

Oh what a shambles!

Every day, it seems, newspapers are producing headlines such as "Railtrack to cull 1000 managers", "10 firms ordered to crack down on missed signals", "£60bn rail plan in tatters", "Byers to demand Railtrack break-up", "Prosecutions will follow Hatfield".

Amidst all this gloom is there anything positive going on? I am, I confess, a Tom Winsor fan, for the Rail Regulator alone seems to require the industry to be accountable for its money. He alone wants to ensure land presently not used is not sold off but retained against future plans.

I also approve of the decision by the Secretary of State to restrict the train operating companies to two-year extensions to their franchises.

I strongly disapprove of these private companies having large chunks of our national railway for years to come.

If the state has to invest then we the taxpaying investors are entitled to a financial stake which can be held in trust for the nation.

How long might it be before Railtrack is eaten up by a multinational company? If the ownership of our railway infrastructure is passed on in this way, the Government will need to take action to control the situation.

If the French and Germans, the envy of Europe in railway terms, can invest privately in a state-controlled infrastructure then so can we.

Beware the permanent civil servants that tell you different. Sir Humphrey lives on, don't ever forget it.

I am giving Stephen Byers a chance to succeed where the bombast of Mr Prescott and the lugubrious silences of Lord Macdonald clearly failed and the mandarins clung on to influence at both the Treasury and the transport department.

Perhaps we will see real progress after four wasted years.

So, Secretary of State Byers, get it right, take your time and listen to Lord Cullen on safety.

If you get the safety right the rest will follow as the safety muddle is the same malaise as the performance muddle.

I believe the new Railtrack chairman is doing his best to make an impression and I wish him well.

☐ Frankly, and this is no idle boast, I could improve the performance on the West Coast main line for example by about five to 10% in a fortnight.

I would be prepared to do it at no charge so annoyed am I by the present dismal performance. The cause is obvious and nothing to do with modernisation or rail condition.

I have said before in *Railwatch*, Railtrack already has the power to act. That's why it is so sad to see its failure to tackle the problems head-on.

Having begun by quoting transport journalists let me continue by saying it is their uninformed sensation-seeking actions on railways – with too much reliance on sound bites and clichés – which does the

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industry no favours. They need to look to their consciences and ask themselves whether they could explain the situation better to their readers. Journalists are not the only people who rely on a simplistic approach.

Recently a man painting my house, who knew my professional links with the railway, said "Why do these drivers keep passing signals at danger all the time?"

Only the fact that I could no more paint my house than fly, prevented me from throwing him out.

Many of the transport journalists who (until they read this article) were my friends, read *Railwatch* so the following comments are to correct some of the misconceptions I know to exist regarding signals passed at danger (SPADs).

First, consider the vast number of signals out there – 500 at least between London and Crewe, more than 32,000 on the network.

Then consider the vast number of trains and the number of SPADs there are in a month – about 30.

So SPADs account for .005% of all signals passed. Most drivers pass a signal only once in their career. That is not to say it is not a serious problem and I acknowledge that some drivers do have the misfortune to repeat the error. The problem needs looking at properly, which the industry is trying to do following the Paddington crash.

There is no advantage to train drivers if they pass a signal in error. "Jumping a red light," a phrase loved by journalists, is misleading in rail terms.

A car or lorry driver may indeed take a chance on the roads and jump a red light. Sometimes they get away with it, continue their journey and the incident is forgotten.

That is an impossible scenario for the railway because the incident is observed and recorded even if no accident takes place.

On the railway, drivers are most at risk, at the front of the train and with only a thin strip of metal in front to protect them. Death is the normal result of a serious SPAD. The comparative rarity of the

drivers surviving at Watford and at Southall has given us the first real opportunity to investigate underlying causation going beyond the obvious first cause, simply blaming the driver. It is all too easy to make assumptions if the driver is a victim. Dead men cannot argue back.

It is often the signal itself which is the root of the problem. At Watford, Paddington, Southall, and more recently at Hither Green, the signals were less than perfect.

The alignment issues at Watford and Southall in particular are key issues. Paddington was a much larger problem which space prevents my explaining.

Statistically, if a driver passes a red by half a buffer beam on a wet night, slipping on a rail with a thousand ton of aggregates behind, it counts.

That is a minor and controlled professional error and not to be compared with a case of serious misreading at speed.

There is a world of difference between slipping a few feet while trying to stop at a signal you can see compared with passing a signal either because the driver did not see it, or indeed has misread one nearby in a difficult, multi-signalled area like Paddington.

It is possible for a train to pass a signal by half a coach length if the driver slightly misjudges his approach.

It is possible also that somewhere else on the same day, a driver might misread a shunt signal and go into the wrong siding. Perhaps again, with the thousands of daily opportunities, a driver on an empty train, on a wet rail, may skid past and stop 100 yards beyond the signal.

These three incidents would count as category "A" SPADs.

On the same day there might have been six other category "B" SPADs which is where the signal reverts from a "proceed" aspect to red because of a technical fault.

From personal experience, I can tell you that this quickens the heart rate. These are sometimes called technical faults rather than human error. I quarrel with that definition because everything is a human error and to describe it otherwise is to overprotect the engineering environment.

It is true that technical SPADs are usually failures of the equipment, and the line itself is clear of obstruction. That does not make it any less stressful when you are in the front cab!

Much more could be said about SPADs and the industry is monitoring the phenomenon even if we are as a nation years behind the rest of the world on protection systems.

If journalists read this piece, they should remember that driving a train is like flying a plane. You rely on instruments and on signals that take you beyond your line of vision.

In a road vehicle you drive on sight alone and stop short of the obstruction ahead by eyesight, so you regulate your speed accordingly. Not so in the air or on the rail.

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