

Buses are no substitute for a real public transport policy

I have been travelling recently in the North West of England, visiting Chester, Manchester and Blackpool. My services on North Wales Coast were clean, tickets were examined, and the trains were full. All in all a good scene. There are stories of bustitution but by and large I was impressed. To Blackpool, trains were well loaded, on time and at Preston, a cross platform, or rather same platform interchange, worked well.

Returning on Saturday all the services from Preston were by bus. The engineering work going on at Euxton Junction, south of Preston, to remove the potentially dangerous single-lead junction which caused my bus ride is not something I can complain about since I have long advocated the change and indeed signed plans for it 15 years ago when I was at Crewe.

On a more worrying note, having praised First Great Western and Great Western Link in my last article, I was saddened to hear from one of the Link drivers that the training simulator at Reading is not being used and there is little recruitment of drivers on the local services. I hope the lessons of the past have not been forgotten. I supported the larger franchise because a bigger family is usually easier to manage but local services must be looked after as much as the expresses.

It is good to record that on one day in April all the train operating companies exceeded 90% punctuality. It is sad of

course that such a commonplace achievement should be worthy of mention. It is only newsworthy because Network Rail has begun to pull back from the disastrous era of Railtrack which, to quote NR chief executive John Armit: "Allowed basic knowledge about assets to leave their business."

So given the fact Railtrack was a disaster in terms of operating a railway, and fell to pieces after the Hatfield accident, and if one accepts – as anyone must who understands anything about railways – that Network Rail with some exceptions are pulling it round, why, with a full term to run, does this government not take the whole lot back into public ownership?

I have always maintained that ownership be it private or public made no difference and that what mattered was a vertical chain of command downwards from the Fat Controller (or Thin Controller in the case of Mr Armit).

A good financial case for renationalisation has been made, involving a windfall tax on the rolling stock operating companies, but a good case nevertheless which would enable the 56 community lines primarily under threat to be saved and developed.

As you all know during the last days of the old Parliament the two main political parties colluded by rushing through the Railways Act. This opened the way for cuts, bus substitution, all at the whim of the Department for Transport – which means

Treasury – while at the same time removing the robust and proper procedure to oppose them.

What Railfuture may well need is a "Don't Close it Conference" rather than a Rail Reopenings conference.

Getting the odd station reopened is all good stuff but to me it's a bit like having cosmetic surgery when someone is stabbing you in the back!

If we let Secretary of State Alastair Darling get away with his, "we are not carrying fresh air" gambit, we have no chance.

There is far more air being carted around in cars than in trains which have the advantage of being available to all and less polluting.

Mr Darling should be reminded of a few basic facts.

If a shop was closed for repairs, no one would expect it to be full of customers on the day it reopened.

And few would be stupid enough to say: "No customers! OK shut it".

That is what has happened at Norton Bridge, Wedgwood and even Stone, a substantial community.

This brings me finally to my one ongoing criticism of Network Rail. There are many engineers but very little ability to navigate the railway. NR is too keen to shut lines for engineering work and makes little attempt to keep rail services running.

Nothing discourages passengers more than having to break their



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journey, possibly with luggage, on to buses, and back on to trains. Motorway problems abound, as I know from the daily traffic news on the radio, but always there is a "contra-flow" system in operation.

Not so for good old engineering-obsessed Network Rail.

Come on Network Rail. Learn to operate properly.

You get full marks for better engineering but no marks for operating.

Along with millions of other people in Britain I want the new government, with five years to run, to get on with making the railways run properly.

Forget bustitution and create a good train service that gets people OFF the roads.

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

Slimmed-down Railfuture faces challenge

The Railfuture national office was closed on 10 June 2005. In future, membership, media, general inquiries and policy matters will be dealt with by individuals. For details, see the panel on page 2.

The Railfuture registered office is now 18a Grantham Road, Bracebridge Heath, Lincoln LN4 2LD. It is not to be used for general inquiries.

Shortage of money forced the Railfuture board to close the office in a bid to balance the books this year.

For several years Railfuture had managed to keep the office open by agreeing a deficit budget while, at the same time, fighting hard to raise its profile, to raise money from sponsorship and to boost membership. But sadly there was never enough money to go round.

In future Railfuture will be even more dependent on volunteers. Railfuture has won many of the

arguments on rail development but threats to lines and services remain and the Government and the rail agencies must be persuaded to speed up the improvements necessary to make the railways the reliable backbone of the public transport system.

The Railfuture AGM decided that an updated register of members' skills was needed. But there are already many jobs that need doing. If you can help, please contact a board member. Railfuture is already relying more on its website to get over its message but the website needs more volunteers.

You could be particularly useful if you have a broadband connection at home or work, and you could take over responsibility for keeping one or several pages up to date. Advice and help on how to do it is available although, once learned, it is pretty straightforward. But

the job can also be done by people with dial-up connections to the internet. We need one person from each branch to maintain the branch page on the website.

We also need one person for each of the Railfuture committees. You don't have to be a member of the committee to maintain a committee page. You will be able to get the information from committee chairmen or secretaries and then upload the material to the website for use by members and outside bodies.

We know that many journalists already appreciate the Railfuture website for its reliable information. If you would like to help, please contact Ray King (contact details on page 2).

Thanks to David Harby, Paul Krebs, Robert Stevens, Keith Dyall and Laurence Fryer for their help in organising and effecting

the office closure. In addition to the office closure, administrative officer John Lee is planning to cut back his work for Railfuture.

If you think you could help in this field, please contact chairman Mike Crowhurst (contact details on page 2).

Next year's AGM is planned for 6 May. By the time you read this the Reopenings Conference will have been held at Barry on 2 July 2005.

After that Railfuture members will have the Rail Users Conference in Manchester on 5 November 2005 to look forward to.

Board meetings are scheduled for 16 July 2005 in London and 10 September 2005 in Leicester.

From the board meeting on 21 May 2005, 17 new action points for individual board members were agreed, plus three more points carried forward from the previous meeting.