

And 3,000 died on the roads

By Alix Stredwick

In the aftermath of the tragic Paddington accident questions fly thick and fast.

"Who is to blame?" cry the media, predictably. Were safety concerns ignored? How much should be spent on safety improvements? How long will this take? Who pays? How many more people must die?

I have some questions myself: Why is it that a relatively safe form of transport gets a disproportionate amount of negative attention when a (thankfully) rare but tragic incident occurs? Why is it that the appalling death toll on our roads is accepted without question by almost all of us who use them every day?

Serious rail accidents make the news headlines partly because they are so rare. To illustrate, our chairman Steve Wilkinson was contacted by the Australian media, and Railwatch editor Ray King was questioned by New Zealand radio.

The very nature of public transport means that one of its great advantages – the ability to shift great numbers of people about – means that when there is loss of life it is in the form of many people concentrated in both space and time.

The impact on awareness is therefore inevitably different to the steady dribble of deaths every day under the wheels of cars and lorries.

This may all be fairly obvious stuff, but it is often forgotten by those commenting on the issue – although for those that were directly involved of course it is understandable.

More subtly, I think a reason for the dramatic effect on public consciousness of an accident of this kind is that so many people were involved in a shared experience.

This could perhaps be likened to that of a bombing campaign in a war, many people suffering at the hands of an unseen yet deadly enemy, ordinary people versus technology and "hardware" which essentially still has a sinister human element.

There are also the many people who were involved in the rescuing of the victims, and stories of heroic gestures and miraculous escapes.

And of course there was the fire that was so visual both in terms of the smoke billowing upwards during the first few hours of



footage from the scene, and later when we saw the gutted carriage remains. The primeval human fear of fire and the panic induced when imagining or experiencing its lethal power in a confined space is a potent force to focus attention.

And as Christian Wolmar pointed out, the fact that the crash scene was located conveniently near to television studios must have influenced the amount of media coverage.

The plume of smoke was visible from BBC Television Centre in Wood Lane.

The ability to blame one or two key players whose job it is to ensure that people are transported effectively and safely is another major reason why these accidents are the subject of prolonged media attention. It is not perceived as just an accident.

The pile-up on the M4 in November, which led to at least two deaths, reached only page eight of *The Guardian*. Most other road accidents get no mention at all and there is no paper inquiry after them.

Train drivers, engineers and decision-makers are entrusted with this great responsibility, and the nature of a public transport system means that the root cause

of an accident can almost always be accurately found, and the finger of blame pointed.

Furthermore there is the feeling of helplessness that must be far greater for those sat on a train in an accident than those at the wheel of a car, who can in theory often take some kind of evasive action.

This appalling accident will stay in the minds of all involved and probably most of the TV-watching British public for years to come.

If anything good at all can come out of the Paddington crash, it will indeed result in a "watershed" for attention on our railways.

Hopefully we'll see renewed investment for areas such as capacity, service quality and access which are almost as important as safety.

These are some of the vital issues on which RDS is campaigning so that rail can entice more people out of their cars – in which it is still at least 15 times more dangerous to travel.

There are of course also the hidden side effects of road transport, like its role in causing respiratory diseases, which would also be reduced if there were a major shift from road to rail. But right

now the reality is that public confidence must be restored in our railways.

This should not be left to the Government and interested rail bodies.

Responsible reporting which accurately depicts the true picture of transport safety in Great Britain has an important part to play. Let's hope that this isn't an unattainable goal for journalists.

On a brighter note: a plea to all RDS members who may have website design skills.

We're working on an exciting RDS website idea for the new Millennium, but need some help. If you have expertise in this area and are interested in helping, please get in contact. Tel 020 9981 2992.

■ Alix Stredwick is RDS campaigns director.

The Ladbroke Grove crash raises many issues, including the problems facing an industry without the vertical integration – and comprehensive control mechanisms – which it enjoyed in BR-days.

The dismantling of BR was one of the contributory factors to automatic train protection being abandoned.

The apparent abandonment of the 100-year practice of signals and points interlocking with the advent of computer-aided signalling is also puzzling.

The present de facto freeze on any sensible electrification programme will mean that in future there will be more diesels running under 25kV electric wires.

The public junking of 50 years in which a commitment to public service was valued and appreciated has played a part in the present state of morale on the railways.

RDS issued a press release in October to welcome proposals to introduce a network-wide confidential "whistle-blowing" scheme for railway staff who are concerned about safety practices.

But RDS warned that measures should be put into place swiftly before passengers lose further confidence and decide to use their cars instead – a move that would lead to increased safety risks.

Campaigns director Alix Stredwick also urged: "The public does not deserve to see a repeat of promises broken, like the situation that occurred after Clapham in 1988.

"Automatic Train Protection should not take 10 years to implement.

But she added: "The real issue here is time, because the question of who pays is somewhat spurious."

RDS argues that if train operators and Railtrack foot the bill then it is almost inevitable that costs will be passed on to the passenger.

Britain's fares are already among



the highest in the world. RDS would like to see Government money provided for ATP. The phasing out of the £1 billion-plus each year that is termed Government subsidy but is really public investment in a public service should be reconsidered.

It should be remembered, however, that per passenger mile, rail travel is still the safest form of land travel, and per passenger hour travelled, rail safety exceeds air travel.

Between 1986 and 1995, the number of passengers killed or seriously injured per billion passenger miles were: 1,786 by car/motorcycle, 47 by water transit and 3.3 by train (source: Health and Safety Executive).

Per hundred million passenger hours, there are 33 on the roads, 36.5 by air but just two by rail.

It is over 20 times more dangerous to travel by private car than by train.

Every year more than 3,000 people are killed on Britain's roads and a further 300,000 are injured. Then of course there are the deaths indirectly caused by road travel, such as the 24,000 premature deaths per year related

to air pollution. This would be a much lower toll if rail carried more freight and passengers.

Ideally – like most people – RDS wants to see ATP installed network-wide. But if the Train Protection and Warning System can be installed more swiftly then this system should be applied across the network without delay, and high-speed and congested routes should be prioritised for ATP.

In another press release Alix Stredwick called for tougher regulation of the industry and for more coordination between the many rail companies.

RDS also called for greater progress with electrification as electric trains are less likely to catch fire in any collision.

Electric services are of course cleaner, can be more frequent and are less polluting.

The problem is how to justify the investment in a world where there are conflicting private interests. Electrification is expensive to implement and offers significant benefits. However, Railtrack will proceed only if it foresees an "adequate rate of return" for itself. Railtrack argues

that it might have to increase track access charges to train operators. The train operators in turn argue that they would need new trains if a line was electrified and they would not get the return necessary unless their franchise was extended.

"Clearly there is a case for longer franchises so that train operators have the incentive to invest," said Alix Stredwick. "But before a franchise is renewed the conditions of the franchise should be revised.

"At the moment there are many pressing problems in the rail network, for example accessibility, punctuality, ticket prices, and the threat to services on rural branch lines.

"Renewed franchises must contain provisions to tackle these as well as safety issues before we can see an improved rail service."

An inquiry into train protection systems was ordered by Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott in October. Conducted by Sir David Davies, president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, it will come up with initial findings later this month. From 1967 to 1971 he was director of research at British Rail.

The road toll
Killed on the roads: 3,421
Injured: 221,891
1998 figures (no rail passenger dies in 1998)