

Opportunities lost as Labour dithers

There is so much uncertainty today resulting from the Government's attitude to railways. Although I often disagreed with the Conservatives over privatisation, at least I could deal with them on the basis of "know thine enemy".

Labour on the other hand makes all the right noises but in essence does very little – at least when compared to the rest of Europe.

The recent White Paper *Delivering a Sustainable Railway* is like everything else, full of rhetoric. It seems to be all perception and no reality.

In the vacuum, a succession of academic economists, with no knowledge of running railways, peddles the same outdated theories that justified Beeching and the submission to the road lobby that followed.

But their misguided views promote a climate in which there is a very real threat of cutbacks in rural rail services.

These economic theorists and the politicians they serve are in the ascendancy and Railfuture must be cautious with whom it cavorts with at seminars and workshops even if they do provide money and glossy development-type pictures to hang around the place. Organisations that fund conferences do so to peddle their wares.

We must not forget the financial chaos of West Coast route modernisation which in itself was enough to seal the fate of Railtrack, to say nothing of Southall, Potters Bar, Hatfield and Paddington.

Turning to specific worries, does *Delivering a Sustainable Railway* do other than plug gaps in the existing system? In my view it does not, apart from the Reading scheme, which is excellent news.

Concentrating on pinch points and junction congestion glosses over the essential task of looking at the network as a whole to see what strategic improvements are needed.

But consideration of upgrading the East Coast main line has been halted while the merits of a new East Coast high-speed line is debated.

The present ECML has critical two-track sections over viaducts and through tunnels. Better regulation can help in the north, but south of Peterborough alternative capacity has to be found to cope with growth.

The Hertford loop could be a partial answer but it is not realistic to send express and semi-fast services that way.

What are the alternatives? One option would be to use the Huntington to St Ives connection and thence to Cambridge which would allow some trains to travel into Liverpool Street, Stansted and the City of London. But this Government has sanctioned the ripping up of the railway track bed for a



LONDON CROSSRAIL: A 34-metre ventilation shaft has been built at Moorhouse in London. A station will be built at the foot of the shaft. But the go-ahead for the whole scheme was still awaited in September. More info: www.crossrail.co.uk

Picture: Crossrail

busway from St Ives to Cambridge. The busway will have none of the safety constraints that I believe are necessary and is flawed in a number of other ways. Opportunity lost!

What about Oxford to Cambridge via Milton Keynes? Opportunity lost.

What about Worcester, Stourbridge, Walsall, Burton, Derby, Matlock, Chinley, Stockport? This could be for a station as you run into New Street from the south. A new Birmingham station could be built there – and the existing service kept going while the building work progresses.

Tram schemes are cancelled where they are required and built where they do the most strategic harm. There are many more possible strategic routes but all this Government does is look at ways and means of spending as little as possible and talking up the bits they do. I have kept away from the Birmingham New Street debate because sadly most of the West Midlands thinking at present is based on false assumptions and a lack of knowledge about signalling.

Space does not permit an in-depth look into those alternatives and anyway this article will appear after a colloquium has been held in Birmingham which hopefully will have done more than rubber stamp a cosmetic upgrade to New Street. The present Gateway scheme in my view is to enable more pizzas to be

correct. Opportunity lost. At the end of it all, Labour will have consigned our railway to an inferior role compared to the essential role it plays in the rest of Europe.

I do not claim to have all the answers but I do want these issues to be debated properly.

I say again: Beware the organisation that pays for research or funds seminars. They want you to sing their song and maybe railways are not best served by those songs.

Network Rail welcomes building over Euston station with more

enthusiasm than the organisation gives to what I term the practical aspects. I am again struck by the similarity between Railtrack attitudes and the present Network Rail belief in its own excellence.

"World Class" they call it and if it were not so serious it would be laughable. Arrogance and self belief is no substitute for leadership, and the recent report by Network Rail on the Grayrigg accident is a case in point.

The report does point to errors but when a spokesman says "it will be the first time that the rail industry has ever published anything so thorough as this", that is nonsense.

Agreed, there has been an admission of failings which is good to see, but responsibility rests at the top not bottom.

For instance concerns have been raised that in recent years frequencies of inspection of "on track" equipment have been extended.

If inspection was flawed and local management to be blamed, surely more senior managers are responsible for setting the frequency of inspection – and ensuring these essential tasks are carried out.

Some of the detail of the report raises serious concerns. How, for example, were staff allowed to work to the job descriptions of previous contractors? We all thought maintenance had been taken back "in house".

Unless an organisation has the right number of staff, properly trained, properly supervised and the system is correctly audited, taking

over the railways

maintenance "in house" is shown once again to be more perception than reality. And what about the constant blather about ERTMS signalling, described as a hi-tech revolution that will give us longer trains that run closer together? It is already being rolled out all over mainland Europe but we have a trial site on the Cambrian Coast. Well at least it's not the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch!

There is yet another complicated concern to those of us who are worried about the railway and its development under this still spin-orientated Government.

Let's consider the new Bus Concessionary Travel Act. On the surface it is good news for Britain's older people. From 2006, older people enjoyed free bus travel on a local basis. The word local became key, and the problem. Some councils interpreted it generously, others not so.

On Tyneside the PTA made access to the Metro more costly for older people, while bus passes all over Cornwall meant pensioners took the bus rather than the branch line trains. In Scotland there was an abstraction from rail as well, just three examples from the many that exist of confusion and inequality.

