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SCOTLAND

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FIRST SCOTRAIL - AND THE ART OF BODYSWERVING



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Address by Gordon Casely to the AGM of RailFuture Scotland, Bathgate, 2 April 2011.

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen –

Thank you for the honour of asking me to address your AGM.

As a journalist, I know little about railway economics, less about railway planning, and I'll leave the knowledge of railway politics to experts such as yourselves.

But as a passenger and traveller, I experience a great deal, and I can spot shabbiness and the third-rate faster than a ferret can run up a trouser leg.

Be in no doubt where I stand. The title of this address is “First ScotRail - and the art of bodyswerving”.

I had thought of “The way we are – a jaundiced look at the state of things” – but that’s far too realistic.

Also considered was “First ScotRail – the train company that’s one wheel short of a unicycle”.

In this 400th anniversary year of the publication of the King James Bible, I did muse about taking as the title a text from the Old Testament book of Proverbs, Chapter 29, verse 18 - “Where there is no vision, the people perish”. Indeed there is no vision, and in First ScotRail’s now infamously doorless SuperSprinters, the people *are* perishing.

Those of you who watched Channel 4’s *Dispatches* 10 days ago will know from it that we in the UK possess the highest fares and poorest trains in Europe, and that the incomprehensible ticketing system is cardinally designed in favour of greed and rapacity. What interested me more from the programme were the excuses trotted out by the various Train Operating Companies and by the Association of Train Operating Companies. They’re precisely the same flim-flam cotton wool versions trotted out by our very own First ScotRail.

So here we are, the nation who invented trains for the rest of the world, and here at home 150 years later, we’ve allowed it to go horribly wrong.

I know. I travel more than most – in Scotland, the UK, Europe, the world. I’m a lifetime cyclist, with more than 165,000 miles under the back wheel, and I’ve cycled on every continent except Antarctica. I’ve also used trains in every continent – so when I tell you that there’s more than an element of the Third World about our national train system in Scotland, you might guess that I backing this up with some experience.

To take tiny examples: there is more legroom in the metre-gauge train going to Machu Picchu in Peru, or on a 3ft 6in-gauge train in South Island, New Zealand, or on a Berlin tram, than there is on a Turbostar. And don’t mention the 158s...it’s impossible to travel on a 158 without playing kneesy with the passenger opposite.

Why do we tolerate such a state of affairs? Transport Scotland is a big part of the equation and our feeble Parliament is all too easily fooled. So, sniper-like, I’ll keep my

fire trained on ScotRail. I've done so ever since the Sprinterisation of Scotland began 23 years ago. And I'll explain why in a minute.

Let me start with really bad news: First ScotRail evinces not the slightest concern about the quality of the long-distance trains it operates. Oh to be sure, they'll talk at length – but in effervescent clouds of platitudes and patronising arrogance. You'll be hard pressed to find anyone in ScotRail actually praising these trains, and I'm not surprised. For wonderful, marvellous, super and terrific they ain't.

Pride of the fleet are the derisory Turbostars, backed by the wretched 158s covering Aberdeen-Inverness, Kyle and the Far North, and truly appalling SuperSprinters serving Mallaig, Oban and Galloway. When introduced, these trains were already antiques of the future. The very existence of Turbostars operating in squadron service shows just how far we have come in allowing our national rail standards to fall.

We've plummeted from those heady days when the term "ScotRail" was launched a quarter of a century ago. We were all so proud to have a national brand, and few were the hearts that weren't lifted by mighty trains introducing new speeds and standards of comfort from Aberdeen and Inverness to Glasgow and Edinburgh. Nothing lasts for ever, but instead of upward revision, what we passengers were landed with was contemptible - Dinky Toys on rails, Thomas the Tank Engine on steroids.

The Sprinterisation of Scotland had begun. In the blink of an eye, we went from trains built up to a standard to trains built down to a price - from BR InterCity to ScotRail InterVillage. Such were the failings of the abysmal Sprinters that Cyril Bleasdale, then BR Scotland chief executive, introduced replacement 158s. I was at the champagne launch in 1989 of the 158s at Blair Castle, and took up with Cyril the issues of tight space for luggage, bikes and humans. (Oh, and the toilets were gravely wanting, though we didn't know then their built-in propensity to flood).

