

Lack of judgment at the top

There has been another road crash at a level crossing near Reading that will put people off travelling by train.

The Berkshire crash, which claimed seven lives when a London to Plymouth, crashed into a car parked on the crossing came just days after a BBC TV programme about Whistle Blowers.

In my considered opinion, this programme – which concentrated on track workers – exaggerated the dangers of travelling by train.

It began by showing pictures of the Southall and Paddington accidents, neither of which had anything whatever to do with condition of railway tracks.

The piece of track shown on Whistle Blowers was not on the high speed line to Portsmouth as stated and was not in my view as unsafe as implied.

However this article is not to debate the BBC's efforts, particularly since I refused an opportunity to appear on the programme.

Returning to the Berkshire accident, I consider the type of automatic half barriers at Ufton Nervet are a very safe method of controlling traffic over little-used roads providing they are obeyed by road users.

Barriers of this type have been in operation for over 20 years. No doubt the inquiry into the crash will focus on cause and may judge it is time to consider the criteria for the barriers. The speed of trains,

the density of road and rail traffic, and the increasingly irresponsible behaviour of some car drivers may now be more relevant.

It is by such careful consideration that the railway is kept safe. Road versus rail continues to be a political issue and I am concerned that the bus alternative to rail is being promoted.

The Department of Transport people who are taking over more control from the Strategic Rail Authority seem to have no answer to traffic problems other than an implied statement that buses are more appropriate than rail.

We face a vision of guided buses roaring through the foggy Fens between Cambridge and St Ives and I believe they will be less safe and less effective than the rail connection to Cambridge would be.

The department plays the cost card all the time. Again I believe the subservience to the Treasury is the problem. Many light rail schemes are being questioned by the department because frugal Mr Darling says they are too expensive. Most of the high costs originate because Mr Darling's political brothers and sisters all insist on the public finance initiative which hamstring any council with vision and environmental sense.

There is no doubt that travelling by rail is much safer than travelling on the road and the Department for

Transport should consider whether it should be promoting this fact instead of trying to find ways to undermine it. I cannot agree however with one commentator who claimed that the railway is safer under privatisation.

It has been proved the fragmentation of railways made safety much more difficult to manage – but it did make a lot of money for private bus companies who picked up those pieces.

Mr Darling's emphasis on buses was demonstrated when the Bus and Coach Show 2004 and Railtex04 exhibitions were held on the same days during November in adjacent halls at the National Exhibition Centre.

The Secretary of State was invited to open both exhibitions – but chose to do so from within the Bus and Coach show.

Here we had two exhibition organisers managing to co-ordinate major events for the rail and bus industries, but the Cabinet minister responsible for transport chose not to give emphasis to public transport integration but focused on the bus mode. For years, investment in railways was hampered by the Treasury. It was all supposed to change with privatisation, with entrepreneurs bringing market forces and private-sector skills to the industry. Many of the newcomers to railway operations were from the bus industry, of course, but after 10 years of privatisation, what have we got?

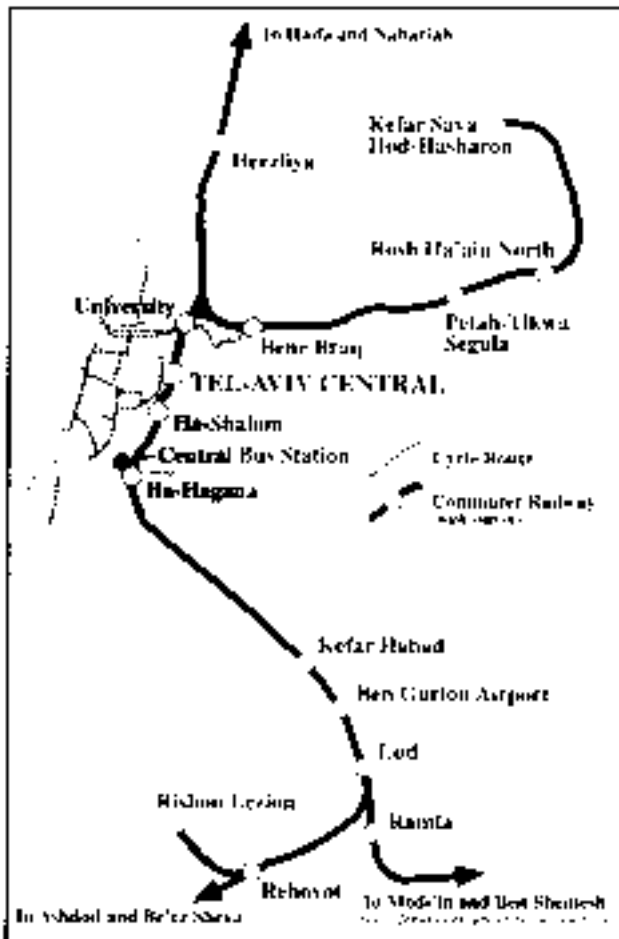


Rayner's Review

Many of the predictions contained in original franchise bids have proven to be wildly inaccurate and costs are now sky-high, way beyond those of British Rail.

So the Treasury is reining back again, preventing expansion of the rail network to cope with rising demand, and instead trying to limit financial commitments by focusing on cheaper bus alternatives, while use of private cars continues to rise and rise, and major motorway expansions (such as on the M6 and M25) are planned. Haven't we been here before?

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



GROWING: The rail network around Tel-Aviv is improving

Israelis get on track

The Israeli train system has been developing but Tel-Aviv is one of the few cities of its magnitude in the world that exists without an underground system, writes Avner Ben in a report to the magazine A to B.

Although bikes are officially banned on board, I am able to travel around with my folder bike (bought by mail order from Avon Valley in Britain).

From the days of the Turks and then the British, a railway line followed the coastal plain from Lebanon through Haifa, Tel-Aviv and Gaza, with side routes from Haifa through the plain of Esdraelon to Syria and from Tel-Aviv through Lod and Ramla (a Turkish-built administrative centre) to Jerusalem.

After the British left, the system fell into decay. The "valley train" to Lebanon was abandoned, and although the train to Jerusalem survived, it climbed the 700-metre ascent so slowly that it was practically useless.

The renaissance started five years ago. New stations began to appear in the greater Tel-Aviv and Haifa areas. First came Ha-Shalom, then Ha'Hagana and University (near the exhibition centre).

Ha'Hagana is incidentally near the new central bus station which holds the dubi-



ous record of being the biggest bus station in the world, but also one that neither the citizens nor the bus operator needed. New suburban rail lines followed, many of the stations being built in the middle of nowhere, but near shopping malls, a policy that, surprisingly, has proved quite successful.

The eastern suburban line, leading from the university to Bene Braq (actually, the Ayalon Mall), the Segula mall, Rosh Haayin (near an industrial park) and Kfar Sava has been running successfully for two to three years.

The newer Rishon Lezion line has been less successful, due to its bad location. More ambitious plans include a completely new line to Jerusalem, and there are proposals to extend this railway as far south as Eilat on the Red Sea.

The railway can be very useful. A nice train station has been built in an industrial park I used to visit on business errands quite often, some 90 kilometres from home, and which – though located on a main road – was virtually unreachable by the bus system.

The rail network is developing and two underground lines are planned, on paper at least.