

The powers that be: Who's in charge at the top

November 17, 2022



We all know the familiar faces in politics – after all, they're never off our TV screens. And most of us are probably fairly confident about the industry specific ones too, now they have been in place for a few weeks, and there's been minimal chopping and changing.

But how well do you really know the people that are leading our industry? The people that are making the decisions that impact your businesses day to day? The decisions that shape YOUR decisions, on staffing, development, finance and growth?

We've had a look at the areas of the government that we think are the most relevant to rail, and the key players in those departments, their history – shady and otherwise – and what their challenges are likely to look like.

Mark Harper



Secretary of State for Transport: 25 October 2022

Mark Harper replaced Anne-Marie Trevelyan as Secretary of State for Transport on 25 October 2022.

Harper, who was elected MP for the Forest of Dean in May 2005, has previously held the positions of Chief Whip (Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury) from May 2015 until 14 July 2016, Minister for Disabled People from July 2014 until May 2015, Minister for Immigration from September 2012 until February 2014, and Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform from May 2010 until September 2012.

With such a large task at hand, Harper doesn't appear to seem daunted by the challenge in front of him. He took to Twitter after he was appointed, tweeting: "Transport affects us all, and I can't wait to tackle the challenges we face so we can deliver for communities across our United Kingdom."

As a backbencher in 2009, Harper called for significant investment to the rail infrastructure in 2009, and a few weeks into the job, he has been vocal on projects such as the opening of the Elizabeth line, approved new infrastructure projects and received high praise from industry heavyweights such as Sir Peter Hendy, so it's a positive start.

The rail industry was quick to comment on their new representative, with Rail Partners the first to make a public statement. Chief Executive, Andy Bagnall, said: "Congratulations to Mark Harper on his appointment as Transport Secretary – Rail Partners and its members look forward to working closely with him and his

wider ministerial team.”

Harper qualified as a chartered accountant in 1995 with professional services network KPMG and worked until 2002 for Intel Corporation in fields including finance, business operations and marketing. He then went on to establish his own chartered accountancy firm in the Forest of Dean, where he then became an MP.

Huw Merriman



Minister of State at the Department for Transport: 26 October 2022

Previously the chair of the Transport Select Committee, having served on it since 2015, the MP for Bexhill and Battle has been a high-profile figure in highlighting issues affecting aviation and transport.

His appointment as rail minister comes as no surprise, as he has been an ardent supporter of the Sunak campaign, and always keen to understand the repercussions of government decisions about transport. And so far, he seems like a positive appointment.

Merriman delivered a speech at recent Railway Industry Association conference, which seemed to highlight his honest passion for the sector. He pledged to “take responsibility for one of the most critical parts of national infrastructure” and described rail as “the connective tissue that improves lives and livelihoods”.

He certainly has plenty of responsibility. As rail minister, he has responsibility for rail transformation and reform, rail infrastructure, High Speed 2 (HS2), Integrated Rail Plan, Northern Powerhouse Rail, international rail, rail passenger services and freight and accessibility.

Where does he stand on the big issues though?

Great British Railways

- Merriman supported the Williams-Shapps Rail Review and the creation of Great British Railways. At the time of the review's publication in May 2021, Merriman questioned reform to passenger service contracts and wanted to ensure that private sector investment still continued for the network.
- Again, in May 2019 in a general transport debate Merriman said that he hoped the private side of the rail sector could to be given the opportunity to remain involved with GBR.
- Responding to the delay to GBR legislation in October 2022, Merriman expressed frustration at the slow progress of GBR and called for secondary legislation to be used where possible to speed up its creation.

HS2

- Merriman is a vocal supporter of HS2. He has argued that HS2 is vital for building capacity as passenger numbers continue to increase and is an example of levelling up in being able to connect eight out of 10 of the country's major cities for 30 million people.
- Despite this, during a 2019 Commons debate following a progress report on the project he called for tighter financial discipline to ensure the project could be delivered.

Integrated rail plan

- During his time as Chair of the Transport Select Committee, a report was published on the Integrated Rail Plan in which the Committee called for a review into a new line between Leeds and Manchester, redeveloped stations at Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham and Manchester and taking HS2 to Sheffield and Leeds
- In a 2019 Commons debate he called for the Government to support the Midlands Rail Hub to allow the new grade of track to be shared across the wider region

Northern Powerhouse Rail

- Merriman supports Northern Powerhouse Rail and has argued that it represents best value for the economy and communities in delivering transport reform for the north.