The complete gentleman that was Cyril was promised to look into the matter, and in due time, the 158s were shunted to "lesser" lines such as Aberdeen-Inverness. Have they improved? Try one if you must. In 158s, I can think of no other modern item of transport which has had so little consideration for passenger comfort, legroom, baggage space, toilets, noise, quality of ride and vibration. Except for the Turbostars. A Turbostar is utterly unfit for purpose. If ever there is a train that simply occurred rather than was designed, it's a Turbostar. Who invented this rubbish?

The head honchos at First ScotRail remain blind to the fact that the Emperor Turbostars are actually naked. When it comes to criticism, First ScotRail keeps the deaf aid switched full on, and those of us forced to use the current train fleet feel patronised and deceived.

The *type* of rail privatisation delivered by the Conservatives under John Major landed us with this legacy of El Cheapo trains designed-for-midgets, a programme continued by London Labour, maintained by Holyrood Labour and propped up by the SNP – and if I've omitted the Lib Dems, then be sure that they carry their share of culpability too.

Through global travel, I find that quality of trains reflects a nation's ambitions. For high aspirations, I cite France and Germany. For no vision at all, look around us. To put Scotland's national trains in perspective, there is more passenger consideration built into the train I travelled in Poland working the secondary line from Cracow to Oswiecim than in a Turbostar. Suburban stock working out of Stavanger is light years ahead of anything First ScotRail musters on the main line. Even the single coaches serving rural Brittany knock spots off us. And we haven't begun to consider the truly cracking national trains of Denmark, China and Australia.

The ending of nationalised BR in 1994 made life more difficult for us campaigners, since every privatised fragment of the railway industry now plays pass-the-parcel. For example, First ScotRail operates trains it doesn't own over track it doesn't own between stations it doesn't own. And for a train operating company such as First ScotRail, profit as percentage of revenue represents a huge return on the tiny capital fund that a franchise involves with its hired trains and rented infrastructure. Running a railway today presents an El Dorado of rich reward...tumescent excesses of cash.....Just sign up here, Sir, to a system that dumps all significant risk on the taxpayer, and makes the passenger pay through the nose.

So why should I direct such fire on poor little First ScotRail? Isn't First ScotRail just the innocent little franchisee just doing its best to run Scotland's national train service, and in the process carrying 95% of Scotland's passengers? At this point, beware Mr Chairman: in November, First ScotRail called me a bully. I wear the badge with pride.

I'll tell you why the fire should be directed straight at First ScotRail - though be sure First ScotRail disagrees. It's this. If I buy a shirt in Marks & Spencer and the buttons come off in the first wash, my immediate port of call is Marks & Sparks, not the wholesaler, nor the sweatshop in the Philippines which made the shirt in the first place.

Ah, but First ScotRail is only a franchisee, I hear you say. Well, franchising is part of UK commercial life everywhere today. McDonalds is a franchise. Thus if you think their chips taste like cotton-wool, then you take the matter up with the place you bought your fish supper, not head office in the US. I bought my new Canon printer from Smart Cartridge in Aberdeen; when a problem occurred, they fixed it, not the Canon head office in Surrey.

So when I buy a ticket, First ScotRail is my travel retailer. More than three decades ago, The Sale of Goods Act (1979) made the retailer responsible for shoddy goods or services, and no longer could a customer be palmed off to the manufacturer. Railways are no different.

Therefore the first port of call for complaint has to be First ScotRail. For in the United Kingdom, there are no franchise-specific laws; franchises are subject to the same laws that govern other businesses. The case I make is strengthened by the fact that in the UK, franchise agreements are produced under regular contract law, and do not have to conform to any further legislation or guidelines.

After more than six years of the ScotRail franchise – and with less than three still to run – the company can be in *no* doubt whatsoever about public feeling anent the quality of the trains it operates. It's taken only four years of incessant lobbying by me of First ScotRail for them to admit finally that they won't refer the matter of the poor quality of the trains upstairs to Transport Scotland or the Scottish Government.

In my book, this represents abdication and abnegation of responsibility. First ScotRail defends its position by confining itself to a gnat's-eye-view of the situation and stating its business is QUOTE “to run the franchise” END QUOTE. This narrowest of views was maintained by managing director Steve Montgomery in his evidence to the Scottish Parliament Transport Committee last month (Tuesday 8 March). Asked by SNP MSP Rob Gibson “The three-car units that you purport to call expresses and long-distance services are really suburban units?”, Mr Montgomery replied “That is the fleet that we are asked to operate on those routes under the franchise”.

