

Politicians fail to understand rail

I have always tried to recognise that things change constantly whether we like it or not.

Values change, terminology changes, even some safety standards are altered to make the railways better.

For over 100 years, station masters and inspectors have paid regular, recorded visits to level crossings as part of their general duties and so ensured the railway is being operated correctly and safely.

Today's mobile-phone-juggling, BlackBerry-fondling generation want to call this process "risk assessment". So be it as long as the job is done properly.

It is too soon to know what Sir Roy McNulty's value for money study has produced but it seems that some of these bright young people are not going to wait to find out anyway.

Let's examine a few autumn chestnuts pulled out from the fire by the present politicians.

The Chancellor says that raising regulated fares by inflation plus 3% annually will pay for new rolling stock.

Commuters in the south-east will pay most of that rise because the network there is the most heavily used. It is however the area where most of the rolling stock is relatively new.

Rolling stock policy is a shambles because the Department for Transport has played micro-management.

No one has had the sense yet to realise that if you do the "infill" electrification now and link Manchester with Liverpool, Manchester with Blackpool and join up Leeds to Manchester and encompass the relatively simple infill that is needed in the Leeds area, diesel rolling stock will be freed up.

Some of the worst polluting diesels, which are not crashworthy but remain in use, could be retired.

Sensible "cascading" of the other diesel units is however difficult without financial penalties because of the fragmented franchise arrangements.

The Government is also having "another look" at franchising. It looks like a way of kicking an awkward problem into the long grass while at the same time finding a way to let National Express off the hook by giving them an extension.

The whole question of how franchising has been implemented on Britain's railway is flawed and has been since the initial privatisation.

◆◆◆◆ 120,000 children around the world are killed on the roads every year

RAYNER'S REVIEW

By Peter Rayner



Quite simply I find myself more and more of the view that the system is fundamentally incompatible with the running of a safe, integrated railway in the interests of the travelling public. I now find myself in complete agreement with Bob Crow and the RMT union that passenger franchises should be returned to the public sector as they expire.

Financial experts say that the railway costs the taxpayer three times as much now as it did under British Rail. The House of Commons select committee on transport has been told the uncomfortable facts many times but little seems likely to change while the bus companies, the oil lobby and the accountants hold sway.

I believe ticket barriers are yet another example of the foolish money-orientated, bureaucratic attitudes that prevail in the UK.

You can travel throughout mainland Europe with on-train ticket examinations which reduces congestion on station concourses.

Passenger Focus, another tool of the establishment, says passengers find it easy to use ticket barriers. Easy to use the barrier! Why should there be barriers anyway? Believe me, from years of experience, the level of fraudulent travel is

best tackled with staff – and intelligent ticket inspections.

Cutting staff has become an obsession. So wherever you look, safety and service quality are being sacrificed because fewer and fewer staff are available. The great myth with railways and other organisations is that if you can make someone redundant and reduce staff numbers, then profits will go up and all will be well.

It is a worldwide disease, for even in Canada and the USA they boast of long, heavy trains over many miles with "just one engineer". That way madness lies and even more people will be out of work.

This obsession with staffing cuts is everywhere apparent, as is obvious from the current rumpus about taking staff away from booking offices and stations. This must affect safety and security.

The present plans will lead to vulnerable people simply not travelling if there are no staff present. Often inadequate lighting, hit-and-miss closed-circuit TV and imprecise interchange arrangements between different modes of travel make matters worse. What is required, and what would give needed work to unemployed people now dubbed as "work shy" is a

return to full staffing for the duration of the service.

It is a crazy world when we install ticket barriers to catch a few individuals on the fiddle at the same time as accepting the £37.3 million profit the Go-Ahead Group made on its rail franchises, a drop from last year!

Well that is a shame, but it is more of a shame for the hard-pressed taxpayer who has to find the money for the subsidies that bus companies like Go-Ahead enjoy – for running trains.

Despite these large profits, Go-Ahead talks of how it will need to "take management action accordingly, focusing on service, quality, cost control and financial disciplines."

Go-Ahead chief executive Keith Ludeman meanwhile was paid £1.25 million in 2009.

There is only short-term financial discipline when our leaders peer into the never-never world of light rail, tram and busways.

A recent conference was called *Bringing the Tram back to Britain*. I wish it were true. But I fear a repeat of what happened in Hampshire, Leeds, Liverpool and elsewhere – good rail-based schemes will be cancelled at the next round of spending cuts.

The so-called cheaper alternative is our old "friend", the guided busway. I read that the Cambridge guided farceway will open next spring.

Maybe ... but I remember with sadness that when I worked at Histon and Oakington in the 1950s, we used to send over 100 vans of fruit and flowers a day from that line alone on to the rail network. All there is now is miles and miles of concrete, transporting nothing.

It seems natural therefore that in the face of that disaster our bright young leaders have retained, among all the cuts, the Luton-Dunstable guided busway which is to go ahead. What a surprise!

I believe the core problem is that our current breed of politicians seems to have no experience in the workplace, within a profession, or a trade.

I look at the Camerons, Osbornes, Cleggs and Millibands and I am damned if I can tell one from another.

I am reminded of Dad's Army and I find myself muttering: "Stupid Boys!"

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Nodding Donkeys live on



Picture: PHILIP BISATT

PEDESTRIAN: Pacers for the Paignton line at Exeter St Davids

Britain's First World War generals were characterised as donkeys leading their lion-hearted men to slaughter. Today the "generals" in the Department for Transport have decided that rail users will have to put up with "Nodding Donkey" Pacer trains for a few more years (See North West news Page 4). Although the Pacer is cheap, the lack of articulation can result in a rough ride, especially over points and around tight

curves. The basic bus bench seating can also be uncomfortable, while the bogey-less suspension has given rise to the nickname "Nodding Donkeys" because of the up and down motion on jointed track. Doubts have also been raised about their crashworthiness after a 1999 crash at Winsford, Cheshire, involving an empty class 142 colliding with a class 87 electric train on the West Coast main line.