railways  
Date: Fri, 1 Jul 2011 10:03:24 +0100  
From: MarkHopwood.FGW-MD@firstgroup.com

Dear Mr Turner

I am writing to acknowledge receipt of your email of 29 June.

Thank you for writing and I will ensure Mark is aware of your correspondence as soon as possible.

Kind regards

Jason Ness  
First Great Western

29<sup>th</sup> June 2011  
Sirs,

I (along with many others) experienced the shambles that is our railway system today.

As we are retirees and holders of senior railcards, her majesty and myself decided to take a day trip from Bradford-on-Avon to Dorchester for the Wednesday market amongst other things.

Whilst the outward journey was fairly uneventful, the return journey was interesting. Whilst waiting for the train, we got talking to a chap who had come down to Dorchester for a business meeting having caught the train at Bristol Parkway. He said that the rush-hour outward journey was absolutely jam-packed with scores of commuters standing. We foolishly thought that a mid-afternoon departure from Dorchester could not possibly suffer this problem ....

My wife managed to find a seat but I made the journey in the luggage rack alongside a nice young chap from the Thomas Hardy school. A family with a toddler and a babe-in-arms had to stand in the vestibule alongside cyclists and their three bikes. There were others in the luggage rack at the far end and I guess that there was a similar situation in the other carriage. I say 'other' carriage pointedly - why, when we have had this issue pointed out through the 'Worst Great Western' passenger strike some years ago, is First Great Western running two-car trains at busy commuter times and on summer seaside routes?

We cannot continue with this shambles surely? We all know that the privatised railway system is just not working. I do not have the latest or complete figures but the total subsidy to the railways in 2006 was £6.3 billion which was about four times what British Rail received in a typical year. I guess that similar figures obtain today. Why don't we just knock this farce on the head and revert to a well-

invested (what could British Rail have done with £6.3 billion!) social railway network. In 2010, the government budget was £9 billion for roads I believe. In order to get people out of their cars and onto public transport, especially the railway, shouldn't we be investing a similar amount in our railway infrastructure and at the same time dismantling the expensive privatised system with its convoluted structures, disincentives for investment, overpaid directors and executives, and shambolic operations?

A 63-year-old riding in the luggage rack and a family with small children travelling in the vestibule on a country route on a summer afternoon, outside the peak holiday period, is surely symptomatic of railway system in meltdown. This might be expected on the railway of a Third World country but not a First World nation in the 21st-century. Perhaps this is what Britain is heading towards - Third World status!

Yours sincerely

Paul Turner