Note that Mr Montgomery chose a reply that might be interpreted as “supine” rather than to exploit a glorious opportunity to promote excellence, and to stand up for his passengers. Indeed, when challenged about the travails of travel facing regular long-distance travellers like me, First ScotRail bleats about no remit from the Scottish Government to get round operation of one-size-fits-all suburban stock, or a lock-in arrangement with the train leasing companies. So blame the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, the train leasing companies, but never inaction by First ScotRail. In other words: “Please sir, it wisna me. A big boy did it and ran away”.

Mr Montgomery's reply to our Holyrood transport committee might well personify the title of this address – “First ScotRail - and the art of bodyswerving”. If there's a non-answer that can be given, First ScotRail provides it. If a situation can be obfuscated, First ScotRail indulges the matter. The company is masterfully adept at weaving and dodging – a fully paid-up graduate of the University of Ducking and Diving. The company won't and doesn't provide information, and my experience is that they won't and don't and can't care.

Two examples:

- The 1718 Aberdeen-Inverness train is possibly the most crowded in Scotland. We pushed for something to be done about it – and the result is a Meet The Manager session on it on Thursday 7 July. I pointed out to First ScotRail that this date falls right in the middle of the local Trades Holidays, and thus the train wouldn't be so crowded. Their reply? “The train will continue to be filled by leisure travellers”. How do they know? Another of their nebulous surveys?
- Mary Grant addressed a public meeting in Aberdeen on November 2006, and ever since, we've been pressing to have the head honcho back. In October last year, First ScotRail informed me that Steve Montgomery wouldn't appear in Aberdeen in either 2010, or throughout 2011. So come this November, it'll have been more than five years since we last saw a boss person attending a public meeting in the

Granite City. (Horrible and unworthy thought: Steve's nae feart, is he? If he is, can Passenger Focus save him?).

Let me lay into rolling stock. This is the stuff, Mr Chairman, that was, is and remains utterly unfit for purpose. All trains operating in Scotland are suburban stock, and as such, they operate both local and long-distance services (Long-distance might be defined as any journey over one-and-a-half hours). So let me direct my fire on the Turbostars. Goodness, I've had years of experience of ghastly travel on these rollerskates – so you won't need to guess that my travel today Aberdeen to Edinburgh was by a real train – an East Coast 125.

As a journalist, I tend to work on the move. On my weekly return journey to Edinburgh, I deliberately travel East Coast, a real train with real legroom, real luggage space, real guard's van, real suspension, real lack of vibration, real quietness and a realistic two toilets per coach. Whether in 2nd class or 1st, I can plug in my laptop *and* connect to WiFi. Try travelling 2nd on ScotRail, as I do two and three times a month Aberdeen to Glasgow, once a month to Inverness, and four times a year to Stranraer (Take my word: *one* 480-mile return across this distance in a ScotRail train deserves a medal for gallantry, never mind *four* times a year). ScotRail cattle class doesn't sport power points, nor is there legroom nor luggage space. WiFi? In our dreams. Yet buses in Fife sport WiFi.

To access a laptop point on ScotRail means travelling 1st. Travelling 1st involves being perched above a bogie, swaying to every lurch and shoogle in a fashion that makes typing impossible. Take it from me – forget writing your bestseller in ScotRail Business Class. The 1st class compartment is what an Aberdeenshire friend describes as “jist a hen hoose clappit abeen the bogie”.

Lack of internal doors means that when the external doors slide open at Stonehaven on a freezing February morning, cold air rushes into the carriage. Were these trains *ever* thought of as being fit for purpose?

Oh, and we haven't mentioned toilets yet. Facilities on a Turbostar wouldn't credit a Lego-building five-year-old.....can you imagine any other nation on this planet operating long-distance trains that provide only two toilets per three coaches? When one of the two toilets fails between Aberdeen and Glasgow, life's grim.

Life's grimmer when a late-running train comes into Aberdeen and turns round again for Glasgow without the toilets being cleaned. In January last year, I saw with my own eyes the incoming train to Aberdeen being turned round for Queen Street with no cleaning, then watched at Queen Street as this self-same late-running train then returned uncleaned to Aberdeen. Three trips without a single cleaning of toilets. When I raised the matter with Steve Montgomery, he denied that the situation I described had ever occurred.

Rail insiders tell me that it *does* occur. Genuinely not often, but often enough to be disturbing. (Incidentally, why should First ScotRail be allowed to sell food on trains with filthy toilets when a hotel or restaurant doing the same would be prosecuted?).

