

Crazy costings

The franchise muddles continue. England's second city could become a second-rate city if the West Midlands is not sorted out.

But sadly Birmingham is not the only location in confusion as I watch the activities of Rail Minister Tom Harris and his advisers.

I am filled with disbelief bordering on anger as he repeats the misleading mantra, "We are not in the business of carrying air about in trains."

With half-baked opinions like that, he is looking like a worthy successor to the string of transport ministers who have done nothing for the railway network.

However, like his master Secretary of State Douglas Alexander, Mr Harris has a seat in Scotland where they are blessed with a joined-up transport policy and one rail franchise that has not been tinkered with.

The only place the railway looks more stable is Scotland where transport is the responsibility of a devolved executive government.

It is no good any more ministers saying they inherited a mess from the Tory botched privatisation.

Indeed what have they done since they came to power apart from killing off Railtrack – not before time in my view?

Meanwhile, under the direction of the Department for Transport we have First Capital Connect and First Great Western both getting some stick for running – or not running as the case may be – their recently obtained franchises.

The train operators are in fact struggling with a system – controlled by the Department for Transport which is bereft of railway knowledge – that does not work very well. For instance, the whole busi-

ness of track access charges is rubbish. It penalises anyone wanting to add vehicles to a service with the result that there are fewer coaches and more overcrowding.

The leasing charges are also a nonsense as they too deter operators from running longer trains because the leasing charges can be in excess of the revenue the additional vehicles earn.

Even good old engineering-led Network Rail, obsessed with a "complete shutdown" mentality has overreached itself.

The "on with the hard hats, erect the plastic fence lads, hire the buses" school of running a railway has taken it too far.

The replacement bus service to Portsmouth is likely to run for three months rather than the two weeks they anticipated as NR's signal scheme over-runs.

I thought the arrangements for passengers during engineering work between Crewe and Wilmslow last year were such a mess that others would not be able to equal it

But now I am being told the Portsmouth muddle is moving to Basingstoke at Easter.

If the Basingstoke scheme over-runs, or ends up with a simplified signalling arrangement that caters for a reduced service, the fat will be in the fire.

Portsmouth is a terminal city with its back to the sea. Basingstoke is an octopus that affects four major routes and more than one train company.

Network Rail regards itself as an infrastructure company, not an organisation that runs trains, employs signallers and is there to keep things moving. This mentality was demonstrated in a recent letter to me which ended in thanking me

for showing an interest in Britain's rail infrastructure.

It was Britain's rail services I was talking about. Let engineers maintain equipment, but let master mariners navigate the boat – and let experienced rail operators get on with the job of running trains.

And now for something more positive.

I hope all Railfuture members are supporting "Captain Deltic" or Roger Ford to give him his correct name, in his fight to resurrect a national electrification programme.

It is 35 years since a definitive plan was published setting out the economic and the environmental advantages of electrification.

All we got from that 1981 initiative was the East Coast main line electrification scheme which went ahead without what should also have happened – equipping the new trains and infrastructure with automatic train protection equipment. The extra cost was too much for the Government to stomach.

Nothing else happened on the electrification front and when I tried in my small way as regional operations manager for the London Midland Region to get Crewe to Kilsgrange electrified I was told "No more electrification, it is getting in the way of privatisation plans which will open the door to investment and the new Jerusalem".

Now the rolling stock companies are getting all indignant because the party may be over. I am a fan of Ken Livingstone and believe the Transport for London policies are an overall success.

He has started to say that TfL will purchase new stock – rather than lease – when it takes over the refurbished North London line. In addition it looks as if the Office for Rail



Rayner's Review

Regulation is to ask the Competitions Commission to investigate the rolling stock companies' powers and profits.

At the same time the rolling stock companies seem to be making it difficult for Virgin to increase the size of its Pendolinos by two vehicles a train set!

Maybe the DfT believes the costs of expanding the Pendolinos are not justifiable anyway.

But whichever way you look at it, track access charges and leasing costs are a burden on the railway.

It is time for the people who have the authority to run our trains to make a sensible review of the issues. It seems to me that Ken Livingstone is more likely to be on the right track.

No, I am not left wing, right wing or any other wing, but simply a railwayman, who along with many others in the profession, is becoming angry at what is happening to the rail network.

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

Count on it. They haven't got a clue

Railfuture often challenges the way Britain's railways are run.

And it is becoming increasingly clear that managers who rely on official statistics may be deluding themselves.

Campaigners counting passengers have shown station usage data, once held by the Strategic Rail Authority and now with the Office of Rail Regulation, are wildly inaccurate.

John Sanderson of Transport for London was grateful for data provided by Cambridge Heath and London Fields Rail Users.

He said: "There is no substitute for getting out there and counting passengers. Glad to see you are detailing the increase in usage at Cambridge Heath and London Fields

– something that appears beyond 'official' rail industry data."

The ORR "footfall" figures for 2004/05 suggest a morning peak usage of about 50 people for each of these stations, compared to CHL-FUG's figures of 350-400 for that period.

Another passenger survey by Railfuture members at Whittlesea, Cambridgeshire, showed almost double the passengers using it than the official figures suggested.

Any official figures are unreliable if based on ticket sales where there is no station ticket office!

But ticket sales are no real indicator of actual journeys made any more and the statistical problem has worsened with the growing need to buy a series of separate tickets from

separate companies to make one journey affordable.

Another dubious practice is Network Rail's policy of closing down lines to carry out engineering work. Passengers deserted the Bedford-Bletchley line when the line was closed in 2004 for an upgrade.

The Bedford-Bletchley rail users group report that usage has still not recovered to pre-2004 levels but despite protests from the group, Network Rail closed the line again for a week in February and plans another blockade in Whitsun week.

Not tackling overcrowding is also guaranteed to turn passengers away. First Great Western's cuts in the Bristol area were well publicised in the national press. But

Oxfordshire passengers suffered similar experiences when FGW withdrew key trains.

Some commentators blamed the Department for Transport for much of the chaos. Transport Minister Tom Harris was even reported as saying that rail passengers would have to put up with overcrowding.

DfT rail director general Mike Mitchell said it was not unreasonable to expect passengers to stand in the peak.

Network Rail chief executive John Armit believes taxis should replace trains on some branch lines.

TSSA general secretary Gerry Docherty, speaking of Dr Mitchell, said he was "arrogant and out of touch". Dr Mitchell is not alone.