



PROJECT ROME

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Editorial

Anger erupted across the North of England as chaos ensued on the rail network following Northern Rail's introduction of a new emergency timetable.

Politicians, business leaders, media outlets and passenger groups have all demanded urgent action to alleviate problems on the network, which led to hundreds of cancelled and late trains. Regional and local newspapers across the North of England took the unprecedented step of co-ordinating their front-page headlines calling for an active government response. The Yorkshire Post, long critical of the Transport Secretary's personal performance, called for his immediate resignation. Greater Manchester Mayor, Andy Burnham, wrote to Transport for the North demanding the removal of Arriva Rail North's contract to operate the Northern Rail franchise.



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- One Yorkshire Local Authority Leader

However, whilst Northern Mayors and local authority leaders were quick to issue joint statements demanding government action, there was incredulity expressed over the lack of a co-ordinated response from the region's Member of Parliament. At the first Prime Minister's Questions after the crisis broke, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was expected to use his six questions to take the Prime Minister to task over the fiasco. He never once mentioned the crisis. In the 28 backbench questions which followed, including six from Northern MPs, the rail network crisis was never raised.

One Yorkshire local authority leader told Northern Agenda, "I was sat watching PMQs getting increasingly irate. By the end I was livid. Not one question about the chaos on our rail network, not even from the Northern Labour MPs who were called." Tempers were eased somewhat when Wigan Labour MP, Lisa Nandy, ambushed the Prime Minister at PMQs on 20 June. The highly-respected Nandy revealed leaked emails from the Department of Transport in which she claimed that the government were warned of the "impending crisis" in the Northern rail network 2 years ago. She went on, "In them, officials describe key northern routes as 'valueless', discuss 'classic handling strategies' for Members of Parliament, discuss whether to 'throw a sop to northern passenger groups' and debate whether to propagate myths in order to divert public attention from agreed planned route closures."

The leak of the emails caused the normally sanguine Chief Executive of Leeds City Council, Tom Riordan, to take to social media to claim that this marks, "the low water mark in the confidence of the North in Whitehall" and called it a "seminal moment" in the demand for more direct powers to be invested in Transport for the North. Riordan's intervention is not to be under-estimated. He is highly respected across the region and has the ear of the business community. A former Whitehall insider himself (who is rumoured to relish a return there as a departmental Permanent Secretary) he is said to be preparing a major step-up in the campaign for a Yorkshire Mayor.

Meanwhile, business leaders are becoming increasingly exasperated at the apparent lack of anyone in government taking responsibility



Lisa Nandy MP



Tom Riordan



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- Jake Berry MP

for the rail crisis, and wider issues facing the transport network across the North. At a recent dinner senior business leaders expressed their private concerns about a lack of ownership of the issue across government, and within the Department for Transport in particular. One attendee told Northern Agenda, “The government don’t seem to have any idea of the damage this crisis in our transport infrastructure is doing to the economy in the North, and they show few signs of wanting to listen. Who in government is taking control of this and saying, ‘This is on my watch, I will get to grips with it’? No one it would appear.”

Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling, in a letter to MPs blamed the crisis on a ‘collective failure’ within the industry, and Northern Powerhouse Minister, Jake Berry, told the Manchester Evening News, “I don’t think as the Northern Powerhouse Minister I am directly responsible for whether the trains run on time.” Meanwhile, a cross-party group of Yorkshire MPs and Peers invited Jo Johnson, the Minister responsible for transport in the North, to address one of their meetings and set out the government’s vision for transport in the North. After weeks of deferring a

decision his private office finally declined the invitation, claiming the Minister had no free time before the summer recess, a decision that was not well received by members of the All-Party Group. One Peer told Northern Agenda, “He’s happy to take the ministerial salary and car, but he won’t come before fellow Parliamentarians and defend his own government. It’s a disgrace.” Another MP from the region pointed out to Northern Agenda that as well as being the Minister for Transport in the North, Jo Johnson is also the Minister for London, representing a London constituency. “If it comes down to a choice of investing in Northern Powerhouse Rail or Crossrail 2, which do you think he’d support? It’s indicative of how seriously the government take transport investment in the North.”

The Transport Secretary compounded the sense of injustice in Northern regions by pulling out of a keynote speech at a major transport conference in Manchester on 25 June. Other keynote speakers at the conference are Mayors Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram, and the Chair of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Susan Hinchcliffe. Campaigners have accused Mr Grayling of “running scared” of meeting Northern political and business leaders.

The continuing rail crisis certainly gave attendees at the Convention of the North something to discuss, and a focus for the growing feeling that the North is being left behind on transport investment, Brexit negotiations and region-wide devolution. The



Steve Rotheram



Andy Burnham



Susan Hinchcliffe



Chris Grayling

meeting of political leaders from across the North at a summit coinciding with the start of the Great Exhibition of the North was held in Newcastle on 23 June in Newcastle.

Meanwhile, as officials at the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government continue to study the devolution proposal sent to them by 18 Yorkshire local authority leaders, campaigners will officially launch the One Yorkshire campaign group on 1 August, Yorkshire Day. The campaign group

is the brainchild of South Yorkshire Mayor, Dan Jarvis, and Keighley Labour MP, John Grogan. It is being funded by regional trade unions and private donations. The campaign received support from an unexpected source at a recent conference in Manchester. Former Conservative Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Heseltine, was said to have banged the table and shouted, "It has to be Yorkshire" in a debate on devolution.



Dan Jarvis



John Grogan MP



Michael Heseltine