

Beware the bus bandits

Well some things are better, no doubt about that. Finally the authorities have done what we asked for years ago – created Network Rail – a not-for-profit company intent on running a railway.

No more share price as first item on the log which always seemed like blasphemy to me. So now we can forget Railtrack, which was born out of bad legislation at the end of the Tory Government's last term when John Major was prime minister.

We still have many more battles to fight with this Government. We can't allow the present Secretary of State to get away with saying things like: "We need to ask whether light rail or a bus-based solution is better. You can often get more for the same money with more flexibility and quicker results".

He must be reminded that the bus industry owns most of the train operating companies now and that the one achievement of the bus industry has been to lower train punctuality to the level accepted for bus operation. Accepted indeed as a norm.

For all his talk about money Mr Darling does not address what Richard Bowker of the Strategic Rail Authority consistently highlights, and that is how do we stop money pouring out of the system into the hands of the large contractors modernising and upgrading our railway?

In my view there are several causes, one of which is the creation of an inexperienced Health and Safety Executive, seemingly more intent on rules and constraints to the exclusion of the practical aspects needed for the task.

By shutting the railway for months in pursuit of



Rayner's review

minor HSE regulations, 50 more people may die on the roads but that does not matter because no blame can be attached to the managers of the railway.

We have lost the skill to rebuild a railway and run trains at the same time. So many plastic fences, red zones, green zones, prefabricated buildings, that they have in many cases created a village.

In the case of Ledburn Junction near Leighton Buzzard, it is more like a small town. A small town has been built to do a job British Rail would have done from four trains over five weekends.

BR would also have kept the railway running. A slight exaggeration perhaps but you get my point I hope.

There are too many contractors but that is being addressed, although still not quickly enough.

We have too many American-based companies involved in the work. But America neglected its railways and created vast and impressive shopping malls

while allowing the track to deteriorate. They are now seen by some in authority as the keepers of all knowledge.

Every time a job gets behind hand and runs into trouble, another Boeing 747 lands bringing some more "saviours".

Unless the contractor issue is addressed we are still in trouble although I wish Mr Bowker at the SRA and Network Rail the best of luck.

We in Railfuture have to be vigilant about yet another Secretary of State who appears to know nothing except what the mandarins and increasingly powerful bus operators tell him.

We also have to fight strategic big issues, as I am sure we are doing but we need to be more and more strident and less and less subdued in the face of bus ascendancy.

For example let's press for a strategic through route from Worcester to Stockport every half hour calling at Stourbridge, Walsall, Lichfield, Derby, Matlock and Chinley.

That would create a corridor through the centre of the country, relieve congestion elsewhere and open up new markets. It could go via Dore in the short term and miss out Matlock until the line is reinstated to Miller's Dale.

It might take some revenue off Virgin *et al* but it would ease congestion. We need to be innovative and forceful and make sure not only the Miller's Dale bit gets done but that they do not shut one line in the West Midlands to make the tram routes easier. Action now!

Things are getting better but not quickly enough!

■ Peter Rayner is a former BR operations and safety officer

News in brief

Road toll More than 3,000 people are killed on the roads every day throughout the world with more than 30million a year injured. The World Remembrance Day for Road Traffic Victims is 17 November 2002. More info: www.roadpeace.org

Adopt a station Arriva Trains Northern is asking travellers to adopt their local station. Duties include checking the quality of announcements, checking the station is clean and tidy and equipment is working. Some stations have already been adopted but in September 86 stations still needed a volunteer. Contact: Dana on 0870 9039191

Greater Anglia Railfuture and several user groups have made submissions about the proposal for a Greater Anglia franchise. The Walton on the Naze, Frinton-on-Sea and Kirby Cross Rail Users Association presented a 24-page dossier indentifying many areas for improvement.

Nothing on offer Cambridgeshire County Council officials told 200 concerned members of the public at a public meeting in Histon that they should accept guided bus plans for the Cambridge St Ives rail line or "get nothing". Officials were unable to explain how the guided bus system would work.

People like trains A thousand passengers a day have been using the new Norwich-Cambridge rail service, reinstated after a gap of 20 years, according to Anglia Railways.

Behind schedule The Thameslink 2000 scheme which Railtrack described as a straight-forward scheme to implement is the subject of a wide-ranging review by the Strategic Rail Authority.

Whitehall back on the bus The Government is to drop many schemes for upgrading the rail network and force people to travel by bus instead, *The Times* reported on 16 October.

Bowker bonds £30billion worth of bonds could be issued to raise money for developing the rail network, SRA chairman Richard Bowker is reported to have told the Government. Transport Secretary Alistair Darling is reluctant to approve the idea, said *The Independent* on 16 October.

Slow down A First Great Western plan for a new £5billion 200mph line for double-decker trains from London to South Wales and the West Country has received a rebuff from the Strategic Rail Authority, according to *The Guardian* on 18 October. The SRA said the operator should stick to getting the basics right.

Asthma danger The upsurge in asthma in young people in western Europe is causing the World Health Organisation more concern than TB or HIV, reports *Asthma News*. The WHO calls on governments to reduce pollution from road traffic.

Executive meeting A meeting of the Railfuture national executive was held in London on 9 November. More info: John Lee. Tel: 01485 528088. john.lee@rdsadmin.freewire.co.uk

Campaign meeting Railfuture's policy, lobbying and campaign group met on 12 October. More info: Norman Bradbury. Tel: 020 8394 0675