

# £78m to wreck another railway

On 6 October 2009, it was 10 years since signal 109 at Paddington was passed at danger with fatal consequences.

It does not seem that long ago when we were putting in place temporary resignalling, appearing on television and radio and attending the official inquiries.

What have we learned? Who was really to blame – if society these days finds it so important to find someone or some thing to blame?

Overall the railway appears to have learned little. There is still a muddled interface of people who seem to rely on their "safety case" and their "legal position", rather than being confident of their own deep-seated knowledge of how the railway operates and how it should be operated.

How can London Midland have no Sunday roster for drivers when they are bound by their franchise commitments to operate seven-days a week safely and efficiently?

It's much too easy for them to call in the buses to run a replacement service. They don't seem to realise how deeply unpopular it is to present passengers with a bus when they have paid for a railway ticket.

They don't seem to realise they have dangerously undermined their professional standing in the public's eyes.

This is one of the consequences of having a contractor, sub-contractor, sub-sub-contractor railway, which is still sufficiently lax to allow different interpretations of the rules and standards.

I have recently examined some engineering worksite arrangements in great detail and found evidence of a lack of understanding of basic rules, little proper supervision, minimal training and next to no audit.

All these failings were present on the day a Paddington-bound Inter-City 125 ran into a Thames Trains service leaving Paddington with such dreadful results. Thirty one people were killed at Ladbroke Grove and over 500 injured.

The signal which should have stopped the suburban train had been passed at danger eight times before the fatal crash.

Most of those SPADs (signal passed at danger) were by experienced drivers with years of service.

Nevertheless the railway "establishment" – with the co-operation of some parts of the media – has managed to leave in the ordinary person's remembrance a notion that the driver was inexperienced and badly trained.

It was not the driver's fault and, in my opinion, Thames Trains were wrong to hold their hands up and admit guilt.

Thames Trains has disappeared in much the same way as Townsend Thoresen did after the Herald of

Free Enterprise sank in Zeebrugge in 1987, leaving 193 people dead. In 2004, the now-defunct Strategic Rail Authority transferred the Thames Trains franchise to First Group, which also held and still holds the Great Western franchise. Thames Trains is no more but its heir, and successor, Govia, has been awarded the lucrative SouthEastern franchise which includes the high speed commuter services. So 10 years on am I happy with the way the railway is run?

The answer is no. Maybe the signal-sighting arrangements are good now, but it should not be necessary for trains to pass a signal at danger nine times and kill 31 people before you achieve it.

We have to do rather more than ensure that driver training is effective. Common sense should tell us all that if the same signal is passed at danger several times by different drivers it might be the signal, not the driver that is wrong.

Although I intended to start this article by saying there is no point in repeating myself with the same messages, I find the same subjects coming up over and over again.

Let us not forget those who have failed the railway since Labour came to power in 1997. John Prescott, Lord Macdonald, Alistair Darling, Douglas Alexander, Ruth Kelly, Geoff Hoon, old Uncle Tom Harris and all.

I have only mentioned those that stayed in their jobs at the Department for Transport for more than six months.

The constant change of occupant at the DfT tells you how important it has been in Government's mind. They even allowed Messrs Darling



## Rayner's Review

and Alexander to cover Scotland at the same time as looking after the DfT. We can only applaud the efforts of the current Transport Secretary Lord Adonis and Transport Minister Sadiq Khan who are trying to bring New Labour's rail credentials up to scratch. But . . . let us examine Lord Adonis's announcement of a £1.2 billion boost for English rail and metro services in his July regional

funding allocations. It is difficult to detect a strategy, but if there is one, it still seems to favour bus at the expense of train.

About £26 million is granted for Watford Junction interchange, but a much greater sum – £78.4 million – was doled out to allow Luton Borough Council to go ahead with its plan to destroy the Luton to Dunstable railway line for the sake of creating another guided busway, a concept more senseless in strategic terms even than the farce of ripping up the Cambridge-St Ives to make way for that concrete monstrosity of a busway.

The funding allocation sees money spent on improving interchanges. There is no hint of any planned reopening of stations or lines, no vision on using Woodhead tunnel for a proper rail role.

West Midlands trams get some money but, taken as a whole, the allocation smacks of just tinkering at the edges. Even worse to contemplate, I believe the only item on that list that will survive a change of government is the Luton to Dunstable busway.

The electrification to Cardiff may survive a few months depending on the size of the new government's majority before it too will get the chop. The Treasury always

backs big spending in the future. It looks good and can be quietly scrapped just before a bank holiday or during the parliamentary recess.

It is not only big electrification schemes that are wanted, such as Midland main line, Great Western main line, but we also need infill electrification – to get as many diesels replaced as possible.

You may remember the trumpet blowing about "level 3 signalling" by the then Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, five years ago.

"Only the best" was right for Britain and millions were to be invested. All we have so far is a trial site on the Cambrian coast. Meanwhile throughout mainland Europe, state-of-the-art signalling is being implemented!

Despite the fact that the St Ives to Cambridge busway is a strategic farce, the Government has spent £118 million pouring concrete into the fen, to build a busway to a community that may not now be built because of the recession.

We can only hope it is possible to use it to relay an electrified connecting railway to link the East Coast main line and thus provide environmentally sensible travel when the oil runs out in a few years.

The battle for St Ives may be lost, at least in the short term, but let us fight the Luton-Dunstable scheme.

Let us ask under the freedom of information procedures, by whom and for what purpose are busways being promoted from inside the Department for Transport.

It is good to see Lord Adonis and other pro-railway people bounding about enthusiastically at the thought of electrification and high-speed rail.

But let us be aware of the detail of what is actually happening on the ground where dyed-in-the-wool road lobby people are still being promoted to key positions, sometimes being made responsible for delivering local transport plans.

However, in some areas, awkward questions are being asked at last. And when they are, there will be a chorus from around Britain of "Another fine mess!"

How can high-speed rail now effectively serve Birmingham city centre, the West Midlands and Britain as a whole?

The last people to decide on a rail strategy for the heart of England are local politicians. We need a strategic view not a parochial one.

One question which has to be answered is what kind of railway do we need in the future when fuel is rationed and railway electrification is a necessity?

By that time people with blinkers on may well have frittered away their opportunities.

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

## Strategic thinking blocked by concrete



**BRAINBLOCK:** The Cambridge to St Ives railway has been ripped up to lay a concrete busway. This was once a double-track main line railway and a goods loop at Histon. It should be a strategic rail link between Cambridge and the East Coast main line. How realistic is it to think it could be converted back into a railway? Picture: STEVE WILKINSON