

Don't be misled by confusing signals

There are so many issues bubbling away in the world of railways at the moment that it is easy for even an expert observer to be misled by the confusing signals.

It is a time of uncertainty for those of us who want the railway to have a bigger part to play over the next 10 to 20 years.

On the plus side is the apparent similarity between the two main political parties in their acceptance of the value of high-speed rail.

We are also beginning to see others, both inside and outside the industry, giving backing to Railfuture's campaign for an electrification infill programme, which has also attracted a measure of cross-party sympathy.

But there are down sides, even when we see long-awaited railway projects going ahead. The proposed closure of the South London line has been explained away by some on the grounds that more south Londoners would ultimately benefit by further extending the East London line.

What is the financial case for closing one line to extend another, unless the plan is to transfer stock and personnel from the closed line to the new, which is not happening in this case?

Even if more south Londoners would benefit, that argument will not satisfy the many people who use the Victoria to London Bridge line and who will not benefit from the East London line. We can't expect them to happily transfer to buses, which are definitely not an environmental option.

Another significant area of worry is the extortionate off-peak fare rises which threaten to stifle the growing popularity of rail travel. The ongoing farce surrounding the £10million per mile Cambridge-St Ives busway also highlights how public money earmarked for public transport is still being wasted, rather than being invested in railways which have proved their popularity and effectiveness.

However, the cancellation of Sunday trains because some operators have failed to negotiate proper working arrangements with their train drivers undermines the railway's credibility as a business and a public service.

If airlines relied on Sunday volunteers, pilots enjoying a stopover on a Bermuda beach might be reluctant to report for duty.

I wonder too if the latest train operator to be affected, First Capital Connect, is in breach of its safety case. Tiredness levels and other pressures can build up if there are insufficient staff to work a seven-day timetable without overtime. In addition to all this nonsense at the operating level, there is a big strategic problem

in that politicians and planners do not seem to be abreast of the latest assessments of how long oil will be available worldwide at a reasonable price. It is reported that the International Energy Agency has been underplaying a looming shortage in world oil resources for fear of triggering off panic buying! The chair of the all-party parliamentary group said the revelation did not surprise him and it had confirmed his own suspicions. In spite of this increasingly obvious problem, and the carbon footprint advantages of rail electrification, the Government continues to favour the bus lobby. Politicians are still sending out mixed messages, but there does seem to



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be a growing willingness at last to consider rail as a solution rather than a problem. I fear though that civil servants at the Department for Transport listen less to their political masters and more and more to their opposite numbers at the Treasury. Although some believe the railway should take its share of the public spending cuts

during the recession, I agree with the many economists and financial experts who recommend increased investment in national infrastructure projects. The environmental benefits of rail electrification, alongside the need to restart the economy, should be too good an opportunity to miss, but miss it we will, because the DfT has no desire to rock the boat. But DfT officials seem to admit no

shame in the fact that diesel trains run for 394 miles under electric wires on the East Coast main line.

This was highlighted when Transport Secretary Lord Adonis travelled to Edinburgh in November to mark the inauguration of the newly state-run East Coast Main Line.

Although politicians now speak nicely to us in Railfuture, I suspect that some are merely trying to keep the lid on a volatile issue.

We must argue our case strongly, continue to lobby and campaign for our railway and give them no chance to write us off. I hope my cynicism is not misplaced but it arises from work I do in Europe and other parts of the world.

I recently attended the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe working party in Geneva to present a paper on access and mobility issues on public transport, and also to be part of the debate on the conflicting objectives of accessibility for the less mobile and the undeniable need in these difficult times for heightened security.

Each time I go to continental Europe, I am struck by how behind many other railway operators we are.

Although I prefer a human driver at the controls of my trains, I was impressed this year when I rode on driverless trains – albeit on a simple infrastructure in Nuremberg – which also operate in other European cities.

On my return from Nuremberg I received a call from the BBC to chat about the failure to roster drivers for Sunday working on First Capital Connect.

So I returned from considering driverless trains to trains that should have had drivers but had none rostered.

Talking of driving issues, I then recalled the problems facing one driver on a complicated infrastructure on one fateful day – departing Paddington.

At the time of the Ladbroke Grove crash, I was working in London as an expert witness in the Southall train crash inquiry.

Over the next two or three days my colleague Roy Bell, a highly respected signal engineer, and I worked out an alternative method for signalling the approaches to Paddington which, after discussions with the Railway Inspectorate and Railtrack, were put in place.

Later, in response to inquiries from me, he sent the message, printed left.

This a reminder that we should continue to seek out the truth – and keep fighting for what we believe to be right.

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

Message from signal engineer Roy Bell to Peter Rayner, both expert witnesses at the inquiry into the 1999 Ladbroke Grove train crash

Ladbroke Grove Sighting of SN 109. Analysis of Train and Signalling Equipment Black Boxes.

I was able to view the approach to signal 109 from the driver's seat of a Thames Turbo on 13 October 1999 in bright sunlight conditions.

Much later I was able to examine the details of the train recorder to examine in detail driver Michael Hodder's driving technique on approach to 109.

The cab ride exposed the fact that on approach to the gantry containing 109, the signals came into view late because of the presence of a flat-girder bridge.

All the red aspects came into view together, except for 109 which was totally obscured by a large insulator on the approach route (line 4 to line 3) which Mr Hodder was taking.

From the train recorder, it is clear that he was ready to stop at 109 but on seeing all the other reds, he applied power.

A further fact was the red of 109 was off-set to the left and the signal head he could see was reflecting bright sunlight from behind his line of sight.

This head was clearly visible although the red was hidden and the yellow aspects reflected brightest as I saw on 13 October.

It remains my opinion that Mr Hodder wrongly thought he had a double yellow at 109 which caused him to apply power.

The fact that he received an AWS warning was completely expected under such circumstances.

It is totally wrong to put this crash down to his inexperience or lack of training. Eight other drivers made a mistake at this signal before him.