Infrastructure

- Merriman is a supporter of decarbonisation, through both investment in greener train technology such as hydrogen or electrification, and also by encouraging more people to use the railways as an alternative to cars.
- In May 2022, he wrote an article in the Rail Technology Magazine outlining his views on railway electrification and the Transport Committee's recommendation for a 30-year rolling programme of electrification across the network. He called for funding to be made immediately available to allow Network Rail and contractors to make a start on the process instead of having to wait until 2024 and the start of Control Period 7.

Freight

- Merriman has not spoken extensively on rail freight, but during the summer 2022 industrial action on the network, expressed concerns about the preservation of rail freight routes to allow for the continuation of supply chains.

Rail reform

- Merriman supported the Government's October 2022 decision to extend Avanti West Coast's contract, saying the operator of last resort was already busy enough and the extension would allow time for drivers to be trained.

Unions

- At the height of disruption in August 2022, Merriman called for workplace reforms to fund the pay rises that were necessary arguing that most other workplaces had already done the same.
- Speaking at a fringe event on Great British Railways during the Conservative Party's 2022 conference, Merriman said legislation on minimum service levels needed to be in place and reform needed to be about increasing efficiency and safety along with diversity of staff.
- On many occasions in the Commons, Merriman has questioned the Government on the need for workforce reform for the sector, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. He has called for unions to work together with operators to introduce reforms to increase safety and productivity of workers.

Prior to taking on this role, Merriman has served on numerous Bill Committees in the areas of transport, finance and education, and was a member of the committees which put the 2015 and 2016 budgets into law. From July 2017 to August 2018 Merriman served as Parliamentary Private Secretary to ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions, before being appointed to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

He is also chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Bees which campaigns to raise awareness of the risks to pollinators and promote their wellbeing, as well as being chairman of the APPG for the BBC, an officer of the APPG on Autism (for whom he chaired a national inquiry on Autism and Education), the vice chair of the APPG on knife crime, vice chair of APPG on Domestic Abuse and the vice-chair of the APPG for Fairtrade.

Jesse Norman



Minister of State in the Department for Transport: 26 October 2022

Having previously held roles within the DfT, Norman was appointed on 26 October, following the departure of Kevin Foster. He moved to the role from the position of minister of State at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, which he held from 7 September 2022. Before that, he was financial secretary to the Treasury from 2019 to 2021, where he managed the COVID-19 furlough scheme and set up the UK Infrastructure Bank.

His role has responsibility for transport decarbonisation, air quality, technology, secondary legislation, including retained EU law, space, active travel (cycling and walking), skills, science and research, corporate, including public appointments and accessibility. Quite the varied task list!

Norman was previously Paymaster General, and also held ministerial roles in the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. As the MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire since 2010, he was also a member of the Treasury Select Committee 2010 to 2015, and Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in 2016 to 2017. He was made a Privy Councillor in 2019.

Before entering politics Norman was a Director at Barclays. He also researched and taught philosophy at University College London, and ran a charitable project in Communist Eastern Europe.

Norman is the author of numerous books and pamphlets, including 'Compassionate Conservatism', 'Edmund Burke: Politician, Philosopher, Prophet' and 'Adam Smith: What He Thought, and Why It Matters', which won a Parliamentary Book Award in 2018. He was Spectator Parliamentarian of the Year and The House Backbencher of the Year in 2012.

Baroness Charlotte Vere of Norbiton



Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Aviation, Maritime and Security): 23 April 2019

Untouched by Rishi's reshuffle, Baroness Vere remains at the DfT as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Aviation, Maritime and Security. In this role, she is responsible for aviation, maritime, security (including Ukraine), civil contingencies, Kent, international, women's safety and accessibility.

She previously held the position of Baroness in Waiting (Government Whip) where she has an active role at the despatch box promoting and defending departmental policy.

Before embarking on a career in politics, Baroness Vere spent working in the finance, education and health sectors. in investment banking. She qualified in biochemical engineering at university College London, and completed an MBA at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University.

Richard Holden



Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Roads and Local Transport): 28 October 2022

The North West Durham MP, elected in 2019, was appointed to his new role in the DfT in October.

In the role, he has responsibility for roads and motoring, including DVLA, DVSA, VCA, regions and devolution, local transport, including buses, taxis, light rail, union connectivity, haulage, Future of Freight, London (incl. Crossrail, Transport for London) and accessibility. He is facing a slight baptism of fire, with upcoming public sector strikes, called by the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), hitting the road transport sector (especially the DVLA) particularly hard.

His involvement in Transport for London will see him working closely with London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who has previously been critical over the government's lack of support over funding agreements for the city. On 30 August a longer-term agreement was announced worth £3.6 billion up to March 2024, but Khan has been vocal in his dissent, calling the input, the mayor called the situation surrounding the reliance on fares "really poor", adding: "we're the only city in the western world, actually the world, that gets so little support from the government now."

