

# Dangers of too much spin

As I sat down to map out what aspects of the rail world I wanted to cover for *Railwatch* this time, I realised the industry is at another watershed.

Lord Cullen and Professor Uff have reported on safety systems and I believe they have been nicely hoodwinked to keep on with the Train Protection and Warning System despite the fact they have correctly outlined and criticised its limitations.

The blame for this, in my view, rests with politicians and also with Sir David Davies, now head of Railtrack Safety who was the first person to push for TPWS, wrongly some of us believed.

But he had the ear of deputy prime minister John Prescott who didn't understand and although he, Sir David was substantially challenged at the public inquiries, this second rate system is going in.

Mark my words, once it is in (and we are putting good money after bad) there will be people saying "Well it prevented this number of signals passed at danger", ignoring the fact that they are the least dangerous signals passed at danger.

We will also be told by the spin merchants that "safety is improving" to such an extent that collectively we may be persuaded that we do not need and cannot afford what the rest of the world is moving towards.

The whole question of train protection should be based on collision opportunities, not signals passed at danger but the very difficult world of railway operating has had to be simplified so that it can be made easy for the press and government to talk in sound bites.

Indeed Bernard Jenkin, the Conservative spokesman talks nonsense about railways, and he is a high-ranking member of the party that caused the problems in the first place.

The on the Government side there is Lord Macdonald who seems to me to understand next to nothing about the issues, and nods in agreement with the Railtrack chief executive Stephen Marshall, when Mr Marshall says things like: "Twenty or thirty years of under-investment has caused the problem on the railways."

No such thing. The railway has always been under-invested in by a succession of governments but it has always, on the other hand, been well maintained, well operated by a disciplined, uniformed hierarchical structure, which was capable and is again capable, given the right leadership, of running a railway.

In this country politicians of all parties (Mrs Gwyneth Dunwoody excepted) are to blame for they have destroyed a culture of safety, destroyed the profession of railway operator and replaced an albeit boring vertical chain of command with a matrix organisation of people with little knowledge of the grass roots or of railway geography.

Not surprising then that they have failed to manage the interface between the train and the track. Many of them, when they have said: "Have a nice day", have exhausted the depths of their knowledge and retire to

## Rayner's review



send each other emails rather than have face to face meetings. It is that interface between train and track that is the root cause of all the broken rail problems at the present time, exacerbated by an inadequate railway inspectorate hiding under a government-subservient HSE.

If one looks around the world, even in America, the land of free enterprise, what do we find, Amtrak is state-owned.

The French and the Germans, the envy of the rest of Europe in rail terms, have got where they are with state ownership and private finance.

Far too simple for us because the Treasury, under a Tory government, sold off the assets in what is now increasingly seen as an irresponsible manner.

Incidentally, the permanent civil service is the same whatever government we have and if this Government has failed us, it is because they simply have not confronted the Civil Service mandarins who put in the unsafe privatisation structure and have from then on defended their actions, with success I am sad to say.

It is interesting to note that one of the early rail privatisations is now being reversed and in New Zealand the operating rights over rail lines in Auckland are being bought back by the local authorities from the company, Tranzrail, which purchased the system from the former government.

By acquiring these rights passenger services can more easily be provided. The result should be that people will be more likely to leave their cars and travel on good public transport.

The Government's main reason for taking a direct role is to protect the rail network. Pity we do not have a Government with the guts and common sense to do likewise.

I may be accused of being self-obsessed but I have recently re-read my own book *On and Off The Rails* and I am frightened by how correct some of the items covered were.

The book is still available to be read by anyone who is interested. The difficulty is that privatisation has put us into a position where the railway is now worse than it was just after the war, when at least it was

respected by public opinion. It now has no respect because it has failed so miserably to deliver, both in safety terms and in performance terms. It will be a long haul back.

I wonder sometimes if I should stop highlighting safety problems on the railways and merely remind people that the roads are much more dangerous.

Within Railfuture we have recently been debating railway football trains.

When I was the Operating Superintendent in Manchester, on important match days we ran 23 extra trains from Manchester to London in addition to the hourly service, all with a restaurant car. Some would even be Pullman sets. Of course we brought them all back again in an orderly and safe way, mostly in two hours 30 minutes journey time.

We also ran football trains every weekend all over the country.

Similarly we ran three or four trains for horse-racing fans to Ascot during Ascot week

Having said all that, I am resolved to be less critical of the often inadequate efforts of the existing players in the industry to give anything like an acceptable service.

Everything has its place and everything has its time, and now is the time for change as far as my comments on the industry are concerned.

If there is going to be any improvement, if Railtrack is going to be brought into line by Sir Alastair Morton and particularly by an unfettered, open minded Regulator which I believe Tom Winsor to be, then I shall stand back and not criticise their attempts to come to grips with what the Prime Minister recently called "the greatest scandal of the 1990s".

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety officer.

## Lottery winners

RDS lottery winners for April were:

G Ford, Carnforth, Lancs £64, J E Dwelley, Felixstowe £40, J Pitcher, Deal £24, P J Ludlow, Budleigh Salterton £16, T J Tolley, Wigan £8, E Ratcliffe, Bournemouth £8

May: W G Davis, Worthing £56, J M Hounslow, Watford £35, M J Breslin, Liverpool £21, W A Emmerson, Belfast £14, K Bullard, London SW17 £7, J D Smith, Bexhill, Sussex £7.

## Volunteers needed

Railfuture is looking for volunteers to help out in our national office in Dalston, London.

We are looking for people with different skills to work in this friendly office and we want to hear from people who are happy running errands or carrying out research, answering the phone or even those willing to learn web site development skills.

Travel/ lunch expenses can be reclaimed. If you feel you would like to make a contribution, please contact Kate on 020 7249 5533 or email me, kate@railfuture.org.uk. Together we can work towards a Railfuture.