

# Paralysis and dogma killing our railways

Paul  
Benneworth



**W**E'VE reached peak Brexit. In the changing room before football training last night, my Dutch teammates gave a better and more insightful analysis of Brexit and Theresa May's deep-seated problems than I have seen in the UK media.

When the Dutch know more about your own problems than your compatriots, that suggests to me there's nothing useful to add. So it set me thinking about the elephant in the corner of United Kingdom politics since 2016, which is what increasingly looks like a collapse in our basic administration, services and infrastructure because of Tory party paralysis.

We've seen that universal credit is turning into the long-predicted slow-motion car crash, literally starving out our fellow citizens who have the bad luck to hit hard times. Increasingly exclusionary and racist immigration policies are driving away, one by one, the "best and the brightest" on whom we've come to rely to patch up our threadbare public services.

In my mind, the most egregious failing has been in the railways, which should be the arteries for the economic lifeblood on which our quality of life depends. But as a recent excoriating Transport Committee report set out in excruciating detail, Northern Rail services' collapse after May 2018 was the fault of an inert and passenger-hostile Transport Secretary.

I travel in trains all over Europe for my job, and although they are seldom perfect elsewhere, they are always reliable, comfortable and good places to work. Rail travel in the UK by contrast has become an overcrowded time-consuming nightmare that wastes any potential

is underinvestment that particularly plagues northern rail transport. While the Government will always shake the Magic Money Tree for another Crossrail overspend in London, we find our creaking railways chronically deprived of support.

An IPPR report last summer highlighted that if the North received a comparable per capita subsidy to London, we'd have had an additional £63bn of investment in the last decade.

That might even pay for last year's Northern Hyperloop proposal - a revolutionary pipeline propulsion system cutting journey times from Newcastle to Edinburgh to just 12 minutes.

What would really benefit the North of course is simply well-functioning, reliable and productive high-speed inter-city rail. Imagine a North where you could stay living in Newcastle and build a career working in Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

If we could just get that delivered, then we'd enjoy the opportunities that other leading European metropolitan regions have built based on shared "critical mass" between cities. Not everyone has to commute vast distances, but it creates a general economic dynamism by making more jobs more accessible for more people.

A mix of Brexit paralysis and toxic Tory market fundamentalism is undermining and dragging down all reasonable efforts for improvement. The newly-created Northern Powerhouse rail organisation is pluckily struggling with trying to realise strategic rail improvements, but its modest progress in developing a coherent "business case" clearly illustrates the sheer thank-

for productive commuting time.

The May 2018 timetable crisis was the culmination of a tendency grinding down our rail services since privatisation a quarter-century ago. Fragmentation and underinvestment in the industry have brought rail services to the brink where something as innocent as a timetable change can destroy the certainty in rail services upon which millions of people depend.

Although fragmentation is a national problem driven by the insane franchising system, it

lessness of the task.

Viewed in this light, the Northern Hyperloop might be an attempt to imagine some kind of better long-term future for rail in the North in the face of current political stasis. Shorn of present hope by our catastrophe-prone Conservative government, it's unsurprising people are embracing magical hyperloop thinking as the only imaginable fast track to a brighter regional future.

■ Paul Benneworth is a senior researcher at the University of Twente in the Netherlands