

Expertise still not respected

When the inevitable collapse of Railtrack took place in October, I wasn't surprised. I felt quite alone when 10 years ago I said that it was an unworkable shambles. Now I am lost among the millions saying the same thing.

In Secretary of State Stephen Byers's address on 23 October he said: "The new body that will replace Railtrack will do much to address the current problems of the rail industry."

He added, in a somewhat unknowing way, that the new company's revenues would go further than they would have done with Railtrack, which is now in administration.

What he may not know, but why he is right even if he doesn't know, is the fact that at the moment much of the money that we as taxpayers put into the system, goes into paying for alternative bus services, it goes into paying for contractors and sub contractors and sub sub contractors, and some of the train operating companies' compensation for not running trains when engineering work is going on. So much of the money that we are pouring into this system to get it modernised is going in peripherals because that is the way in which the previous government and the civil servants of the day set it up.

Also, Mr Byers said, the company would be "a focused professional private sector company, committed to maintaining and improving the rail network". Splendid words.

He said the company would be set up to attract "the very best people" and its financial structure will be such that the lenders would view it "as a very low credit risk and a sound basis for investment". All that is good stuff.

What worries me is that Mr

Rayner's review



Byers has felt it necessary to say that they will take people from outside industry because the people inside the industry aren't capable.

That is understandable, but of course leads us down the same road that we were on before. Railtrack took that view and the privatised railway dispensed with people who are now in their forties, fifties and sixties, well trained, with a lifetime in the industry and who understood it.

They put in place people who manifestly knew nothing about railway operations, couldn't distinguish between investment and maintenance, couldn't maintain older infrastructure and handed it all over to contractors who made a lot of money doing at times a poor and inadequate job.

The shambles partly resulted from bringing outside people in and now we have the Secretary of State proposing exactly the same thing for reasons he just

doesn't understand. That has got to be addressed.

Somehow they have got to go back – they have missed a generation – and find people who actually understand how the system works.

It is nonsense to say "We'll bring someone in from Marks & Spencers to help run the National Health Service because the National Health Service is a muddle".

You can only run the National Health Service if you understand it and feel for it and the problems of the professionals within it. Thus it is with the railway.

The company Mr Byers wants to set up will have 12 to 15 executive and non-executive directors and I hope those people do bring outside influences. But the problem is underneath that level. There has to be professional competency in running a railway.

In essence the present structure of the industry will never allow operation to be controlled in a way that gives priority to customers or to effective train running.

There are countless examples of the way Railtrack's regulation policy acted directly against the customer as a whole.

The present regulation policy is based upon shifting responsibility as far away from Railtrack as possible. The actual agreements were evolved from a meeting of the train operating companies with Railtrack standing back and saying they would apply the policy agreed by the train operators. Since the train operators are set up to compete, the policy is flawed and a large number of resources have been devoted to apportioning blame and claiming compensation, one from another. This is not in

the customers' interests. I believe improvements will never occur until control of operation is vested in a single organisation whose remit it is to minimise overall delay. Now the industry is likely to be in some degree of public ownership, the opportunity should be grasped to run it for the public.

So this brings me back to my "Fat Controller" analogy and a vertical chain of command responsibility. It may have to be through contractors in the short term **but properly controlled contractors.**

If you get the organisation right, then the safety problems based on the legal safety cases, which make money for lawyers, will not be needed.

There is a case for reverting to the geographical logic of the regional organisation. It could be based on the Railtrack zones because they themselves are based on BR as BR was, but I am talking now about the day-to-day running of the railway, which is the key, not the financial nonsenses, which we know have got to be sorted out.

Finally, the fact that Railtrack appears to be moving towards a form of public ownership is said to make it more difficult to get private investment is the greatest con of them all.

The French, the German and indeed the American infrastructure is state-owned. Private money has gone into the running of it and the French and the Germans enjoy magnificent systems, which are based upon state-owned infrastructure and private financial investment. For us to believe that the City of London will not invest if it is owned by the state is political spin from the Treasury and their friends in the City.

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety officer.

News in brief

■ Railfuture international committee meets at Friends Meeting House, Manchester on 1 December. Info: Andrew MacFarlane andrew@mcrua.fsnet.co.uk

■ Railfuture passenger committee at Vat and Fiddle, Nottingham on 8 December. Info: Dave Martins 020 8555 6584

■ Railfuture national executive at Carrs Lane Centre, Birmingham, on 12 January. Info: john.lee@rdsadmin.freewire.co.uk

■ Railfuture Policy, lobbying and campaigns at Carrs Lane Centre, Birmingham, on 2 February. More info: paulkrebs@csi.com

■ Railfuture is planning a Eurostar trip to Strasbourg in the spring. Nothing is finalised yet but it will probably include a

week in Strasbourg, as a base for rail trips to Alsace and the Black Forest. If you are interested, send an sae to Trevor Garrod, 15 Clapham Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk NR32 1RQ. Details will be sent out in the New Year. Another tour may be organised to the south of France in the autumn.

■ London mayor Ken Livingstone has joined a steering group to promote Crossrail and helped to set up Cross London Rail Links Ltd which will also be involved in developing a rail line from Hackney to south west London. Also a

proposed Cross River tram system could link King's Cross, Euston and Waterloo.

■ The Wrexham-Birkenhead Rail Users Association is celebrating after reports that Bidston is likely to become an upgraded transport interchange with a new rail station, CCTV, bus connections, park and ride and cycle provision. A feasibility study has been approved which could pave the way for electrification of the route from Bidston to Wrexham and new stations at Upton and Heswall. The hourly service will be doubled to half hourly.

■ The East London Line received yet another "go ahead" in October. The line is part of Railfuture's vision for a London orbital rail system: Orbirail.