

[National Assembly for Wales](#)

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[Inquiry into the future of the Wales and Borders Rail](#)

Evidence from Mike Joseph - WBF 17

**RESPONSE to
National Assembly of Wales
Enterprise and Business Committee
Inquiry into the future of the
WALES AND BORDERS RAIL FRANCHISE**

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1 SCOPE OF RESPONSE

This response particularly addresses the third of the Committee's three terms of reference - *How can service delivery after 2018 deliver connectivity and value for money for passengers while reducing the burden on the tax payer*. I argue that the fundamental challenge (and hence its solutions) lie beyond the scope of any future franchise, rather than within its terms. I argue the case for a holistic concept of public transport for all parts of Wales, which will be in the interests both of those regions that are not reached by the present rail network, and of regions that are well served by rail, and will be even better served in future. I propose that however a future franchise is structured, it should support this holistic context.

2 CONTEXT

The most significant transport development in Wales in the near future has already been proposed and agreed – by the UK Government. Wales is finally to lose membership of an exclusive but undesirable club of three: European nations without a mile of electrified railway. One huge investment in electrification enables Wales to part company from Albania and Moldova². As a result of investment in the South Wales main line and the Valleys network, two in every three Welsh people will finally have modern commuter and high-speed electric train services. This investment ends a century during which Wales has been bypassed, sidelined and deprived of successive waves of rail innovation in Britain. Prior to the electrification announcement in 2012, the last time Wales was in the forefront of rail investment was in 1912 – see paragraph 18 below.

3 ELECTRIFICATION

The decision, particularly as amended to bring Swansea under the wires, is hugely welcome. Electrification means speed, efficient and greener use of energy, reduced noise, increased reliability, improved scheduling, better acceleration enabling more stops without

sacrificing journey times. The social hierarchy of transport esteem which places buses at the base, has electric trains at its apex. They express modernity, timeliness, connectedness. Everywhere that it extends, electrification delivers a virtuous spiral of growing usage and investment. And by signalling confidence in the future, electrification becomes a major driver of economic and social development. This is the “Sparks Effect”: electrify the line, and the people will ride. Electrification has proved beneficial wherever and whenever it has been applied to a railway network. Having lost a century during which Wales, uniquely, has been denied electrification by London governments, it will be interesting to see if the long delay means that the pent-up benefits will be all the greater.

4 BEYOND THE WIRES

But that is only part of the developing transport picture. Two in three Welsh people will be served by the electric network, but one in three will not be. What transport future can be expected in the greater part of Wales, from Llanelli to Llandudno? Swansea rightly feared the consequences of being left out of the electric revolution. Surely therefore, Carmarthen, Milford Haven and Aberystwyth should now fear for their diesel-hauled future. West and north of Swansea, Wales has no rail network as such, simply a series of disconnected rail fragments, supplemented by declining local bus services and a fragmentary long distance network that, despite all good intentions, continue to fail to integrate effectively with rail.

5 THE CHALLENGE

How can west, mid and north Wales possibly compete in economic and social performance, faced with a modernised, electrified south? An inefficient, inaccessible rural backwater, terrain for preserved railways and Celtic theme parks, will increasingly appear disadvantaged compared to state-of-the-art, highly-connected south-east Wales. The Welsh public transport playing field is about to become very uneven indeed. This is a problem for all Wales, not just the north and west. Are we content to be further divided between an economically successful and modernising south-east, and a rural backwater? This challenge can only be understood and addressed by Welsh Government and Assembly. No London parliament or government can have such a debate. It can only be addressed in Cardiff Bay.

6 DECLINE AND REVIVAL

Two problems undermine the future of public transport in Wales beyond the electric wires: the lack of credible cases for further electrification; and the multiple challenges of sustaining even the current level of bus service for the vast tracts of rural Wales beyond the railway. Scattered, small and increasingly ageing communities, significant distances and difficult terrain - the picture is familiar and daunting. Even so there are also occasional positive signs. When a rural transport innovation manages to be established - as with the successful revival of the Fishguard rail service - it turns out that rural communities have the same travel needs and aspirations as anywhere else: commuting to college and work in Carmarthen, to shop and meet in Cardiff, to take time out in London, or flights from Manchester. Here in microcosm is the challenge and the opportunity: further decline is easy to predict; but public transport revival for the whole of Wales beyond the wires seems

to require a huge effort of imagination.

