

Don't forget

This is a look back, not in anger, but with sadness. I was prompted to reflect when I came across a picture of John MacGregor, the then transport minister, praising the introduction of trams for Manchester.

There were flowery phrases about the environment and multi-modal transport but at least it was upbeat.

I contrast this with the latest line from Transport Secretary Alistair Darling: No Tram for Leeds, No Tram for Portsmouth, No Tram for Liverpool and trams over the wrong routes in the Black Country.

So I thought, can anyone really be trusted to follow through with anything remotely like a sensible transport policy, rather than opportunistic party political manoeuvrings?

This took me to the 1983 Serpell report on railway finances which at the time we feared was going to be Beeching No 2. It was so over the top BR chairman Sir Peter Parker was able to limit the damage.

Serpell set out the lowest cost solution for rail infrastructure. I revisited paragraph 6.2.5 in which Serpell says that a signal box should not be replaced until it is unreliable. Paragraphs 6.26, 6.29, 6.31 and 6.33 are worse so I will spare you them.

In fact if we had followed Serpell's advice we might well have had several more accidents than we did have. Serpell was over 20 years

ago and depressed by the waste of years, I went back to 1980 and was cheered to read the excellent booklet *Cross London Rail Link*.

Twenty five years later, we await London Crossrail. Not so cheering!

Since privatisation, we have spent years trying to stop train companies arguing over rights of access to lines. Then Mr Darling and the Association of Train Operating Companies purported to rediscover the need for unified controls.

Even some of the franchises started to make operating sense – Thames Trains and First Great Western are now one.

But now Alistair Darling is sitting back as the Rail Regulator threatens to disturb the balance of the East Coast main line by granting operating rights to Grand Central to run trains to Sunderland.

Mr Darling and his minions could have required GNER – at franchise renewal – to serve Sunderland.

The real competition is with road and air, not internecine warfare on the railway itself.

I suppose that gesture in the North East was intended to be New Labour's upbeat approach to rail to hide the surreptitious new powers to allow closures.

Let us not forget he can substitute rail with buses while the consulta-

tion is going on. I find myself in agreement with shadow transport secretary Chris Grayling who says, "If they have no intention of closing smaller and particularly rural lines why are they consulting on how to go about doing it?"

Next I looked at 1992, before Labour ascended to power, and read what John Prescott said about the Government white paper on privatisation.

After making many wise comments on investment and safety he ended by calling the paper, "a cherry-pickers' charter, ripe for speculation by property speculators, route operators, bribed by public subsidies and inevitably, by Tories' City friends".

He ends by saying: "We must all campaign to prevent Britain's public railway network being shunted into the sidings."

On coming to power, he assisted in the shunting and his colleagues continue the process.

Tiring of that and looking for a really good laugh I turned next to 1981 and read *Investment in Transport* which was welcomed by then Transport Secretary Norman Fowler. It had been produced by the British Railways Board, the road haulage industry and the trade unions.

It stressed the need for an investment strategy regardless of mode that would provide the right frame-



Rayner's Review

work for the future. All the politicians have done since is to continue to fudge issues and occasionally make decisions which favour big business, bankers and investors.

Remember in *Railwatch* 103 in April last year I said that I would put the name of the organisation that would win the lucrative South Eastern franchise in an envelope to be opened after the decision because rewards come to those who keep their heads down when there are difficulties confronting politicians. My guess was correct!

Don't be too depressed by the theme of this article. It is a new year and we must look forward and continue in Railfuture to campaign strongly wherever we see the need.

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

Concrete road that will wreck a railway

By Jerry Alderson

jerry.alderson@virgin.net

Permission to destroy forever the remaining 10 miles of the Cambridge to St Ives railway, was granted on 8 December by Transport Secretary Alistair Darling.

The rusting track is still owned by Network Rail and connected to the mainline at Chesterton Junction in north Cambridge.

As a result, it is now likely – though not yet certain – that the line will become a guided busway. The busway could become the first in Britain to be built on a railway line.

The Cambridge and St Ives Railway Organisation (Cast.Iron), which has around 1,150 members, had intended to reopen the railway as a commuter service running trains into Cambridge using an open-access agreement.

The scheme had been costed using quotes from infrastructure companies and independent train operators. We had negotiated £3million funding from businesses and a prospectus might raise another £2million. Section 106 funding from developers could contribute another £11million. Importantly, our business plan showed that no revenue

support is needed. This is because Cambridge is a growth area and the line borders Cambridge Science Park and the regional college, both of which generate thousands of trips per day, as well as serving two large towns, St Ives and Northstowe.

Cast.Iron would have built and run the UK's first fully privately financed commuter railway. Surely this is something the Government should allow to go ahead?

Unfortunately we were up against Cambridgeshire County Council's rival plan to convert the line into the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway. We could not persuade councillors to shelve their pet project and so a Transport and Works Act for the busway was submitted.

Following 2,741 objections, a public inquiry was held. Cast.Iron, which spent hundreds of hours producing evidence against the scheme, and other groups such as Railfuture, felt that the case against the busway was overwhelming.

Sadly the inspector, Dr Chris Gosop, did not. Incredibly he did not find a single criticism of the busway, and considered that the coun-

ty council had underestimated the benefits of the scheme! The Department for Transport had *conditionally* offered £65million of taxpayer's money to build it?

All is not lost for those of us who prefer a fully integrated transport system that is part of a national network meeting local, regional and national needs – and one that is attractive to car users.

There is a substantial funding gap for the busway. The £86million cost announced in January 2004 had a gap of £21million. However, inflation will have increased this. Moreover, since the busway would be built by a contractor on a fixed-price basis, bids will be inflated in case of overspend.

Edinburgh's guided busway opened in December 2004 and has already been closed twice for urgent repairs. Both of these have been paid by the contractor, Balfour Beatty Ltd, which is one of the three CGB bidders.

The Crawley busway, built by Edmund Nuttal Ltd, another CGB bidder, has seen a significant overspend. In this case, council tax payers had to pick up the bill. The

third CGB bidder, Birse Civils Ltd, has never built a guided busway before.

Cast.Iron cannot estimate what the construction bids might be, but £100million seems reasonable for the world's longest busway, with so many road junctions.

Railfuture members will ask how the Government can approve this expensive scheme when axing light rail schemes on grounds of rising costs.

We are pleased that the Secretary of State's decision letter explained that awarding powers to build the busway did not imply that the Government would still fund it.

We hope that the Department for Transport will agree with public opinion that funds earmarked for this unwanted and unnecessary busway should be used to expand an already proven scheme such as Manchester Metrolink. This would leave the line intact allowing Cast.Iron to reopen it. Surely this would be the win-win situation!

The Cast.Iron website www.castiron.org.uk gives links to the inspector's report and Mr Darling's decision.