Every busy journey with luggage piled up in vestibules, seats and on tables is excused by my tame First ScotRail spokesman as “a one-off blip”. Yet day and daily, trains operate with luggage piled everywhere. When I supply photographic evidence, First ScotRail’s reply is one of two – “The conductor should have ensured that this didn’t happen” or....they simply deny the evidence of the photographs.

An academic friend and I, just off the ship at Rosyth after a lecturing engagement in Belgium, befriended a young Frenchman and took him in our taxi to Inverkeithing station. Conditions aboard the packed Sunday Turbostar north to Aberdeen made me envious for what a sardine enjoys in a tin. Standing with our considerable luggage in a vestibule, I apologised to our youthful companion for the quality of our trains. He grinned. “Next time I take ze express”. His grin vanished when I told that this *is* the express, the best that First ScotRail provides.

Turbostars are the pogosticks of public transport. The pygmy strides that First ScotRail has made in train improvement (a coat of paint here, a seat cover there, a door handle somewhere else) are put into perspective by the memorable remark by an old boss of mine: “You can’t polish a turd”.

His remark led to a journalist colleague christening these trains “Turдостars”.

Oh, and we haven’t touched on dirty windows nor doll’s house tables nor non-ergonomically built seats. (Incidentally, I hear that the spinally-degrading tall seats on the refurbished 158s are best described as “tombstones”). But let me touch on bike spaces. These were originally two per three-coach Turbostar. We cyclists campaigned, and the number was doubled to four per three coaches. But the additional two came at the loss of four seats. These are the railway economics of bedlam, and you couldn’t make it up – except that in the Tinseltown world of First ScotRail toy trains, this is life as we know it.

As a lifetime cyclist, I usually manage to squirrel my bike away with me on jobs, though it’s a constant battle. For a start, bike spaces in a busy Turbostar get filled with luggage and prams, and who can blame the passengers? Like the Boy Scout I was in youth, I stick to the motto of “Be Prepared” and always try to book ahead.

But a principal joy of cycling is the freedom to roam, to start out not knowing where you’ll finish the day’s run. It’s no joke landing in Montrose one Saturday and watching two, or once three, trains run futilely past because the spaces on each Turbostar were taken. Raising this matter with First ScotRail produced a collector’s item of ScotRail-Speak: “On Sundays, there are more bike spaces because we double the length of our trains”. That’s true – but the trains run two-hourly instead of hourly. So the number of bike spaces remains precisely the same.

In Belgium, Germany and Denmark – to take but three rail systems – trains are built to Hoover up cyclists. The pedalling market is positively targeted as bums-on-seats. Here in Scotland, we’re barely tolerated pests.

My local Aberdeen bikeshop sells four new bikes for every working day of the year. The cycling revolution has been with us now for more than 30 years. In 1988, two of us used a Kyle train between Garve and Achnasheen, and tacked on to the service train were two guards' vans stuffed with bikes and rucksacks. At a stroke, Transport Scotland and First ScotRail kills this market and gifts it to the road lobby. Where now lie Scotland's vaunted green credentials?

When I mention the ScotRail franchise, we deal here with a dripping roast, a franchise so valuable that when First won the ScotRail franchise, First Group shares jumped. I know – some of my pension relies on a personal stake of First Group shares. So if my First shares and dividends benefit me, how much more do the holdings and the share options and the bonuses benefit directors and senior managers? It's well said that to be a First director or senior manager, a qualification is to have arms strong enough to carry the cash to the bank at the end of each day.

These emoluments and rich pickings represent wealth beyond the dreams of transport avarice. So when our trains are running with the odd dirty toilet or two, does it really matter? The bottom line is that the ring of the railway cash register chimes merrily on.

So what *does* First ScotRail provide for us in Scotland? Yes, the number of daily services operated has improved out of all proportion, and yes, services do run to time. At this point, Mr Chairman, here beginneth and endeth the only good news in this AGM address. For might I point out that similar improvements occurred all over Europe years ago?

Let me touch on the weather. When I was a boy, not only did the sun shine every day, but on the occasions when it didn't, we could be certain that trains would continue running no matter the depth of snow. Now we have the unedifying record of Bluebird buses operating Aberdeen to Braemar every day this winter at a time when First ScotRail trains were out of action through frozen couplings, pipes, doors and control items (A good time to ask: whatever became of such old-tec items as carriage sheds?). The days of the railways running when roads were out of use are gone. Mr Chairman, I suppose it's just as well we have little in the way of earthquakes here.

