

# Vertical take

Are things getting worse instead of better on the railway? I am not sure.

We now have the Rail Accident Investigation Branch, a team of 26 frontline inspectors and three technical inspectors.

This all resulted from Lord Cullen's Ladbroke Grove Inquiry recommendations – an inquiry before which I was privileged to give evidence.

In my view the setting up of the RAIB was always likely to complicate an already complicated and fragmented railway which had started to become really dangerous, following a series of accidents, at Watford, Southall, Ladbroke Grove, Hatfield and Potters Bar.

The causes of those accidents – the names of which are now etched in our minds – were all rooted in that very fragmentation.

Inside the industry there were many more examples, luckily which did not result in a high-profile disaster.

They escaped press attention but were well known to those of us who are for want of a better description "the informed ones".

Railtrack has a lot to answer for, as do the civil servants and politicians inside the Department for Transport, which put together that flawed matrix causing Lord Cullen to make the suggestions which I am sure he felt were the correct ones.

My worries stem from the recent derailment on the Wirral loop line, caused by the condition of the track. Let's not be fooled by the investigative small talk about whether it was the trains or some other factor.

Had it been, believe me, the trains would not have been allowed to keep running on the rest of the Merseyrail network. The mid-week derailment was allowed to stop the service for 10 days while an air of mystery, detailed examination and double-talk took place.

If I had still been responsible for Merseyrail I would have expected the line cleared, which it was reasonably easily, and temporary repairs effected to allow "running at caution" until a suitable possession could be granted to put it right.

However, there is not much doubt the condition of track in those tunnels was very poor indeed. It makes you wonder, when cases like this crop up time and time again, not dangerous in themselves, what Railtrack was doing when they had charge of the infrastructure.

All the whingeing supporters in the shareholder row are silent on this aspect. The stewardship of the railway was its responsibility and it failed.

Making allowances therefore that this Wirral job was a big one, and for Network Rail taking their time, it is the subsequent investigative

procedure that is so annoying. OK, we no longer have policemen doing their fingertip search for they "knew not what they did" or for that matter what they were looking for!

Instead we have got the RAIB turning up in all their glory and having a look round on the evening and allegedly booking into a hotel to start the investigation in the morning.

Railway managers should have been allowed to see if they could get the line open, not preparing for a leisurely investigation.

Now, for goodness sake, the Health & Safety Executive is launching through Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate its own investigation.

The engineer in charge for Network Rail is likely to have known the cause the moment he and an operator got on site. So why close the line for 10 days? I believe it is because there is no one in charge, in other words there is no vertical railway-wide chain of command

I have to say again too much power has passed to the engineer who always has a tendency, whatever his or her discipline, to regard the railway as a piece of equipment to be maintained in good condition, just as the professional investigator regards it as a potential "crime scene" which can yield clues.

If your job is to run the railway, you will do your best to run the railways. If your job is to investigate railways, then that is your first priority.

Engineers have the job of building, repairing and maintaining the fabric of the railway, but like all specialists they need coordination and control, or they simply shut the railway down while they erect plastic fences and don helmets. Bus services proliferate and people have to find alternative ways to travel.

This reduction in rail travel caused by constant interruption of the service gives the Transport Secretary Alistair Darling the opportunity to say: "We are not paying to cart fresh air about," and get away with it.

I believe Network Rail is over-controlled by civil engineers who cannot supply a vertical chain of command over the whole railway. Network Rail thus misses the main point of having a railway in its pursuit of engineering excellence.

All this talk about the vertical chain of command is all very well, and I have been one of the worst for using the cliché.

I have always also supported the idea of having a Thomas the Tank Engine-style "Fat Controller". He may not always be right in his decisions but at least he is an identifiable person in charge.

So what is a true vertical chain of command? In my view it is the control office presiding over a logi-



## Rayner's Review

cal geographical area, not just some of the services in that area. It should have authority over all of the services, express, local, freight and freightliner plus such works trains and test trains as are required.

The person in charge should be called the deputy chief controller, because the manager in charge of that geographical area should also be the chief controller.

That was me when I worked in Manchester as divisional operating superintendent and chief controller.

It was one of the oddest but most effective titles I ever had as I trudged up the railway career system.

Throughout the 24 hours the deputy chief controller on duty represented the highest authority in the area but of course any superintendent worth his salt had the phone by his bed seven days a week.

Further vertical chain logic was demonstrated in the way I ran the Southern Region.

As operating officer of the region, I "chaired" a morning telephone conference which involved the three divisions – South Eastern, South Western, and Central – plus the engineers – civil, signal and telecommunications and mechanical.

We discussed the previous day's problems, the state of the present morning peak as it was proceeding, and we made collective decisions for the overall good of the system.

That is what is missing now. We also benefited then from having a Railway Inspectorate that was professionally knowledgeable on running railways, that trusted us to run it safely, which by and large we did.

It was not perfect as I am sure many will be anxious to tell me. But we did not hide anything, there were fewer lawyers and no police interference unless they were in pursuit of a criminal or if we chose to allow them to get to a suicide body before we did!

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

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