Not surprisingly it had a mixed welcome from older people and Ray Bentley in *Railwatch* 111 highlighted the unfairness to rural train services.

Now the Act is in existence it poses in my view an even bigger threat to rural rail from 2008. The Government believes the bus is the place for the pensioner.

The DfT, in response (under the signature of the Minister of State) to a query about the need for multi-modal travel replies thus:

"There are no plans at present to extend the statutory minimum concession in England to modes other than buses. Bus travel remains the most used form of public transport, especially by older people."

Not surprising it's the most used method if you give it free!

Trams and trains are excluded and the only way Railfuture can fight it is to organise campaigns and draw attention to issues that seem to be deliberately overlooked.

The first thing to note is that house prices increase and regeneration is boosted if tramways are introduced into an area. Not so with buses.

Secondly, older people will get out of their cars and travel on trams and trains but buses do not have the same effect, a spin-off no doubt from Mrs Thatcher's famous remark that anyone getting on a bus after they have passed 40 is a failure! I always regard that as the only thing she ever did for the railway. Railfuture members should take note that the Welsh Assembly extended the facility

to Shrewsbury-Swansea via the Heart of Wales line and also on the Conwy Valley which has doubled the number of passengers on the routes and prompted requests for extra vehicles.

We must combat the cries of extra costs with the response that not all pensioners are without some disposable income, so business communities have benefited.

Paid-for travel has also gone up by about 15% because other family members travel along with their elder relatives. This also has the effect of teaching another generation to think and use rail. More inclusion brings better health.

To extend the concession to rail is an environmental way of increasing inclusion and helping tourism. In Northern Ireland free travel is on all modes of travel and into the Irish Republic as well!

There are so many advantages resulting from older people's concessionary travel and we must ensure rail is not the loser.

I am aware incidentally that in many places – West Midlands, Merseyside, Greater Manchester to say nothing of London – that rail and tram are included.

That is not because of central government, but because local authorities choose to extend the facility. So do not be fooled.

In 2008 when older people come up from the country with their now-nationwide bus pass, they will not be able to join their city contemporaries on the tram, train and tube. For them, it will be "bus only".

This Government, despite the hype, appears wherever you look to be anti rail. Opportunity lost again!

The Act does make provision for an extension by a future Secretary of State to add other modes of travel but I do not see the present lot doing so.

I see the West Wiltshire Rail Users Group have created two petitions on the Government website asking for the concessions to be extended. One is: "Consider the damage to the rail industry of the anti-competitive decision to make bus travel free for UK seniors in spring 2008".

<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/RailBusParityUK>

The second is: "Grant free government-funded off peak rail travel in England for resident pensioners aged over 65 years".

<http://petitions.pm.gov.uk/FreeSeniorsRail>

It is some time since I covered so many items and, at a time when we should be thrilled by the St Pancras reopening and looking forward to the new upbeat railway, it is a shame there should be so many things of concern.

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

Lincolnshire

By Brian Hastings
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■ ■ Bus replacements
Members of Railfuture Lincolnshire were monitoring the replacement bus provision during track replacement and re-alignment work at Lincoln station. Gainsborough, Saxilby, Market Rasen, Ruskington, Metheringham, Hykeham, Swinderby and Collingham were all affected by the complete shutdown of rail services. We plan to give our survey results to the train operators to assist them in planning for next year's July-August shutdown. The £55million work caused inconvenience but it is the first major investment in Lincoln for many decades and will provide greater operation flexibility.

■ ■ Brigg line
£9million is to be spent on the Brigg line to make it a reliable freight artery. Railfuture will continue to campaign for better passenger services on the line.

■ ■ Co-operation
TransPennine Express made extra stops between Doncaster and Scunthorpe – at Crowle, Althorpe, Thorne South, Hatfield and Kirk Sandall – when Northern Rail were forced to cancel a Sheffield-Scunthorpe local stopping train. Railfuture welcomes this encouraging sign of co-operation which has not been seen in the area since the days of British Rail.

■ ■ Fares
Northern introduced a welcome Duo offer – where the second adult travels half price – but then cheap day tickets on the Barton-Cleethorpe route were withdrawn.

■ ■ Cancellations
Railfuture is worried by the increasing number of train cancellations reported by Central Trains. Sunday services, it seems, are particularly vulnerable because they are subject to the willingness of staff to work a Sunday shift.

■ ■ Poacher line initiative
The Grantham to Skegness Community Rail Partnership, led by Lincolnshire County Council, has appointed the Independent Rail Consultancy Group to carry out a strategic marketing review for the Poacher Line. The line already carries over 750,000 passengers per year, as well as freight. Councillor William Webb said: "The railway is a vital transport artery in the county, not only bringing thousands of holidaymakers to the coast each year but also transporting passengers to work, school or for social and leisure purposes every day. "At a time when environmental issues are high on national and local political agendas, developing shared sustainable transport benefits us all."

■ ■ Elizabeth Hastings
Brian Hastings' wife Elizabeth died in August after several months of illness. Elizabeth had been a member since the days of the Railway Invigoration Society and was one of the unsung "backroom" helpers who many branches rely on to keep going. Lincolnshire members will fondly remember her for her cooking skills and the many excellent lunches she organised for branch AGMs.

COME TO ELY: Railfuture's National Rail Users Conference at The Maltings, Ely, Cambridgeshire. Saturday 3 November 2007. 10.00 to 17.00