

Bridging the Border: The Future of Anglo-Scottish Rail in the GBR Era

Introduction: Select Committee Perspective

Good afternoon, everyone.

It is a pleasure to be here. As many of you know, I am a member of the Transport Select Committee – the only Scottish member of the Committee as it happens – however, I began working on transport policy a few years before I was elected as an MP, on Edinburgh City Council as the Transport Convener.

Back then people would regularly approach me asking if I could fix a specific local project or a niche grievance and, maybe unsurprisingly, this still happens now that I'm an MP; however, in addition to my constituents I now also have industry asking me to fix all their personal gripes.

My standard reply is that I have limited influence over the Committee's "direction" in the immediate sense, as our agenda is shaped by the various different ongoing enquiries. Currently, we are spinning around eight different plates at once - covering everything from road safety and electric vehicles to transport manufacturing, taxis, and the vital role of our ports.

If any one issue is prioritised over others, it might just be rail, which has consistently dominated our conversations in this first parliamentary term, thanks in no small part to the Railways Bill. Our focus on this area has been split between two key tasks: scrutinising the Bill and investigating the damaging "boom-and-bust" cycles of rail investment. Today, I want to talk about how those two pieces of work - combined with the evolving status of HS2 - will define the future of the Anglo-Scottish connection.

Railways Bill

Without a doubt, the most significant legislative shift we are witnessing is the Railways Bill, which made it to the Report Stage in the House of Commons during the last session, and has just been carried across, in the recent King's Speech, into the new session. This represents the most far-reaching change to our industry since privatisation.

If a Labour government had proposed this five or six years ago, it might have been viewed through a purely ideological lens e.g. nationalisation for the sake of it. But standing here in 2026, I believe the mood has shifted. The government's move toward public ownership and the creation of Great British Railways (GBR) is driven by pragmatism, not just politics, as we attempt to overhaul an old, fragmented system and replace it with something more connected - a "directing mind".

The Select Committee issued our report on the Bill in February, and we received a broadly positive response from the government, at the end of April. To reiterate some of the points in our report, we support the "directing mind" concept: bringing track and train under one roof is the only way to ensure the efficiency and passenger service standards that the public demands.

However, we also raised some red flags. We cannot have a GBR that is merely a puppet of Whitehall. Our report made it clear that while GBR is intended to be an "arm's length" body, the current Bill gives the Secretary of State significant authority. We need clear safeguards to protect against political micromanagement or, conversely, a future Secretary of State who might deprioritise rail entirely.

On this point, the government, in their response, acknowledged this tension and stated that they "are clear that GBR will be empowered to be a commercially minded organisation that operates at arm's-length from the Government and is trusted to take charge of the railway without being overly hindered by bureaucracy." I welcome this statement, but, as with many areas of government policy, we will have to wait and see how this balance of power plays out in practice.

Scottish Perspective

For those of us in Scotland, the Bill's impact is distinct. We are already "ahead" in some ways: ScotRail is in public hands, and the integration of track and train has been our reality for some time.

I know the Scottish Government has expressed concerns that GBR might "overreach" into devolved powers, and I want to be clear that I don't believe that will happen. Scottish Ministers will retain power of guidance and direction.

Collaboration is not just a "nice to have"; it is mandated, especially on cross-border services. And I believe that this is devolution in action, working together to ensure that a passenger boarding in Edinburgh or Glasgow experiences a seamless journey all the way to King's Cross or Euston.

Investment

I can't discuss the future of rail without addressing the "Boom and Bust" enquiry. For too long, UK rail infrastructure has been a series of expensive surges followed by long, quiet gaps. This has created a difficult environment for the supply chain, leading to hikes in costs, and increased delays, frustrating all of us.

We have recommended a long-term rail strategy - a 30-year vision - that provides the industry with the certainty it needs to invest in skills and machinery. GBR must be the

engine of this strategy, and we must smooth out those funding peaks and troughs by reforming the Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline.

If we want the Anglo-Scottish corridor to be the backbone of the UK economy, we cannot fund it through "stop-start" political cycles. We need a steady commitment to improvement.

Anglo-Scottish Opportunities & HS2

This brings me to the "elephant in the room" - HS2.

