

# At last, a healthy approach to rail

Despite my criticisms of the railway, I have been actively looking for good news.

So to start with, I can applaud Lord Adonis and his tour of the country which has persuaded even the hyper-critical national newspapers to praise his grass roots approach!

I can just about accept him saying the Government wants to drag Britain's railways into the 21st century.

If politicians of both ruling parties over the past 17 years had allowed the railways to make steady progress – with electrification, automatic train protection, integrated timetabling and more besides – he would not have had to make such a “sound bite” remark.

However Lord Adonis's efforts are very good public relations for a number of reasons.

For the first time, a rail minister looked at issues with the passenger in mind.

Second he spoke to staff and reassured them and us that the Government wanted to ensure that the railway works properly for those at the “coal face” as well as the passenger.

No surprise there to me as railways have always been a calling rather than a job.

Lord Adonis identified the small things that the railway companies could put right for the passenger, without eating into the companies' vast profits.

This approach could achieve a great deal.

But – and it is a big but – life on the railway does not stop there.

There is the bigger picture which brings me back to electrification and the long-term strategic plan.

It is horrifying to see former rail trackbeds being dug up. We all know that for a small cost, surviving trackbeds could be rebuilt, providing through route connections for both freight and passenger use.

Instead the Government has allowed, and even encouraged, the use of former railways for a flawed concept – the guided bus.

We know that no guided busway can give the benefits of a railway and we must fight to ensure that no more railway rights of way are sacrificed in this way.

We have no objection to buses having reserved lanes on roads.

They can enhance the public transport system, but they should not be allowed to undermine the rail network

I am sure Lord Adonis and Paul Clark, presently Under Secretary of State, are both sincere, and certainly better than the 10 or so quick-change artists we have had since 1997. Before then, the

breakers were in – in an era when at least we knew we had a fight on our hands.

To be fair, there have been some recent achievements, painfully made at vast cost with vast profits being made by the contractors. I refer to the now excellent performance of the West Coast main line which I use regularly. It has become both quick and reliable. CrossCountry operation is better, with train regulators actually getting back to letting the faster train precede – where possible – the slower one. It may not be rocket science but it has taken some people on the railways 10 years to re-learn these basic facts of life. South West Trains out of Waterloo has a sensible interlocking timetable which works well on a daily basis, although we had to endure years of muddle and confusion before this was achieved.

First Great Western is improving its performance again, largely thanks to a return to simple operating skills. Despite the good news I still have reservations about all the rhetoric surrounding High Speed Line 2.

We are told trains will travel at 250mph and will allow the railway to jump a generation in technology terms.

All wonderful stuff, but we must remember that the Department for Transport is controlled by the Treasury, while the bus companies have undue influence.

Our planners give the impression of suffering from schizophrenia. They have wild mood swings from euphoria about the future, to cutting the budget of Network Rail.

As usual it's easy to clap hands about vast expenditure that does not affect the here-and-now.

Many of these people are not friends of rail. I believe the railway as we know and understand it as a network at risk. I remind myself however of the need to



## Rayner's Review

remain upbeat and of course there are aspects of rail development about which we can be proud.

They mostly result from sensible actions taken by the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales.

For me that is wonderful because it proves that with political will and a common sense environmental outlook lines can be revitalised, services extended and developed.

That's all good stuff but again I am forced to have my doubts and those doubts centre around the guided busways and the polluting incompetent farce that is the ongoing saga of the St Ives to Cambridge busway: “beautiful” new Stagecoach buses, masses of concrete, over budget, environ-

mentally damaging to local vegetation and wild life. Furthermore it's going nowhere as the community it was built for may not now be built! Yet deep in the heart of the busway mania remains and will almost undoubtedly surface again. Am I worrying too much? I do not think so because they do not listen to our electrification suggestions. But they do listen to such organisations as the Commission for Integrated Transport.

I understand that the person who was the driving force behind the Cambridge County Council's guided busway scheme has assumed a key appointment at the commission. So watch out for other guided busway schemes! The Commission for Integrated Transport is only one such organisation and the problem we have faced for many years is that academics and economists involved with transport lean towards bus operation.

Some have worked in the bus industry and have little understanding of rail operation. The problem is complex because the bus industry now has a

controlling influence over the railway. In addition, the railway itself has the wrong engineering structure. This structure needs to be changed.

Network Rail is a 2009 reincarnation of Railtrack which was set up when the railway was privatised by the then Tory Prime Minister John Major.

It has the added strength that it is protected by Government while it pretends to be a publicly owned company.

Yet it shuts the railway and runs buses at weekends and bank holidays.

A recent survey has shown that passengers would prefer a longer journey at weekends rather than being put on to buses.

Alternative routes can be left operating when the planners are programming engineering work. It is not difficult to provide reasonable diversionary rail routes.

I was recently travelling home from Glasgow, only to be told the train was being replaced by a bus to Carlisle.

In an attempt to avoid travelling by bus, I diverted to Edinburgh and would you believe it, the train from Edinburgh was being replaced by a bus to Newcastle.

I had gone to Glasgow for a pensioners' rally and to address another public function which brings me to the real problem we in Railfuture face.

We have to understand that while we worry about the railway and see its problems as massively important to the nation, the subject does not grab the politicians or the public at large.

When there is a financial crisis, people want know: Are my savings safe?

They also want to know whether care homes may close, will the Post Office close?

What will happen to the NHS? Is the education system healthy and are the police fair in their dealings and are we safe?

Those are the issues that take precedence at election times so we have to find ways of showing that the debate about public transport and climate change is as important as these other issues.

We will have to raise environmental questions about rail's advantages.

This will give us the authority to push for electrification, tramways and light rail schemes.

We have to do so loudly and strongly and not get sucked into establishment debates with the people who may appear to be sympathetic but whose real task is to keep the protesters quiet.

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



**Lord Adonis, right, was presented with copies of Railwatch and the Yorkshire Rail Campaigner when he arrived at York from Scotland following his week-long rail tour of Britain.**

**He was met by Railfuture's Chris Hyomes, left, and Graham Collett. He said work on the case for more electrification was progressing.**

**Andrew Adonis, a former history fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford, is now Transport Secretary.**

**He is the author or co-author of six books, including studies of the English class system.**