

Will the Coalition listen to reason?

It is now six months since the change of government. Well what have they done so far? To my mind, the coalition is in danger of doing too much too soon, just as Labour did too little too late.

We now have instant management, seemingly knowing the answers without understanding the questions.

They use lovely sound bites like “devolved authority”, “local empowerment”, “doing away with 40 quangos”, “real value for money” – all regularly repeated in pro-government tabloid headlines.

But these little sound bites could prove a big threat to the rail industry and Sir Roy McNulty’s value-for-money study of the rail industry could make him a hero in our eyes – or Dr Beeching in disguise.

If we are to keep on fighting our corner of the transport debate and putting constructive suggestions to opinion formers, politicians and government ministers, we have to remember two things.

First, the oil lobby is still there despite the BP fiasco in America, and second, many of the largest and most influential train companies are in reality bus companies and are run by managers who draw their experience almost exclusively from the bus industry.

We should also not forget our recent history.

Remember the damage done to the industry by Gordon Brown and the Treasury, the long years of Alistair Darling as the safe pair of do-nothing hands at the Department for Transport, followed by Douglas Alexander and Tom Harris as the Rail Minister.

Ironically they all represented parliamentary seats in Scotland where a more enlightened attitude to the railway exists.

Their tenure of 14 years allowed the flawed, fragmented railway to stagger on, sometimes leaderless, with many organisations feeding off it until disastrous crashes finally forced them to partially remedy the situation.

I say partially because Network Rail, to my personal knowledge, has pleaded guilty and had to pay compensation and heavy fines for unsafe practices.

However it still paid out substantial bonuses to senior staff!

The creation of Network Rail (in a ludicrous and costly structure



only now being exposed) and the demolition of the Strategic Rail Authority effectively handed power back to the Department for Transport.

The DfT has concentrated on managing the detail of rolling stock provision and timetable specification to fit the financial rules when what is needed is a strategic view.

I truly hope Sir Roy McNulty’s VFM study leads to a strategic view being taken of the network.

But I shudder to think how any strategy will work when there is talk of local empowerment at key locations.

By way of example, take the West Midlands. If Centro and the integrated transport authority enjoy parochial empowerment, any chance of putting back the key strategic route from south and west of Stourbridge through to Derby and beyond will be lost.

I have already given my views to the VFM study but I ask myself who can we turn to now, to guard the network concept and much-needed plans for infill electrification?

There are local MPs who may be sympathetic and there is the Commons transport select committee and other rail groups.

But it boils down to the essential fact that the industry has too many levels getting in the way of any worthwhile scheme, and, despite boasts to the contrary, has myriads of contractors, sub-contractors and sub-sub-

contractors. You only have to read as you travel by train what’s written on the back of many high-visibility vests: Moomin Rail, Mickey Mouse Rail, and Donald Duck Rail. They are all getting a slice of the action.

Second, we need a strategic, not parochial, look at the network.

Third, infill electrification is the key to new rolling stock provision as well as to environmental issues.

Only a strategic examination will prevent schemes like the Luton-Dunstable guided busway or a rethink of the Cambridge to St Ives guided farce-way.

I am still convinced, as I said in previous *Railwatch* articles, that when the dust settles, Lord Adonis’ excellent plans will for the most part be axed, while the ludicrous Luton-Dunstable scheme will go ahead.

The DfT claims its hands are tied because Luton Council nipped in the day before the spending review and hijacked a small piece of the railway network. Who do they think they are kidding?

I am reminded of many examples over the past 40 years where the power of the establishment makes something happen despite strong and rational arguments to the contrary. The closure all those years ago of the Manchester, Sheffield and Wath line over the Pennines – now urgently in need of reopening – was based not

on productivity but by those in the corridors of power simply buying the coal for Fiddlers Ferry power station from some alternative pits so the traffic faded away!

But the fact that we are likely to lose the Luton battle is not a reason to stop fighting!

Who else can we approach when the VFM study has been delivered to the politicians?

Certainly the select committee may be receptive to views on some issues and we need to be watchful of their calls for papers on different subjects.

The composition of the select committee is interesting, with key figures from all the parties who might listen to reason.

Tom Harris, the former rail minister, now in opposition, is one member.

He was not my favourite because he often pronounced on a subject he understood only from a “public affairs” angle.

Perhaps I was hard on him for his remark that BR was a joke when he was growing up.

Well, I regarded him as a joke when he was a minister and I can only hope he has changed.

He and Stephen Hammond are joint chairs of the Parliamentary Rail Group which is a forum that we should use. It has around 50 MPs and Lords thereon.

Those of us with connections to members of the committee should use them to argue the strategic case for rail and for the importance of electrification.

The spending axe is however already poised and rigorous local and national campaigning will be necessary.

The road lobby is always active and is urging that money is spent on roads not rail.

Railfuture members know that it is in everyone’s interests to invest in the rail system if only to conserve future oil supplies.

Finally Potters Bar. It has taken us a long time to get recognition for what some of us said on radio and television the same night as the crash, eight years ago.

It is now clear for all, including Sir Roy McNulty, to see that the industry has layers and layers of management all protecting the most sensitive area of their anatomy.

Unless some of these layers are stripped off, we are going nowhere.



BLOCKING THE LINE: A bus was driven on to the Luton-Dunstable railway to ‘launch’ the busway project in June. Conservative MP Andrew Selous joined rail campaigners in calling for the project to be scrapped while Labour MP Kelvin Hopkins attended the ceremony
Picture: BBC

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

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