

In Short, just what

If Labour wins the next election - and all the pundits are saying it probably will - Clare Short will be Secretary of State for Transport. She echoes Leader Tony Blair's colourful promise of a 'Publicly-owned, publicly accountable railway,' - but neither will explain exactly how they'll achieve this.

Rail privatisation is the most hated, least successful and most disastrously handled sale of them all. Frequently promised benefits are further away than ever and public discontent is intense.

If it could be such a vote-winner, why won't Labour explain its policy?

AN EXCLUSIVE
RAIL
INTERVIEW

NIGEL HARRIS
met
CLARE SHORT
at Westminster, to ask the questions.



Photography: David Gordon/Katz Pictures Limited.

is Labour's vision?

I WAS NOT looking forward to interviewing Labour firebrand Clare Short. Her frequent (and frequently volatile) TV appearances had made me wonder if I'd be able to get a word in edgeways, whilst tales of her legendary short fuse (no pun intended) had made me wary, to say the least. But the smoke and mirrors hiding Labour's intentions towards the railways, should it win the next general election (and the widespread belief is that it will) meant that we should go as high as we could to get some straight answers, face-to-face, with those who cast and carry out policy. Even so, nudges and grins around the RAIL office greeted news of my mission to Westminster. "Stick a phone book down the back of your trousers, just in case," quipped one wag, convinced that a word out of place from me would prompt swift and painful retribution. I knew what he meant. Clare Short has a reputation for not mincing her words, for telling it like it is, whether her bosses (or anyone else, come to that) like it or not and for breathing fire and brimstone when her passionate convictions are crossed. Especially by journalists. But in the not-too-distant future she could also be Secretary of State for Transport, with the future of our railways in her hands. I badly wanted to talk to her. And so it was, on January 8, that I pushed through the doors of a nondescript concrete office block opposite the intricately carved stone splendour of the Palace of Westminster, with Ms Short firmly in my sights. I wasn't going to let her off the hook. Absolutely not. Besides, I thought, Labour wants to get elected, so that's going to keep the temperature down. Mistake. Big mistake. By the time the security guards had frisked me, all-but dismantled my miniature tape recorder, thumbed suspiciously through my wallet, jingled my keys, poked about in my loose change and flipped through my notebook, the adrenaline was pumping. I suddenly recalled - in technicolour 3D - the way she'd drawn blood, even from the mighty Paxman, with all his successes in roasting Westminster's most experienced political bruisers. This was the woman who'd just been promoted by Tony Blair, for Heaven's sake, whose Labour leadership bid she had openly opposed and who she had once, famously, described as a "poisonous voice." After that, I don't think even she rated her career chances very much after Blair became her boss. She's guarded when asked about this, and I suspect her elevation to Transport was as much a surprise to her as it was to the rest of us. But then, meeting Clare Short brings some surprises, a great deal of straight talk - but, worryingly, too much prevarication on what Labour's plans actually are. She's not as tall as I'd expected, and not at all intimidating; shaking my hand she fussed around her small office, waving me towards a seat alongside a second desk, neatly piled with papers. It's always a fascinating experience meeting for the first time a well-known politician whose face is as familiar to you as your closest friends and whose personality you think you know. I say 'you think you know' because TV impressions are deceptive. For Clare Short is, well, a lot...nicer...than her fiery performances on TV might lead you to believe. She's open, friendly and likeable. I found her extremely easy to talk to - immediate and direct. She's expansive and articulate and whilst she clearly stands no nonsense, unlike many other politicians, she doesn't patronise.

