

Privatising Britain's passenger railway:
expectations and outcomes of
the 'free' market approach.

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Abstract

The privatisation of the British railway industry was announced in 1992, and a central plank of the government's strategy was to liberalise British Rail's (BR's) passenger market at the time of its divestiture. Competition was to be introduced both for the market, through franchising, and in the market, by freeing up access to the rail network. This thesis examines the policy adopted to promote competition in the British passenger railway industry. Its central aim is to assess the extent to which the promotion of competition between passenger train operators was an appropriate policy goal. In pursuit of this aim, the thesis critically evaluates the evolution, outcome and future prospects of rail liberalisation policy and closely examines the translation of neoliberalism - the theory of political economy upon which rail privatisation was based - into practical policy measures. A significant original investigation, drawing upon the experiences of key personnel involved in framing, executing and operating within the policy, augments secondary data to provide an in-depth level of analysis not currently available within the literature. The study employs predominantly inductive, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis, which together constitute a relatively novel investigative approach within transport geography. The empirical results are presented and discussed against the background of the other 'network' industry privatisations of the 1980s and early 1990s. The main findings are that, despite the sale of BR having been considered by the government for more than a decade, the privatisation and liberalisation strategy advanced by the 1992 White Paper, *New Opportunities for the Railways*, was not the result of a coherent policy analysis. The opportunities for, and even appropriateness of, a neoliberal agenda to promote competition between train operators were not sufficiently well understood by government when the proposals were adopted. Competition for the market, nevertheless, would appear to be a workable and 'successful' policy option, with the scope to offer long-term benefits to the rail industry should future governments choose to seek them. Competition in the market, on the other hand, is far less appropriate and continued emphasis on this aspect of rail policy could damage the industry's prospects in the coming years. Finally, the overall success of franchising seems to have occurred despite the muddled circumstances in which the Conservatives formulated rail privatisation policy, whereas the general failure of 'on-rail' competition seems to reflect them.

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