Prior to a career at Westminster, Holden was involved in several campaigns, including leading parliamentary effort to ban hymenoplasty and so-called virginity testing, for which he was given the 'true

honour' award by IKWRO. Richard also actively led on the campaign for lower duty on draught beer, being awarded 'Parliamentarian of the Year' by the All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG) on pubs. Immediately prior to becoming a minister, he was leading a private members bill to extent auto-enrolment on pensions to younger and part-time workers.

Jeremy Hunt



Chancellor of the Exchequer: 17 September 2022

The man of the moment, everyone is aware of Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt (regardless of what they may think of him, and his financial statement).

First elected to Parliament in 2005, representing South West Surrey. He was swiftly promoted through the Shadow Cabinet ranks and served as Shadow Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport and then Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, which was also his first ministerial brief in Government.

If you watched the coverage of the financial statement today, you will have been reminded of many his previous roles within the house, including overseeing the London 2012 Olympics, a tenure as Health Secretary (the longest holder of this job in history, at six and a half years – and no sign yet of heading to the Australian jungle), and Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

Appointed as Chancellor by Liz Truss, he was retained by Rishi Sunak. It is considered that he was seen as a 'safe pair of hands' to help unpick the disastrous remnants left by Kwasi Kwarteng's now notorious mini budget in September.

Before he entered the hallowed halls, Hunt ran his own educational publishing business, Hotcourses. He also set up a charity to help AIDS orphans in Africa in which he continues to play an active role.

With regards to his interest in rail, specifically there is not much. However, as the man who holds the country's purse strings, he is a key figure in the growth of the industry.

Kemi Badenoch



Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade : 6 September 2022

One of the key contenders in the Summer's hotly contested leadership campaign, Kemi Badenoch was appointed to her role within the Department for International trade in September by Liz Truss. She was also appointed Minister for Women and Equalities on 25 October 2022.

Her primary responsibilities within her trade role include securing world-class free trade agreements and reducing market access barriers, encouraging economic growth and a green industrial revolution across all parts of the UK, supporting UK business to take full advantage of trade opportunities, facilitating UK

exports, championing the rules-based international trading system and operating the UK's new trading system, including protecting UK businesses from unfair trade practices.

During her time in parliament, she has been Minister of State (Minister for Equalities) in the Equality Hub between 14 February 2020 and July 2022, Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury from 13 February 2020 to 15 September 2021 and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Education from 27 July 2019 to 13 February 2020.

Grant Shapps



Secretary of State: 25 October

As former Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps is a familiar figure to most within the rail industry, but in his new position, as Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which he took up on 25 October, Shapps still plays a pivotal role.

With his new hat on, Shapps has overall responsibility for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy which brings together responsibilities for business, industrial strategy, science, innovation and energy. This includes leading the government's relationship with business, ensuring that the country has secure energy supplies that are reliable, affordable and clean, ensuring the UK remains at the leading edge of science, research and innovation, steel and metals, critical minerals and the maritime,

automotive and aerospace sectors.

Historically, his approach to business has been 'low regulation', which may be music to the ears of people used to battling with mountains of red tape where innovation and R&D is concerned, however it is yet to be seen if he puts his policies where his promises are.

Shapps should have a good grasp of the challenges facing the sector. During his tenure as Transport Secretary (which took in the pandemic, a time that ripped up every rule book going), he was present for the creation of the Williams-Shapps rail plan, the Integrated Rail Plan and the establishment of the Restore Your Railway fund. All momentous in the recent rail history.

He has recently hit headlines with claims that there's "not much point" in building the Northern Powerhouse Rail project in full, although today's Autumn Statement has somewhat nixed that viewpoint.

He's held a variety of roles during his political career. From a (very) short spell as Home Secretary during the final days of the Liz Truss government, to Minister of State for Housing and Local Government, Shapps has touched all of the controversial posts, giving him, you would hope, decent overview of the workings of Westminster.

Michael Gove



Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities: 25 October 2022

Michael Gove has had a controversial career in politics. Whether he is being criticised by unions, stirring the pot about his colleagues or having his private life poured over by the tabloids, he's never far from a whiff of gossip.

Considering this, it is somewhat ironic that he was made minister of Intergovernmental Relations on 25 October 2022. At the same time, he was appointed as Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

In February 2022, as Levelling Up Secretary, he spearheaded the launch of the Levelling Up White Paper. This set 12 missions that the Government would deliver against to level up communities across the UK. With Gove back in DLUHC, it is likely that the Government will remain strongly behind the White Paper. Good news perhaps for regional rail projects.