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Evidence from Mike Parker – WBF 50

**SUBMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF THE WALES & BORDERS RAIL FRANCHISE
by Mike Parker, Plaid Cymru Westminster candidate in Ceredigion**

Preamble

There are many issues to do with our rail service that Plaid Cymru feel strongly about, most notably that the whole Wales network should be under the aegis of a not-for-profit company based here in Wales. Here, however, I will concentrate on the issues that directly affect Ceredigion and its immediate surrounding areas, especially therefore the service on the Cambrian Coast line from Birmingham to Aberystwyth.

The current franchise

I am a regular user of the Cambrian Coast line, and have been so for the best part of twenty years. Without doubt, the punctuality and comfort of the journey has improved noticeably in the past five years, although it should be noted that this was from a very low base of acceptability prior to that.

That said, there are still too many unacceptable delays, and when these occur, sometimes extremely patchy provision of information about what is happening. This can be especially so at unstaffed stations, e.g. Borth, Dyfi Junction, Caersws, where passengers rely on tannoyed announcements and the electronic indicator board. In my personal experience, the messages relayed on these are often long delayed, confused and confusing.

As to the question of whether the current franchise meets passenger needs, we do not believe that it does. Under the Plaid Cymru-Labour One Wales government of 2007-11, the line was significantly upgraded with partial dualling, new passing loops and improvements to stations and facilities. Part of the reasoning for this was to prepare the way for the long-promised hourly service on the line.

Following the formation of a Labour only government in Cardiff Bay in 2011, the promised hourly service has been postponed; we learn now that yet another survey is to be conducted to establish whether there is any call for it. I respectfully suggest to ministers that they only need to travel a few times on these trains to see that there is an urgent need for the hourly service. Many trains are already running at near capacity; on some services, it is impossible to get a seat. It is unquestionably true that a more regular and reliable service would attract more people on to it – it is the large gap between trains that keeps many people using their cars. The growth of the University in Aberystwyth, and

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a significant growth in the size of the town itself and many of its surrounding villages, are further impetus for an hourly service.

Potential new services, routes and stations

There are a number of new services on existing tracks that I would like to see prioritised:

- As already stated, that the service between Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury should become hourly. Ideally, we would like some variety in direct destinations on the Cambrian Coast line, and are particularly keen to see regular trains go to and from Cardiff, via Hereford and Newport. For most of the day, if there were an hourly service, perhaps every other train could take this route, which is entirely within the aegis of this franchise operator, alternating with the existing trains to Wolverhampton and Birmingham. Inter-Wales traffic is increasing all the time, and with the growth in the National Assembly and its reach, this is only going to continue.
- The possibility of at least once daily direct through train from Aberystwyth to London (and back) should be re-examined.

While any new routes and stations are more long-term goals, it is important to state them nonetheless and to work towards their ultimate creation:

- Of all the potential new stations on the existing Cambrian Coast line, I believe that there is the greatest call for one to serve the communities of Bow Street and Llandre. This is a growing commuter area that suffers much from excess traffic on its roads, especially the main A487 through Bow Street. With a population of nearly 3,000, it is highly likely that there is a significant potential market for train users.
- Even more long-term as an aim, but one that I believe needs to be explicitly stated as a definite aim, is the reinstatement of a line between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, via Lampeter. This is an obvious gap in the network since its closure under Beeching, though the closure (and subsequent building over of the line in places) does mean that a substantially new route could and should perhaps be sought (the old line was built largely piecemeal out of an assortment of different plans). Reinstating the railway would reconnect three University campuses (Aberystwyth, Lampeter, Carmarthen), and would have significant benefits for a very large swathe of west Wales that is currently denied access to the rail network. It would connect south, west and mid Wales, and be a huge economic boom to the region.

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