Plainly, our unfit-for-purpose First ScotRail trains were never built for winter, a point developed at some length by *The Herald* on Saturday 4 December 2010. Plainly too, our long-distance fleet was never built for summer either, given the often-denied but factually existing non-working of air conditioning on 158s. In First ScotRail-land, you know when summer's arrived – the trains are ovens.

So we passengers now travel in an Alice-In-Winter-Wonderland of thermic lances, gardeners' polytunnels and train kilts. The reason for all this is that the trains themselves are so poorly designed that First ScotRail says that up to three tons of ice and snow can build up underneath during a shift.

Hmmmmmm.....My maths don't stretch to it, but would a volume of three tons of packed snow actually fit under a Turbostar?

This past winter knocked the operations of First ScotRail into a cocked hat, and the

reputation of the company might have been likewise but for the fact that the freeze-up of the M8 and the resultant television performance by our immediately previous Transport Minister allowed First ScotRail off the media hook.

How does First ScotRail look back on its winter performance? The company devoted just two-and-a-half sentences to the matter in its February issue of *First Insight*. One almost has to admire the *chutzpah* and the sheer brass neck.

I attended a private presentation in the FirstGroup boardroom recently, and I was informed that two core values of First Group are:

- Attention to detail;
- Creating the perfect journey.

Attention to detail on First ScotRail is singularly lacking, even to ensuring a supply of handwashing water on trains on a daily basis. There's also the example of a rail replacement long-distance bus I travelled on during the snows. This was a FirstGroup vehicle with a FirstGroup driver, and the toilet was not only filthy, but the pan was full and swilling about. If ever a metaphor is required for First ScotRail management, First ScotRail standard of supervision, and First ScotRail trains, then this First bus toilet supplied it.

Creating the perfect journey? Why should there have to be a queue for a toilet from Glasgow to beyond Dundee on a main-line long-distance train? Or why should passengers have to stand from Glasgow to Perth and beyond? Mr Chairman – maybe these conditions pertain in North Korea. Why should they apply in 21st century Scotland?

Let me indulge in a little recent history. Andrew McKay, the BR executive who became first planning director of Greater Glasgow Passenger Transport Executive in 1973, and later director-general, never tired of pointing out in papers, reports, lectures and addresses that come 1985, the then existing generation of DMUs would be life-expired. Andrew possessed a thoroughly realistic view of the quality of those DMUs, adding “The bottom of the Clyde is too good a place for them”. Andrew was noted for his originality of thinking. He was someone who believed that high standards didn't necessarily mean high costs, and he worked to produced outcomes that provided value for money without being gold-plated. Tragically, he died in a car crash in 1979 – and it's just as well that he's not with us today, for he wouldn't believe the rubbish now masquerading as long-distance trains on Scotland's railways.

Nor, Mr Chairman, would he believe the mealy-mouthed platitudes and plain old-fashioned tosh trotted out by all sides to excuse their existence. I echo Andrew McKay's words in suggesting that the bottom of the Clyde is too good a place for the current First ScotRail fleet.

It is such a pleasure for me to have this privileged swing at my favourite TOC that I hardly have time to mention Transport Scotland, a civil service outfit whose breadth of vision on a good day might almost reach well down to the average.

The current system stifles initiative, and because of the fairy-tale world of track access charges, it actually encourages Transport Scotland not to order more trains, nor better trains, nor longer trains. Transport Scotland goes along with this to such an extent that if it was a human being, Transport Scotland would be living proof that Snow White and Dopey had had an affair.

Rail passenger figures rise year on year, yet where flourishes the spirit of a merchant venturer to capitalise on this market? Not with this lot, it doesn't. If something looks like actually happening, it suffocates in a muzz of safety legislation and approvals. Imagine a meeting between Kirkpatrick Macmillan, the inventor of the bicycle, and a Transport Scotland safety wallah. "What? You're going to ride that on the public road? You can't – it'll fall over". Actually, it doesn't - and incidentally, a person on a bike is the second-most efficient converter of energy into motion known to mankind. (The first is a migrating salmon).

Scotland is a small country with a huge imprint upon history. We are too small to suffer layers of railway mediocrity.....the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland, Network Rail, the Department for Transport insofar as it is involved in cross-border franchising, with greedy and unloved First Scotland crowing at the top of this unholy midden.

And so, muddle-headed, we govern our railways by offering a thousand spurious reasons for not actually doing anything. Who can suggest something new and original we could actually undertake? Well, here's one. While our English friends dither about how and where and when to build HS2, we in Scotland could swivel our eyes away from a new Forth Road Bridge heading north, and start digging our very own high-speed line heading south. That would fairly force the hand of our cousins over the border. What an example to lead by – and please, may I turn the first sod?

