

Business The manifesto

Briton puts the French at front of the queue to run the nation's rail services

Alistair Gordon is clear about his ambitions for Keolis on this side of the Channel, reports **Robert Lea**

He's an expert in managing queues, he's working for the French...and he wants to run more of your railways than anyone else. Alistair Gordon is the chief executive of Keolis, a name not much known outside of the rail industry. In fact, Keolis is SNCF, the French state railway, in disguise and it is likely to become more familiar as it embarks on aggressive expansion to match the ambitions of its UK boss.

Keolis is already a big player in Britain, helping to provide a third of all train journeys. It is the often-overlooked 35 per cent shareholder in joint ventures with Go-Ahead that run three of the capital's big commuter routes: Southeastern, Southern and London Midland. It is also the minority shareholder in the joint venture with First-Group that operates the TransPennine Express.

Its 45-year-old boss, though, is fed up with playing second fiddle.

From his new headquarters a stone's throw from Euston railway station in Central London, Mr Gordon, a maths graduate and specialist in queueing theory who cut his rail teeth in the playground of privatisation in the 1990s, explains. "We have been a minority partner for nearly 20 years. We have been in the position of being one step back. We sit on the company boards, manage the KPIs [key performance indicators], ask all the right and tough questions. Is the business performing? Can you do more? Have you learnt from other organisations?"

"Our ambition now is to bring together those skills and win franchises on our own or as a majority partner."

"What has changed is our [deeper] understanding of the market and having the capability — the headquarters, staff, operations, engineering, timetabling skills. We have grown from a team of eight to forty. We can run an operation on our own."

The new office space is needed, for Mr Gordon is overseeing four different franchise bids. Something is working, though, as Keolis has been shortlisted for all four bids, the latest being the eye-catching Keolis-led joint venture with Eurostar to run the East Coast Main Line. Being re-tendered after spending the economic crisis as a nationalised entity, the London King's Cross to Edinburgh intercity line is so potentially lucrative that it has attracted the toughest of competition: First-Group, Britain's biggest rail operator, and its arch-rival Stagecoach-Virgin.

While Eurostar brings to the bid a whiff of slick marketing and an understanding of the needs of a business/leisure mix of passengers and fares, Mr Gordon says that Keolis's SNCF connection brings decades of intercity TGV expertise from France, too.

Keolis's other shortlisted bids have a strong suburban and metro feel, again playing to the French connection and its parent's running of the cross-Paris RER lines that are being replicated in London with Thameslink and Crossrail. Keolis is partnering with Go-Ahead on both: Go-Ahead will take the



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER CHRIS HARRIS

Alistair Gordon has his sights fixed on winning contracts from the East Coast Main Line to Thameslink at the head of a consortium, no longer as a junior partner

lead on Thameslink, but, for the first time in the relationship, Keolis will take the lead on Crossrail.

The bids reinforce a longstanding partnership that had been in danger of souring. Keith Ludeman, the former Go-Ahead boss now on the board of Network Rail, used to joke that the two companies were still married, just sleeping in different bedrooms.

Mr Gordon doesn't disagree. "There definitely were tensions, but we have realised that we are good together. [At one stage] Go Ahead felt they had the skills and did not need us. We felt we were a rail operator in our own right. As it is, the partnership now is as strong as it has ever been." The Crossrail bid is

complex because it is new. Thameslink is complicated because the existing franchise is being merged into the Southern Railways network.

"There are specific skills to running an SMS [suburban-metro-suburban] line, taking trains off the classic rail network, putting them through a tunnel and back on to the classic network. We think we have those skills getting people into the network and out again, of managing a flexible operating plan so that one delay doesn't cause chaos."

The fourth shortlisted Keolis bid is for the Docklands Light Railway, on which its junior partner is the London Underground maintenance veteran Amey. The DLR bid works for Keolis

because it is not dissimilar to operations it runs in Lyons and Melbourne and, on a smaller scale, in Nottingham and its tram network.

Mr Gordon did not take the direct route into the railways. The son of a Scottish agricultural salesman and a Welsh mother, he excelled in maths at his Reading comprehensive and took a degree in the subject at University College London. There he became fascinated by the college's traffic and transportation school and in his last year specialised in Queueing Theory and the management of roundabouts or lines waiting to use the cashpoint.

Graduating into the 1990s' recession, he didn't fancy accountancy, but the

knowledge of passenger queue modelling landed him a job in rail consultancy at the advent of the commercialising forces of industry privatisation. Later he went to work for Jim Steer, the celebrated rail expert. His consultancy was working on the creation of Eurostar, for which Mr Gordon later went to work. He stayed at Eurostar for several years, during which the high-speed passenger service was loved by its customers but repeatedly missed its targets.

Rather than stay for more of the same, he joined Keolis, a company that has had various owners over the years and is now 70 per cent-owned by SNCF and 30 per cent-held by CDP, a Canadian pension fund. He joined with the self-confessed intention of rising to lead it and to lead a business that ran its own franchises.

It would appear to be no coincidence that Keolis has turned to a Briton to ease their UK expansion. Mr Gordon thinks his nationality is as irrelevant as the fact that, despite spending most of his career working for the French, he refuses to speak the language.

"I joined with ambition for the company and that's why they got me in — someone to push and stretch the business. Being British is not the criteria. What is important is having someone who knows the market and someone who is respected by the market."

"I don't speak French, which I admit is probably quite surprising — but I am quite stubborn. If you have made no effort to speak French in the last 18 years, I suppose that shows you must genuinely think you are the best person for the job."

Q&A

Who, or what, is your mentor?

Sir Mike Hodgkinson, chairman of Keolis UK (and a former chief executive of BAA)

Does money motivate you?

It's one of the many motivators, which also include job satisfaction and making a real difference for the business

What was the most important event in your working life?

Leading the bid and winning the franchise for Southeastern.

We were a young team and very motivated and it's satisfying to see many of that team doing well

Which person do you most admire?

Lord Coe. Grew up being a big fan of his during his athletics career and to see him lead the team that delivered the Olympics was very inspiring

What is your favourite television programme?

Strictly Come Dancing, right

What does leadership mean to you?

Setting the ambition for the company, motivating the team and giving them the tools to get the job done. Also, I like to give my teams the opportunity to develop by giving them tasks outside their particular field of knowledge

How do you relax?

Cycling, running and being with my family

CV

Education: Maiden Erlegh Secondary School, Reading; University College London, degree in mathematics

Career: 1990: Gibb and Partners (now part of Jacobs), transport consultant; 1995: Steer Davies Gleave, rail consultant; 1997: Eurostar, latterly as strategy director; 2004: Keolis UK, initially as a project director. Chief executive of Keolis UK since 2012

Family: Family of three children in Yorkshire

