

# Key to rail network

More changes in the industry. Are we pleased or not? The Railfuture chairman's thoughtful resume of the situation in *Railwatch* 100 set out serious concerns and points of acceptance and if I can indulge in a bit of backslapping, was classic Mike Crowhurst, leaving me free to indulge myself in a slightly more "off the wall" examination.

Because the present railway sometimes works and sometimes is a tremendous muddle, I must return to my theme which I still hope the Government will address.

Here is a recent good example:

The 7.44 First Great Western train out of Newbury on time.

08.05 Virgin Reading to Birmingham on time.

10.03 Virgin Birmingham to Derby on time.

15.05 Midland Mainline Derby to St Pancras on time.

17.33 First Great Western Paddington to Newbury on time.

So why bang on about problems? It is because deep down I know the system is flawed. No one knows what to do when things go wrong, no staff appear and take charge and it drifts from a relatively minor incident into a shambles that would have been unbelievable years ago.

So the Strategic Rail Authority is to disappear! It's OK I suppose, providing Secretary of State Alistair Darling does not become too subservient to the Treasury.

I am in favour of some state direction and reversal of the fragmentation which has made fortunes for many since John Major's government left office.

But if this reorganisation is going to reverse the damage we need to be telling Mr Darling and his people what we think should be done and remind him his "short-termism" is typical of Mrs Thatcher's view which was that the railway would never expand again and should be funded as an old tree, pruned and nurtured till it died.

It seems this Government has now abandoned the growth targets for rail in its 10 year transport plan in order to improve punctuality. So they are doomed to fail their environmental aspirations and sadly, the engineering-led railway with little operating nous will fail to improve the performance.

Sensible operating is dependent on general management controlling both engineers and operators. We need the master mariner to navigate with the operators knowing what they should do and the engineers supporting that effort, not playing building sites among the ruins.

If that was done, Mr Darling would not have to say there will be no extra trains except, "where the benefits are not outweighed by the effect they would have on performance or cost." That is typical Treasury stuff.

The Secretary of State should be bold and recognise cross-country services are the key to a successful rail network.

The decision by the SRA to end negotiations with Virgin Trains over the future of the Cross-Country franchise could be a blessing in disguise. It offers a real opportunity to sort out the operating and customer service mess created by Virgin in the past two years caused by too many small-capacity expensive-to-run trains clogging up core sections of the network.

If the SRA grasps the nettle now, a sensible network of clock-face Cross-Country services, with hourly cross-platform interchanges at Birmingham New Street, could replace the present timetable.

Larger trains than the present Voyagers are in

any event needed as they are only really suitable for relatively short regional services because of their packed seating layouts and insufficient luggage space.

It is also amazing that major stations, such as Leeds and Birmingham International, still only have hourly interval services yet the trains which serve them offer only half the capacity of the InterCity 125s that were used in the past.

The Voyagers are horrendously expensive in leasing charges and operating costs, so they need to be moved to routes where there is high revenue-earning potential, never a feature of the cross-country market. But cross-country services were viable in BR days because they used rolling stock that had seen 10-15 years service on major routes and had been largely depreciated in InterCity's accounts.

Of course there is plenty of such rolling stock surplus to requirements at present: the Mk II and Mk III vehicles Virgin has given up from its West Coast and CrossCountry operations! There are also many driving van trailers surplus to requirements, and freight operator EWS seems to have a fleet of 125mph class 67 diesel locomotives which have little to do, since the Royal Mail discarded rail operations earlier this year.

Looking at Royal Mail results since that happened makes you realise that the roads are even worse than the railway for congestion.

So there is plenty of opportunity to form trains designed for long-distance travel, and with adequate seating and luggage space, to operate on the longer cross-country routes.

There are also class 86, 87 and 90 electric locomotives surplus to requirements which could be used to power these trains where they run under the wires over sections of the West Coast main line, such as Birmingham to Glasgow or Edinburgh, and end the crime of currently operating all-diesel services when energy-efficient electrification infrastructure is available, lessons we learned in the 1960s and 1970s.

The review of CrossCountry is also timely, since the Central Trains franchise is due for renewal in 18 months time. The Central franchise never made any sense, combining as it did a Barmouth-to-Yarmouth mish-mash of rural services, inter-urban services and West Midlands services. Additional long-distance cross-country services have been added, with routes like Birmingham-Liverpool and Birmingham-Cardiff. Why should such services not be classified as part of CrossCountry, when Birmingham-Manchester and Birmingham-Bristol are?

Already the rural Welsh parts of Central Trains have been incorporated in Wales and Borders, and it is probably time to do the same on the other side of the country, by incorporating the East Midlands local and Lincolnshire rural services with Midland Mainline.

If the long-distance services were also merged into a new CrossCountry franchise, this would then leave a sensible urban group focused on Birmingham to form a new West Midlands franchise, for which the principal specifier would become Centro.

The best thing the SRA could do now (as it did last year with South Eastern) is take temporary management control while it reorganises CrossCountry's asset base and its timetable, and also undertakes a review of Central, so that new franchises, offering value for money and a better service for passengers, can be let from spring 2006. This will save the Treasury money.

Whatever happens we in Railfuture must keep a close eye on the CrossCountry service changes which for many people, elderly and disabled

especially, offers an alternative to crossing London and the tedium associated with changing trains.

We should liaise with Help the Aged, Age Concern and the National Pensioners Convention. I am quite happy to be part of that approach, especially to the NPC since I am one of its transport advisers. In effect I shall be talking to myself! A bad sign perhaps.

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



## Rayner's Review



## Unions battle on

The rail unions are still campaigning for the industry to be taken fully back into public control as the above page of Aslef's *Locomotive Journal* shows.

Train unionists rallied in Whitehall in July to lobby their MPs and cheered when Aslef's Graham Morris said: "Public opinion shows 90% of people support the railways being returned to public ownership. It's a vote winner for Labour."

Most of the savings achieved by private companies taking over public services are achieved not through genuine managerial innovation but by cutting terms and conditions of staff, according to a Kingston Business School paper by Sanjiv Sachdev."

Another paper by the union-backed think tank Catalyst argues that public ownership would speed up the rail renaissance.

*Renaissance Delayed? New Labour and the Railways* can be downloaded from <http://www.catalystforum.org.uk/pubs/paper24.htm>