

Whose railway is it?

Since *Railwatch* 98 in December we have seen more and more upsets and the media leaping on them with glee. It does our hopes and ambitions for a better railway no good at all.

Most of the media comment is either flawed in understanding, or written from one political view.

Worse still some comments are obviously prompted by briefings from the Strategic Rail Authority, Network Rail or the Department for Transport.

"Darling sacks Bowker!" Yes he does, no he doesn't. "Branson uses Blair to change Darling's mind." Hardly a day goes by without some silly story, which may sell papers but does the railway no good.

Even a respectable Radio 4 programme, with which I am familiar, allowed the promoter of a proposed internal airline to say that travelling from Norwich to Exeter there was no direct rail service from London and one must change at Bristol. Unchallenged rubbish!

The latest headline to annoy is "Treasury has doubts about Crossrail". All this talk about taking the railway back under direct Government control indicates re-nationalisation is nonsense and doubly dangerous because it gives the anti-rail lobby a chance to moan about nationalisation.

But more importantly it also hides the fact that what more Government control really means is less money for the branch lines, fewer reopenings, more risk of closures, more money for highly suspect busways and less condemnation of bus substitution generally.

What Government money is available will go to trunk route operators and there will be no fundamental cross subsidising of one service with another.

What we are getting is not nationalisation - but more Treasury control.

On the bright side let me tell you I travelled from Basingstoke to Birmingham International recently and met friends from London and Stafford. We were all at the coffee stand on International station at 10.00 having had seamless journeys.

I returned to Basingstoke on a Glasgow-Bournemouth train which ran exactly to the timetable.

However when something goes wrong, problems are not tackled efficiently. Forgive me for saying this again and again but there is no navigational skill inherent in the system. If everything goes well - excellent. The most minor upset however causes disarray because the staff are unhelpful in their responses and everyone runs for cover. The chairman of Network Rail Ian McAllister clearly demonstrated in a recent

newspaper interview that he doesn't understand his own industry and goes on about engineering excellence as if engineering excellence alone is going to give us an efficient railway on a daily basis.

I saw the new Cunard liner leave Southampton on its maiden voyage. A marvellous sight! I thought: "There is a master mariner at the helm of that ship, not the chief engineer."

So let us then get the engineers in their right place in the railway industry.

I realise Network Rail is trying to get its act together and I have some sympathy with the task but to make change and reduce staff requires leadership.

It is not a new task. I had to close the Beckenham division of the Southern Region - a terrible time for us all - but we managed it without the low morale that is everywhere within Network Rail today.

Stories abound of hard-line attitudes, and "clear your desk" letters. How the devil do they think the railway will ever run properly with that sort of management style?

Let me return briefly to Ian McAllister's newspaper interview. The real irritation is, when asked about Government control and vertical integration, he says: "They are our tracks and we can say 'no'".

The former Ford Motor executive and three-car owner (two Fords and a Mercedes) tells us he travels standard class but he doesn't say how often he travels by train.

They are not his tracks. They are part of the nation's railway network of which he has the stewardship at this time. He has to do more than tinker with its engineering. He has to drive the network. Operators, signallers and their supervisors are his as well as the engineers.

Finally there are one or two millstones round Mr McAllister's neck which gets him my sympathy. I noticed on the National Rail website on 6 February, eight miles of signalling in the Luton area were lost.

It was an almost identical situation to the failure at about the same distance from London at Maidenhead in December. The two failures caught my attention because Network Rail has just taken over the Serco contract at Luton and it had just taken over the Amey contract at Maidenhead in December.

We must not underestimate the difficulties of dealing with contractors at this time.

Mr McAllister also makes the point that over 300 operatives are employed simply attributing delays to one organisation or another - one of the great absurdities of railway privatisation

about which we have been complaining for years.

Take that cost and consider the 60 or so profit-making private companies arranging training and certification of railway applicants and think what the industry is losing in financial terms.

It brings me back to the fact, as always, that the fault of this muddle lies with the politicians who smashed the disciplined, well trained workforce and fragmented the industry in a way that was little short of vandalism.

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



Rayner's Review



Railfuture member Peter Atkinson sent *Railwatch* this cartoon of amateur magician John MacGregor who as Tory Transport Minister 10 years ago brought privatisation to Britain's railways. Happy anniversary Mr MacGregor.

Fight for city cross-rail

The campaign for a rail link between Bradford Forster Square and Interchange stations is hotting up, now that Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott has given the go-ahead for the Broadway development in the city centre.

Bradford Rail Users Group say this is an ideal opportunity to redevelop the city and link rail lines in the north and south of the city with a double-track line.

The Railfuture affiliate says this would provide big benefits for the whole of the West Yorkshire rail system and well as improving Bradford's economic potential.

Currently however Bradford Council is reluctant even to

protect an alignment and plan a development which could block the cross-rail line. If you would like to help the campaign, contact Bradford Rail Users Group, PO Box 357, Bradford BD8 9EJ. Email: asuchi@aol.com

■ The Wirral Transport Users Association is fighting plans to withdraw some rail services for the duration of the British Open Golf competition at Hoylake for 10 to 14 days in 2006.

The association criticised plans to close the line between Hoylake and East Kirby.

WTUA can be contacted via Tides Reach, The Moorings, Lower Heswall, Wirral CH60 9JU.