

# We will have to fight for our railway

Let's accept what the Conservatives accept themselves, that the fragmentation of the railway was disastrous both from a business and an operational safety point of view. Millions of pounds have been made by train companies (and bus companies) and millions made by contractors and sub- and sub-sub contractors, but the users of the railway have not benefited.

## Rayner's Review

We all know that some of the money scooped up by private companies could have been used for on-going modernisation and electrification of the railway.

Setting that thought aside however, we are still left with the realisation that this New Labour government has failed to realise the scale of the problem, let alone to do something about it.

Let me quote from the Rail Minister Tom Harris in a recent interview: He said that rail privatisation was done for the wrong reasons, but conceded that the railway industry has grown and services have improved!

He said: "Actually historically the British railways safety record has been extremely good and has continued to improve since privatisation!"

Shall we ignore the series of high-profile accidents then?

He also said: "When the Labour Government returned in 1997 we did not want to return the railways to the public sector for a number of reasons not least of which is cost!"

Surely the high costs of running the railway result directly from privatisation.

And he also said: "Actually 80% of people who use trains in Britain use fares that are regulated or discounted; very few people use full, or unregulated fares!"

When I think how much belief I had in 1997, I have to laugh at the way I for one have been conned.

There is no doubt in my mind the present Secretary of State for Transport Ruth Kelly has little regard for a rail solution or any understanding of the industry's problems.

The recent White Paper *Delivering a sustainable railway: 30 year strategy for railways* was short-term and not strategic.

I quote from the recommendations of my nine-page submission provided to the Transport Select Committee at their request in February:

"The lack of vision of the strategy document should be strongly criticised since it does not address the future but is guided throughout by



## Gwyneth Dunwoody

**Railfuture lost a good friend in April with the death of Labour MP Gwyneth Dunwoody who was MP for Crewe and Nantwich as well as being chairman – her choice of title – of the House of Commons transport committee.**

**Rebellious Mrs Dunwoody voted against her own government 118 times and had a wicked sense of humour.**

**She survived as chairman even after the then prime minister Tony Blair tried to sack her.**

**When Mr Blair's transport adviser Lord Birt repeatedly refused to appear before the committee, one of its members joked that he was not "man enough" to face Mrs Dunwoody.**


**Mrs Dunwoody, a former journalist, was also dismissive of some of her "inadequate" and "crawling" colleagues but she refused to name them. She said: "There are so many. It would take too long to**

**name them." However, Mrs Dunwoody, who died aged 77, treated both rail staff and rail campaigners with respect and was not afraid to ask for advice.**


**Railfuture's Norman Bradbury was one of those upon whom she called for information.**

**The transport committee has chosen Mrs Louise Ellman, the Labour MP for Liverpool, Riverside as her successor. Mrs Ellman has been a member of the transport committee since she was first elected to Parliament in 1997.**

**The other members of the committee are David Clelland (Lab, Tyne Bridge), Clive Efford (Lab, Eltham), Philip Hollobone (Con, Kettering), John Leech (Lib Dem, Manchester Withington), Eric Martlew (Lab, Carlisle), Lee Scott (Con, Ilford North), David Simpson (DUP, Upper Bann), Graham Stringer (Lab, Manchester Blackley) and David Wilshire (Con, Spelthorne).**



**RESPECT: Mrs Dunwoody**



**SUCCESSOR: Mrs Ellman**

the short-term hand of the Treasury.

"The many incorrect assumptions, biased views and contradictory statements in the document should be exposed. Above all considerations, an electrification programme should be approved."

So where does that leave us? Ms Kelly is on her way up or down the "Brown ladder" and is keen on sound bites.

She put out a statement on Birmingham New Street and illustrated it with a First Great Western high-speed train.

Proof indeed that the Government should not be attempting to run the railway they know so little about.

Finally Ms Rosie Winterton, the third transport minister – and I have listened to her several times – is to my mind, ineffective and imperfectly acquainted with her subject.

It worries me that the much-needed re-regulation of the bus industry is dependent on such hands, for unless some control is brought on buses, the railway and the environment are at greater risk.

Unless the pensioner bus pass, which I support, includes local rail it will become "Beeching by the back door" by taking passengers away from local branch lines.

The franchises on the East Coast main line are further examples of DfT incompetence.

Grand Central, the new open-access rail company is supposed to be opening up Sunderland and the Durham Coast! Looking at their problems, and looking at their cancellations, I wonder how they are

allowed to remain in operation. What about the ticket barrier fiascos at Sheffield, Birmingham and elsewhere? More DfT-led nonsense, with money counting more than common sense.

Even the rail industry resurgence in Scotland looks like faltering under the SNP.

Stagecoach's owner has made donations to SNP and now there are re-thinks on trams and re-openings.

It is all very gloomy and I believe we in Railfuture have to stop being regarded by some as gentle rail enthusiasts invited to stakeholder groups to listen to the message and imbibe the flannel along with the coffee and biscuits.

We have to ignore the propaganda about how well they are doing and be a truly campaigning force.

I know many of you are doing just that but we need to combine our strength nationally and alter an erroneous impression.

I propose to list all the possible schemes that are needed environmentally, with electrification and line reopening, and present them at Salisbury in July when I have the opportunity to speak under the title "Does it matter who is at the Department for Transport? The Treasury rules" at the Railfuture summer conference.

We need for example to object strongly to the deliberate acts of damage such as the Sainsburys being built at Matlock which will prevent for ever the reopening of a direct route from the West Midlands up through Burton and Derby to Millers Dale and Chinley.

Vandalism again, like the Cambridge busway, by a Government that has failed us railwaymen.

We need a half-hourly service from Worcester to Stockport, calling at Kidderminster, Wednesbury for the tram, Walsall, Burton, Derby, Matlock and Chinley.

Think how many thousands of people it would take off the roads and the equally large amounts of freight that would have an easier path than now.

That is only one example. In July I will cover every one I can get information on. Some will be out of reach of practical application, I know, but all shall be mentioned!

It is time to fight by any legal means available, for unless we do, it will be heritage rail for us and to get there we will have to travel on the bus!

Having mentioned the Select Committee I cannot conclude this Review without mention of my feisty friend the late Gwyneth Dunwoody MP.

Many in the rail industry will have breathed a sigh of relief that no longer will they have to face her informed and accurate probing of their efforts.

To say nothing of many of her fellow parliamentarians who also withered beneath her direct approach. However, Mrs Dunwoody, whose adviser I have been these past 10 years but who I counted as a friend as well, has gone and I shall miss her.

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