



## All Change on the Railways?

### Introduction

Next month (24 October), Mick Lynch, General Secretary of the RMT, will give the Jimmy Reid Memorial [Lecture](#). He does so at a time of significant change for the railway system across the UK. This briefing outlines the issues facing our railways as they move towards greater public ownership.

### Background

Our railways have [struggled](#) for years since privatisation with under-investment, poor service, delays and disruption. Yet they contribute over £36bn annually to the UK economy, a greater economic impact than the food, drink, tobacco, chemical and pharmaceutical industries.

Under Rishi Sunak, only 85.5% of trains ran on time, and many more failed to run at all, not least because industrial disputes were deliberately left unresolved, wasting £1.25bn of taxpayers' money. Fragmentation, waste and bureaucracy beset [privatised rail](#). The biggest [project](#), HS2, was cut short and cost double the original estimate.

### ScotRail

The Scottish Government was ahead of the game with its decision to bring ScotRail into public ownership. A decision long campaigned for by the rail unions in their [report](#), *A Vision for Scotland's Railways*. They also campaigned to end peak rail fares; a trial scheme was implemented but sadly ended by the Scottish Government. The pilot scheme boosted demand for ScotRail services by around 6.8%, short of the 10% target. However, this ignores the policy's [wider benefits](#), including two million car journeys taken off our roads.

The temporary timetable may improve as the current pay dispute is resolved, but the underlying driver shortages remain. ScotRail is losing so many train drivers to retirement and other operators that its target of having enough by 2027 to end reliance on overtime is "absolute fantasy", [according](#) to ASLEF. At ScotRail [Engineering](#), a third of staff will retire in the next five years. We are some way off an integrated transport system, and even an integrated ticket system, common in cities worldwide, has made [slow progress](#). More needs to be done to ensure [the safety](#) of women and girls,

including clarifying the role of guards and British Transport Police.

### Great British Railways (GBR)

The new UK Government has [said](#) they will take all operators into public ownership alongside bringing track and train back together. A [transition team](#) is up and running, and the Rail Public Ownership [Bill](#) is reaching the final Commons stages. However, it won't happen overnight; most contracts are expected to lapse within four years, although a couple run until 2030/31. Private 'open access' operators will be allowed to operate, and the rolling stock companies will continue to pour out profits to their shareholders.

Much more needs to be done. Investment is required in [disabled access](#). The much-touted driverless trains are decades away, given the necessary signalling and rolling stock changes, and skill shortages remain. There is also a strong case for retaining guards, as the workers concerned point out in this [RMT report](#). And ending outsourcing, including [train cleaners](#).

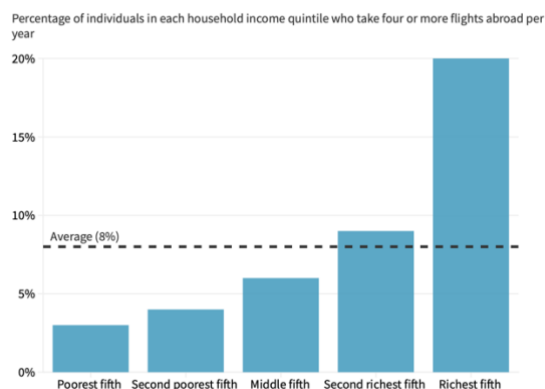


### Trains – not Planes or Roads

The UK Government is supporting the expansion of London City Airport and has indicated likely [support](#) for a third runway at Heathrow. The Scottish Government also [supports](#) Heathrow expansion. It is argued that this is necessary to support business growth. However, in 2023, 3.9m fewer air trips were made for business purposes, a decline of 29% since 2019. Businesses spent £2.9bn less on flights, a shift the New Economics Foundation [described](#) as a "decoupling" of business air travel and the economy. There has been no net increase in business travel in the UK's aviation sector since 2006.

Governments will also have to get to grips with the damage air travel is doing to the climate. There is growing public support for a [frequent flyer levy](#), as a disproportionate share of aviation's climate damage comes from a small number of mostly very wealthy individuals. The current system means a teacher driving to school pays more fuel duty than a private jet owner would to fly away on holiday. A [jet fuel tax](#) would raise £6bn a year.

Figure 1: A far higher proportion of high earners fly regularly compared to lower earners



Source: DfT National Travel Survey analysis

The new UK government has inherited a massive road-building programme estimated to cost up to £27bn. How much of that will survive the Autumn budget cuts remains to be seen. The [evidence](#) going back many years is that adding capacity to the road network simply encourages more people to jump into their cars, thereby quickly filling up the new lanes and ensuring that congestion is as bad as before.

In Scotland, the [budget](#) featured an increase in spending on roads of £210m and a reduction in spending on the railways of £80m. Transform Scotland has [highlighted](#) that £900m of the £1.3bn Scottish City-Region Deal spending on transport infrastructure was spent on high-carbon infrastructure that will "lock people into unsustainable transport for decades to come". Active travel [schemes](#) also appear to be another casualty of budget cuts.

**Transform Scotland**  
@TransformScot

A breakdown of [#ScotBudget](#) for transport:

- £210m up
- No change
- No change
- £80m down
- to £220m, but misses [#ButeHouseAgreement](#) commitment by £100m
- cuts to other sustainable transport lines
- How is this consistent with [#climate](#) emergency?

## Railfreight

A modal shift towards rail freight is [essential](#) in decarbonising the freight and logistics sector and wider society. Reductions in carbon emissions can be achieved by facilitating the growth in existing flows, like intermodal and construction materials, and the development of new flows, such as parcels and light logistics. Unite the Union has [been raising](#) the need for a continuous route for freight by train from Scotland to Europe, which would require an enhancement of tracks around Wembley.



Rail Freight: Building a Stronger, Greener Future for Britain

For Britain, for the environment

A typical [freight train](#) carries the equivalent of 80 HGV's. Some 7 million lorry loads of freight are moved by rail each year, helping cut traffic jams and pollution. Several bids for freeports or greenports don't even have a rail link, suggesting they will be served by even more lorries on our roads.

## Overseas Investment

The German Government plans to invest more in rail than road, and the Austrian Government has introduced a "climate ticket", giving access to all public transport. It is worth looking at the [Swiss system](#), with its emphasis on integration of all public transport into an impressive network. It is publicly owned and is designed by consensus. Spain has built 2,500 miles of high-speed track linking 16 cities. The previous UK Government couldn't build one line from London to Manchester. In California, the first [hydrogen-powered](#), zero-emissions passenger train in North America will enter service early next year.

## Conclusion

The key to the future of our railways and climate change is to get us out of our cars and onto the train. Rail is in a unique position to accommodate transfer away from the car. To achieve that, we need a radical policy shift and investment.

### Jimmy Reid Foundation

The Jimmy Reid Foundation is a think tank which brings together different voices from across Scotland to make the case for economic, environmental, political and social equity and justice in Scotland and further afield.

<https://reidfoundation.scot>

For further Information contact:

Dave Watson – [contact@reidfoundation.scot](mailto:contact@reidfoundation.scot)