In privatising the railways, John Major promised us a new Jerusalem. The reality has taken us down the road to perdition.

I could go on.....and I will just long enough to add these bullet points:

- There has to be a requirement in the next franchise for the operator to provide real trains on long-distance routes. You and your members, Mr Chairman, know better than I do what kinds of trains these might include – though I know what I'd like to see.
- The existing imperative of running a railway on a shoe string means absolutely no spare capacity to deal with emergencies.
- There will be no way back from the glut of international economic difficulties foisted on us by problems and disasters in Libya, the Gulf and Japan. The price of oil will rise inexorably. Where are our electrification programmes?
- Where are the professional railwaymen? Why are our railways in the charge of bean counters, brush salesmen and assorted numpties?

Here in Scotland, we have a disconnected and disgruntled view towards railway planning and vertical integration in which no side communicates effectively with the other except through disinfected and sanitised committees. We seem to delight in horizontally separated systems.....and nobody cares. If anyone does, will that rail-connected party please speak out?

You all have your own examples of this. Mine lies in Kintore, historic royal burgh in Aberdeenshire which has two doubtful claims to Royalty. English Edward overnighed there in 1296 in his first invasion of Scotland, and five-and-a-half centuries later, the infant Great North of Scotland Railway bulldozed the ancient motte of King Robert Bruce's family house out of existence, to create the junction for the line to Alford.

Poor little Kintore now possesses a third claim to notoriety. It's the place that has waited longest in Scotland for a proposed station still not built. In 1967, as a young reporter on a county newspaper in Aberdeenshire, I wrote a story about a move to reopen Kintore station. That was then, when double track still existed over much of the Aberdeen-Inverness line. Some 44 years later, we have the meddlesome snouts of Network Rail, Aberdeenshire Council, Transport Scotland, MSPs, NesTrans, First Scotrail and gweed kens fa else all still stuck in the same trough, and producing as much combined oomph as a blancmange.

In more than a generation, these seat-polishers have produced nothing except figures that put the price of a new Kintore station into the same stratospheric league as a moon rocket. These selfsame self-seeking suits represent a self-regarding, self-electing oligarchy, alive and well in modern-day Scotland. What price now the Churchillian dictum "Action this day"?

Let me summarise Scotland's rail scenario in three points:

- First ScotRail corporately indulges in downgrading our material culture;
- We lack a hero to champion Scotland's railways.
- For how much longer are we in Scotland to endure long-distance trains unfit for purpose for a 21st-century nation?

Make no mistake - we *can* help ourselves. Write to your MSPs, your councillors, your newspapers, to Transport Scotland, to First ScotRail. Make intelligent and thoughtful nuisances of yourselves. And never forget the whip-hand that each of us holds....First ScotRail is terrified of losing the franchise. Every time I mention the franchise publicly, I hear from the inside that there's a trembling of the pink gins in the First ScotRail boardroom. Don't be afraid of direct action.

As a journalist, I report on what I see. As a journalist, my role includes having the temerity to expect that trains should be up to the job. As a more frequent user of long-distance rail services than most, I question at every opportunity why we in Scotland should allow ourselves to be fobbed off with second best. I have yet to see any intention by First ScotRail to run a rail service where consideration for passengers is a top priority

(or any priority at all for that matter). We travellers are merely units in a business plan, allowing our national TOC to make as much money for as little expenditure.

This is the problem: what is the solution? A return to public ownership? The catch-all of “Bring the railways under direct control of the Scottish Government” will only work if the Scottish Government wants to make it work – and the example of Transport Scotland is scarcely uplifting.

So where are our rail champions? Where now lies a Chris Green? How do we locate a big hitter, an industry leader? The people who created the best of our railways and who made our railway system great, set us a lesson or two. They didn’t go around knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. They taught themselves to think out of their skins, to establish excellence in what they did.

We *can* do it – I *know* we can do it, for we already have. Here at home in the early 1960s, Scotland pioneered high-speed push-pull operation. Here at home in May 1971, Scotland launched a 43-minute Glasgow to Edinburgh service – a timing that has never been matched since.

My enduring non-love affair with First ScotRail and the not-fit-for-purpose stock means that I’m unlikely ever to feature on First ScotRail’s Christmas card list. There are worse fates, I suppose.

And on that note, Mr Chairman, this concludes “First ScotRail – and the art of bodyswerving”.

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