7 INTEGRATED TRANSPORT

The standard response to this challenge appears in the form of the integrated transport debate. The convenience, independence and flexibility of the private car is taken as a benchmark, against which to assess the performance of public transport in delivering end-to-end journeys. It is not surprising that public transport struggles to measure up. Indeed poor connectivity, rather than an absolute lack of services, is one of the most distinctive failings of public transport in Wales. Disintegration is the common experience of regular transport users. To take an example again from Fishguard, at first sight, the town seems well served by public transport: seven routes (one rail and six bus) serve the small town. Yet very few connections between these services are possible, and all proposals to integrate timetables are met with well-reasoned objections. There is neither commercial motivation nor statutory requirement to deliver at the roadside the integration that is endlessly debated in Cardiff Bay. What can be done to inject credibility, ambition and urgency into this debate?

8 SWITZERLAND

Switzerland is often (and rightly) seen as a country that has got its public transport right. Trains run on time, and they run everywhere. Where they don't run, post buses, cable cars and ferries do, and above all, the whole operation runs as one seamlessly integrated network. Because of this, the Swiss railway clock is an icon of the country. Is it possible to draw meaningful comparisons between Wales and Switzerland?

9 WALES AND SWITZERLAND

For all their contrasts of wealth, peripherality/centrality, and independence/dependence, Wales and Switzerland have surprising similarities. Both are mountainous countries surrounded by larger neighbours. Both have densely populated urban belts to one side of the country. The greater part of each country consists of extensive mountainous regions with small highly scattered communities. Tourism is a vital component of both national economies. Both countries have been, in their time, world-class pioneers of railway investment and innovation. And despite the majority of their population being highly urbanised, both countries draw strongly for their distinct sense of citizenship and identity from the remotest rural parts of their nation – the Cefn Gwlad. Switzerland is slightly more than twice as populous as Wales, and slightly less than twice the size. So the population density of the two countries is similar, Wales with 382 people per square mile and Switzerland with 496.

10 CARDIFF, BRISTOL AND ...

Now consider three cities of similar size: Cardiff (346,100), Bristol (433,100) and Zürich (380,500). On an average day 33,589 people arrive and depart at Cardiff's main station, Cardiff Central. That equates to ten percent of the city's population. That seems impressive, and even more so when compared to Bristol Temple Meads which can only manage 23,038, a mere 5% of the city's population. The reason for the discrepancy is not

hard to find. Coal gave south-east Wales a legacy of rail lines which survived Beeching to be reborn as a commuter network, today the most developed outside Britain's main conurbations. Moreover, Cardiff's main bus station is immediately outside Cardiff Central. By contrast Bristol's Broadmead Bus Station is a twenty minute walk from Temple Meads, and Beeching cuts lost Bristol its branch lines, giving the city a legacy of congestion that it struggles to address.

11 ... ZÜRICH

What of Zürich? Every day 340,000 people use its main station, the Hauptbahnhof. That is equivalent to 89% of the city's population. The static is eye-watering. It demonstrates the real meaning of integrated transport. It is a consequence of every Swiss train, tram, bus, Postbus and ferry running in a synchronised transport system that reaches every remote valley and Alp.

12 TRAVEL CARDS

But the achievement rests on much more than a synchronised timetable. 2.3 million Swiss adults carry a half-fare travel card. A further 400,000 have a full-fare travel card, and another million have travel passes for specific routes. Thus well over half of all Swiss adults buy discount travel passes. It is not hard to see why passes are so popular. They are valid on all 280 transport operators in Switzerland. Single tickets are also valid across all operators for the end-to-end journey, but passes in addition offer entire-route discounts regardless of the terms of individual operators involved. The passenger and his/her journey is the central consideration, not the convenience of the individual operator.

