

# Election storms may buffet the railway

We are now in the run-up to the general election. Until a few months ago, I would have said it did not matter who won as both major parties have consistently undervalued the railway and its importance to the environment and the economy.

And despite a lifetime in what may be called public service with the railway, I have no affiliation or inclination to any political party.

There is no doubt in my mind, however, that the Conservatives destroyed the railways and created a financially unstable and fragmented system based on profit and greed which was unable to deliver seamless travel.

Privatisation also made it more difficult to manage safety within that melange of vested interests.

Add to those problems a compliant Inspectorate and inadequate regulation by the Government, and it was no surprise that the railway tottered into the 21st century.

When New Labour replaced the Conservatives, they continued with the destruction and seemed to accept the ludicrous matrix that had been created.

Much money was made by small organisations that fed off the system, sucking the blood of the "mother railway" which had earlier managed everything in house and had very few outside contractors feeding off it.

One only has to look at the proliferation of small training organisations to see how much money is being extracted today. Because New Labour accepted the status quo, the same problems continued.

So here we are in 2010 with failed franchises, guided busway farces and a method of maintaining the

London Underground that is both scandalously costly and less effective than it was before.

An additional danger in this IT-obsessed world is the thousands of people pronouncing on their website blogs on a subject few of them have any idea about.

Some might view these Rayner's Review articles as not much more than my blog. But my writing is based on almost 60 years of knowledge and experience in the industry.

I have, however, read blogs by road-orientated, bus-worshipping academics and high-profile politicians.

They ignore or do not understand the true costs of a road-orientated transport system and the damage to the environment.

I worry that these ill-informed views could lead to a swing away from public transport, cuts in rail investment and the bulk of public investment going to buses.

Despite the rhetoric of Lord Adonis and the Government's "born again" railway credentials, the action seems too little and too late. Major projects announced recently will have to pass a "value for money test" if the Conservatives take power.

How they apply the "test" to electrification for instance will be crucial.

Long term there are massive paybacks but a blinkered short-term view could be disastrous, and will probably ignore both the environmental and network-enhancing benefits.

"Cheap" busways could well be the theme, despite the fact that the blighted and ludicrous busway scheme in Cambridgeshire is



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still pouring money and cement into the fen. To my mind the busway is unlikely ever to get to the station or Addenbrookes hospital.

It is already hideously overspent. Seamless travel it is not – and never will be.

Another good railway formation between Gosport and Fareham in Hampshire is being

wasted by converting it into a non-guided busway.

To a public rightly sceptical about bus travel, the "experts" are trying to confuse the issue by marketing it as a bus rapid transit project.

In Bedfordshire, another busway – on the Luton-Dunstable rail line – moves inexorably onwards despite its many obvious flaws and a complete lack of public support.

Railfuture members should examine the websites that promote these schemes and start challenging the misleading "facts" constantly trotted out.

Only by such action do we have a chance of halting the slide towards busways.

Most of the rail franchises are controlled by bus companies.

The only rail franchise that has performed well above expectations is Chiltern, which is controlled by a rail company, Deutsche Bahn.

Even without the fear of what might happen after the election, I have plenty to worry about on today's railway.

In pursuit of savings to meet Government demands, I worry that changes are being made to key safety standards. There are many examples where ground-

level staff and supervisors have concerns. From my examination of Network Rail's current management regime, I am forced reluctantly to the conclusion that they look more and more like Railtrack.

The motivation now is not share price but bonus-type rewards for management prepared to drive costs down.

They have increased the period between inspections and reduced the number of staff involved in ultrasonic flaw testing.

There appears to be confusion regarding the examination of facing points and there is an increasing reliance on computer generated assessments of workload.

There is not a single person with responsibility, and staff attend from many miles away with no "ownership".

I believe managers are there to manage and to control their costs, but they must also work to robust standards.

If managers need to "cut a corner" they should use the formal derogation procedures.

For example, if a potential problem is spotted, a judgement can be made to allow the railway to continue to run for a further week before a speed restriction is necessary.

But they must sign the derogation and the derogation should be brought to the attention of a more senior engineer.

The Government has allowed slack practices to develop and risks making matters worse by allowing longer franchises and threatening Network Rail with more cost cutting.

The Government has much to be ashamed of and train companies are over-protected.

A typical franchise clause reads: "The Secretary of State at his sole discretion may decide to reimburse or ameliorate net losses of the franchise operator arising from industrial action (howsoever caused and of what nature)".

So the train operator can treat staff badly, fail to arrange reasonable Sunday rosters for example, cause unrest by employing unreasonable management tactics, yet the Government will reward it with a cash bail-out.

No wonder there is no shortage of investors.

The bail-outs and huge unplanned subsidies keep many companies in profit and the franchisees afloat.

The system is not good enough now and it looks as if it could get worse.

■ Peter Rayner is a former British Rail operations and safety manager.

## Rayner's Review: Playing Monopoly with the railway

*Railwatch is pleased to welcome a new commentator. Here former London Midland regional operating manager Peter Rayner casts a critical eye over British Rail.*

The annual report and accounts from the British Railways Board for 1994 and 1995 make interesting reading.

They show that outgoing Chairman Sir Bob Reid and the board members who remain have all been rewarded for a "job well done".

Yet that "job well done", selling off essential parts of BR, has made it more difficult to operate the railway and more difficult to keep it safe.

BR did make a profit but the uncomfortable fact is that the

profit exists only because the Government doubled the subsidy.

And despite this so-called profit, there is no money available to replace the 2,000 or so old coaches which are vulnerable if involved in accidents.

The profit of £362,000,000 was achieved because the rolling stock leasing companies made a profit of £450,000,000.

Without these leasing companies which are about to be transferred to private ownership, there would have been a loss of £88,000,000, – almost exactly what was spent on privatisation last year. The statistics meanwhile confirm a continuing decline in railway usage, both passenger and

freight, since 1990. It is wrong to assume that last year's strikes are to blame. The real problem is that people, both inside and outside the industry, can see that it is not operated effectively or managed consistently.

BR's report opens with a eulogy to Sir Bob Reid by the man who steps into his shoes - John Welsby:

It is my view that during Sir Bob's five-year period as chairman, more damage has been done to the railway than even in the era of Dr Beeching.

Beeching pruned the trees excessively. Sir Bob damaged the very roots of the tree by destroying the co-operative culture. He replaced it with a

fragmented group of businesses squabbling among themselves, worrying about costs but worrying more about how to pass the costs to another part of the railway. Playing Monopoly with the public purse in the name of market forces is Sir Bob Reid's achievement.

The changes he oversaw have enabled accountants to shunt pieces of paper more easily while shunting wagons and trains is more difficult.

A fair comment on Sir Bob's period would be to say that he has done a good public relations job.

He has smiled while others have backed away at the railway's strength.

NUMBER ONE: Peter's first article in Railwatch was written 15 years ago when a big issue was how BR had performed while the Tory government was intent on dismantling it for privatisation