Clare Short talks to you - not at you or, worse, down to you. I don't think she could be smug to save her life. She looks you in the eye, she doesn't waffle (well, not much) and her views are confidently delivered with that husky Birmingham accent she's never lost, despite all those years 'down south.' Oh, and by the way (just in case you were wondering), she's not *at all* the scowling feminist harridan that her tabloid coverage might have prompted you to expect. What I especially like is that when you ask Clare Short what she thinks, you usually get it - both barrels - and if you don't like it, tough. If her opinion is about something you've just said, then you'd better be ready to take it on the chin, like she has to. She gives no quarter and takes no prisoners. Clare Short really *doesn't* mince words, she often shoots from the hip and she's a formidable interviewee. No, she certainly wasn't the dragon I'd feared - but she was no soft touch either. If I'm going to get straight answers from anyone about Labour and railways, I'll get them here, I hoped. Transport has never been high in the ministerial pecking order, where it's seen somewhere between a joke and a poison chalice. What's her view?



"To add a coach to the system costs around £170,000 a year in track access charges whilst to add a coach to the roads costs between £300 and £450 in vehicle excise duty. How can you get more passengers from roads to rail with that kind of distortion?"

"Well, I was genuinely surprised, because I've done environmental protection, with a policy review, and you have to look at transport issues - so I'd visited the subject. It wasn't one of my expert areas. But the more I got into it, the more I found it...challenging and exciting, for as one of my brothers said, there's a lot of things that politicians pontificate about that they can't actually do anything about. But a nation's transport system - especially a nation like ours, where the transport system is a nation - we can, at a national level, do something about it and make it a lot better. In that sense it's a really exciting and good job." She tells me that we spend 20% of our national earnings (GDP in economics-speak), that we have a transport policy that's "going

nowhere" and that we can't go on as we are. "There's clearly an emerging consensus about the sort of change there has to be," she explains. "It's a question of mobilising it and getting everybody working together to make the changes. I'm very pleased, but others have commented that transport historically has been a job for people on the way down in politics. And it's the impression of quite a lot of people that I'm not on the way down. Tony is taking a different view of the job, which is good." That's all fine so far - but then, she would say that, wouldn't she? I want more background. Is Labour totally anti-private sector? Deputy Labour Leader John Prescott (formerly a transport spokesman) has spoken openly about his support for private rolling stock companies. At the moment, he's spearheading Labour's currently top-secret response to the Railtrack sale - so what role does Labour want the private sector to play, if any? Labour transport spokesman Brian Wilson has also spoken - albeit rather vaguely - about a 'partnership.' Can we have some detail? "Our commitment is to a high quality rail network and in order to achieve that we need much higher levels of investment and we're looking for genuine partnerships. We are deadly serious about public/private partnerships and as John Prescott says, with the whole business of leasing, we've been very keen on that for a long time. So there's no way we're saying 'back to the past' and no private money at all. We've got to increase levels of investment. That's very much our way forward but the model of privatisation chosen for the rail network where public subsidy is poured in without any public accountability - it's not privatisation at all. It's marketisation, commercialisation and fragmentation. "How can you have Railtrack - if they get away with it - with all this money coming through in track access charges as public subsidy, having no public accountability, and paying profits to shareholders when taxpayers are putting money in and not getting any control in return?" She's also bitterly opposed to the way the ROSCOs need have no commitment to invest in new trains. Fine. But what will Labour actually DO, Clare? What do you actually mean, in plain English, by the "publicly owned, publicly accountable railway" promised by Tony Blair in his speech at the last Labour conference? Tell us like it is, please. "The first point I have to make," she replies, "is that those who say the Railtrack sale would be prevented if we undertake to buy everything back the minute we take office, are misguided. That would take all risk out of things for buyers. At the moment, people who are looking at Railtrack don't know what to think - what their rates of return will be? Also, they don't know exactly what Labour will do. If Labour says 'OK, you can sell it for nothing' - because they're planning to sell it for massively less than it's worth - because Labour will buy it all back at market prices, you take all their risk away!" According to this theory, would-be investors are kept in fear and dread of what Labour might do in power, so they don't buy shares. The down side of this approach is that railway supporters looking for a champion to rally behind are also kept confused and in the dark. What's her answer to those who say she could - and *should*, if Labour really means what it says - torpedo the Railtrack sale, which it could do with just a couple of sentences? "I know what you mean. I've been