While the project has seen its share of radical changes, the commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail - including the £45 billion investment between Liverpool and York - remains a massive win for connectivity. But we must be completely honest about where HS2 stands today. Following the major government reset announced just this week, we now know the price tag for this truncated line could reach up to £102 billion in 2025 prices. The Leeds and Manchester branches are gone, costs have ballooned, and passenger services won't begin until the late 2030s, with a full connection to central London's Euston pushed back to the 2040s.

It is a sobering case study in infrastructure delivery. Cancelling it now would cost almost as much as finishing it, leaving us with a multi-billion-pound bill and absolutely zero benefits, so the project is going ahead under a new delivery team, with train speeds scaled back slightly to 320 km/h to strip out complexity and save billions.

For us in Scotland, despite these frustrations, we can be hopeful about the eventual improved capacity that HS2 will bring.

We often talk about the "three-hour journey" between London and the Central Belt as the "tipping point" where rail beats aviation. I would argue that with modern onboard tech, the rising "green consciousness" of travellers, and volatile jet fuel prices driven by global conflicts, rail is already competitive on experience. However, we cannot compete if the West Coast Main Line remains completely clogged.

Resolving the bottlenecks north of Birmingham and freeing up that track is vital. The London-Scotland corridor is one of Europe's busiest aviation markets. By shifting those passengers to high-speed rail, we don't just hit our climate goals; we free up crucial airport capacity at hubs like Edinburgh for the long-haul international flights that drive our global trade.

Of course, alongside passengers, this is a massive opportunity for our premium Scottish industries, especially Whisky, Fish, and high-quality food exports. These businesses depend on fast, reliable, uninterrupted connections to English markets and the Channel ports. Faster

Anglo-Scottish rail means that a bottle of Speyside malt can reach a table in Paris or London more efficiently, with a fraction of the carbon footprint.

The timeline is longer than we hoped, and the budget is painful, but the strategic necessity of connecting Scotland's economy to this network remains vital.

Safety & Accessibility

It is not enough to have fast tracks if people don't feel safe or able to use them.

In the Select Committee, we have focused heavily on Women's Safety. We've seen a 15% increase in the British Transport Police budget, allowing for 200 more officers. But safety is also a design issue. It's about lighting, station personnel, and urban planning. If a woman doesn't feel safe walking or cycling the "last mile" to a station, she will take the car. It is that simple.

And the same applies to accessibility. It is a disgrace when we hear stories in the Commons of lifts being out of order for months, or disabled passengers being "marooned" on trains without assistance. Our report recommends a specific inclusion of disabled users within the Passengers Council to ensure accessibility isn't an afterthought, it must be baked into the GBR regime.

I have personally campaigned for an amendment to the Bill which would require that at least two members of the Passengers' Council board have lived experience of travelling as a disabled person. In their response, the government acknowledged the importance of lived experience, but ultimately fell short of accepting the amendment as they believe it is already codified in the Bill under clause 18 (promoting the interests and needs of disabled passengers). I think this is disappointing; however, I welcome the duties enshrined in clause 18 as I do believe this will have a positive impact on disabled passenger's journeys going forward.

Electrification

Finally, I want to touch on the technical future of our tracks. The Scottish Government's goal of Net Zero rail by 2035 is ambitious, but necessary. Currently, about 40% of our lines are electrified, covering 76% of passenger journeys.

But "the rest" is the hard part. In our rural and northern reaches, overhead wires are probably not the answer. This is where battery and hydrogen traction solutions come in, and I believe we need to become world leaders in this tech.

Conclusion

As I wrap up, I also want to address the private sector partners in this room.

I know there are worries around how a UK-wide public delivery model will impact on open-access operators, but I believe there will be compromises. While GBR provides the "directing mind" and the long-term strategy, we need your expertise, your innovation, and your private investment to assist with managing the upfront costs of these massive developments.

We saw recently with the Glasgow Central disruption - and the fire that impacted services - just how vulnerable our system is to a single catastrophic event. We cannot afford to be fragile. We need a resilient, modern, and integrated Anglo-Scottish rail network.

I look forward to working with all of you as the Bill progresses, in this new session, and want to assure you that, even although I'm a member of the government, I will be holding them to account when it comes to ensuring that this legislation meets the needs of passengers, freight customers, and businesses.

Thank you.