13 CONTINUED GROWTH

It might be thought that Swiss transport reached this developed state many years ago and has since rested, perhaps even stagnated. Far from it. From 1992 to 2008, the number of stations and stops in the public transport network increased by 30 percent, and the total route length grew from 21,709 to 28,075 kilometres, with recent growth being largely from new bus and Postbus services. In addition 90km of new rail routes including a 40km tunnel and a new urban underground have opened in recent years.

14 REDUCING SUBSIDY

Has all this come about at huge public expense? Apparently not. In 1998 the taxpayer subsidy per passenger kilometre was 25.7 centimes. Ten years later in 2008 this had dropped to 14.9 centimes.

15 INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

Productivity gains have contributed to growth. Over the same period the number of people employed in public transport fell by 13.4 percent, while the volume of transport services rose by 16 percent. Passenger volumes have seen a 30% growth in demand since 1996. Each seat in the Swiss public transport network is used eleven times a day.

16 MULTIPLE OPERATORS

Where should we begin in Wales? Perhaps with the plethora of transport operators. Is that a particular problem for us in Wales? In Switzerland, 280 separate operators combine to provide one seamless passenger service. Could that be done here? In fact it turns out that Welsh public transport is already highly concentrated in just two boardrooms, in Aberdeen and Berlin. Stagecoach of Aberdeen owns First Group which holds the Great Western franchise and operates buses across south Wales from Cardiff to Haverfordwest³. Deutsche Bahn in Berlin runs all other rail services in Wales through Arriva, and also operates buses across north and mid Wales, and from Aberystwyth to Cardiff.

17 POLITICAL WILL

Two operators in Wales, 280 in Switzerland. Given the political will, it is hard to see why the job of coordinating public transport in the public interest should be any harder in Wales than in Switzerland. The problem, I suggest, is not the scale of the task but the lack of ambition. Wales has never been offered a comprehensive vision of what public transport can and should be, that comes remotely near the daily reality in Switzerland. With the electrification decision, London has handed the onus of a unified public transport future for Wales back to us.

18 CAN WALES INNOVATE?

Which brings this paper to 1912. In England, railway lines were already being electrified, in south London and Tyneside. In that year, Wales' first and only high speed rail line was opened, to speed the London boat train on its journey to and from the transatlantic steamers at Fishguard. The line bypassed the slow bottlenecks of Neath, Swansea and Carmarthen, cutting many minutes off journey times. The line is still open⁴ and used for freight and just one daily return passenger journey, the lunchtime Fishguard boat train, still timetabled as one of the fastest long-distance routes anywhere in Britain: Cardiff to Llanelli in just an hour.

But the opening of the high speed line in 1912 proved to be not a new beginning but a culmination for public transport in Wales. Within two years, we were at war and the transatlantic dream was at an end. We have had to wait a century for the next serious investment. So it takes an effort of memory to recall that until 1912, Wales had been at the forefront of railway innovation since 1804 – from Trevithick's first railway steam engine at Penydarren, to Brunel's broad gauge high-speed Great Western running (in 1845, two years before the first Swiss railway) the fastest rail service in the world, and of course producing and exporting the coal that energised the world's railways.

The world now rightly regards Swiss achievements in public transport with respect. It is equally worth remembering Wales' remarkable contribution to the first transport revolution, and very necessary to remember it, if we wish to believe that we can do it again.

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- 2 Moldova may also be leaving the club. It is seeking EU funding for electrifying a line to Romania - <http://moldovan.railwaysummit.com/> With Albanian railways remaining in a state of near-collapse, the non-electric club will become even more exclusive.
- 3 First Group was also expecting to hold the North Wales line as part of the West Coast franchise until UK Government miscalculated the risk, throwing all franchising into limbo.
- 4 Barely – with the restoration of a double track between Swansea and Llanelli (singled by Thatcher in the 1980s), the Swansea by-pass line will come under serious threat of closure. Its survival should be a matter of concern for any long-term Welsh transport plan.