

Public service at risk from cash cuts

Looking back over the 15 years I have been writing these reviews for *Railwatch*, I re-read some of the research I undertook in the distressing early days of privatisation.

The obvious safety flaws took up most of my interest at that time and sadly the warnings that I gave that safety would be more difficult to manage were not heeded.

It was only after accidents at Watford in 1996, Southall in 1997 and Paddington (Ladbroke Grove) in 1999 that things on the safety front started to change.

I was closely involved in the investigations of these incidents and in the aftermath.

I often think that the problems surrounding Signal 109 at Paddington sum up that period.

It was passed at danger on eight occasions in the previous six years (see panel right) and finally and fatally with the loss of many lives on 5 October 1999.

To me, safety issues are paramount but they were not addressed until it was too late.

Perhaps I thought less about the business and financial shortcomings, but for some of those now involved in the railways, money is a priority. You could say that money lies at the heart of all the railways' problems.

When British Rail was a nationalised organisation we were dependent on Government money.

It was easy therefore for anyone to moan about BR being a drag on the public purse.

Now it is privatised, what is the difference? The railway is still dependent on Government money. Now though, the Department for Transport is exercising its centralised power more than ever before.

The railway is also costing the taxpayer more now than ever before. The cause is simply the way, in the last days of BR, the then chairman Sir Bob Reid introduced changes that made it easier to shunt invoices between contracting parties than it was to shunt wagons. As the last and in



my view the worst chairman of BR, he introduced an era when managers spent their time and energies on passing costs on to each other to ensure the ultimate privatised model fitted the accountants' ideas.

Progressive electrification, the key to progress then and the veritable solution to our environmental problems now, was put on the back burner and much of the

SPADS AT SIGNAL 109

2 August 1993

13 February 1995

15 March 1996

23 June 1996

3 April 1997

4 February 1998

6 August 1998

22 August 1998

5 October 1999

SPAD=signal passed at danger

overhead line skills were lost. Trains used to erect the electrical equipment were disposed of and sensibly located depots were closed and amalgamated.

It has taken us 15 or so years to even get ongoing electrification debated at all. There were signs that under Lord Adonis, transport policy was changing.

But it looks like all we will be left with is the Luton to Dunstable railway sacrificed to make way for a guided busway.

When costs are being assessed, the Treasury is more than likely to make short term comparisons.

Rail is likely to lose out in any assessment because there are now literally hundreds of small firms taking a slice of the financial cake.

They are siphoning money from operations, training and the bloated health and safety budgets. Then there is the money spent on simply painting trains

different colours or providing different uniforms for the myriad of organisations involved in the constantly changing melange. It's an uncontrolled shambles.

I also worry that Network Rail so closely resembles the worst days of Railtrack that the financial targets imposed upon it by Government now, and who knows what in the future, will lead to renewed safety risks.

Perhaps the rail unions are driven partly by fears of redundancy among their members when they raise safety concerns.

But RMT can be congratulated for preventing several hundred workers crucial for rail safety in southern England losing their jobs recently.

If an organisation has strong, arrogant people on very high salaries with great power, you can expect railway staff to respond in an equally over-the-top manner.

Network Rail seems to be organised so as to devolve responsibility away from itself. That too reminds me of Railtrack. NR needs to be reminded that in the event of an accident, responsibility cannot be dodged, even if there are many devolved levels to blame.

I was recently involved in a case which resulted in me and a colleague writing to the Rail Regulator to get some flagrant safety problems corrected.

It is so easy to believe the plausible financial statements put out by economists and other academics.

I recently re-read *Railway Accounts for Effective Regulation* which was put before the European Conference of transport ministers. When you read the detail it is easy to see why they are so wedded to fragmentation.

They believe competition inevitably brings efficiency. But that is not necessarily true of a railway because of the constraints

that surround its operation. If a franchise with challenging timetable and difficult operating conditions was offered to two rival bidders, it would probably be unwise to select the cheapest bid or the one with a glib assurance of improvements.

What is needed is a careful scrutiny of their ability to deliver what they promise.

If not, the likelihood would be a shambles requiring remedial action and additional resources from the public purse.

The real problem is that the people writing these tomes have in many cases never been exposed to nor understand the real railway.

In the run-up to the election, the Conservatives said they want train operators to have more flexibility, and less micro-management of franchises by the Department for Transport.

It sounds good, but that is what Railtrack did. It gave more flexibility to contractors to have their own controls, and certainly Railtrack did less micro-management.

In fact there was little actual management at all, which explains why it was able to mount a defence to charges of corporate manslaughter by saying it did not know what was happening.

To be deemed responsible, lawyers had to show Railtrack had a directing mind.

Well it certainly did not have that.

Back to the present. The Government has not encouraged people outside the industry to have any input into a consultation about the *Future of Rail Franchising*.

My reading of the franchise document appears to propose financial incentives to cut train services. How can it be that cutting services to save money does not affect the passenger?

In *Railwatch* 123, I pointed out the franchise clauses which allow a Secretary of State to reimburse or ameliorate net losses to the franchisees from industrial action.

With Philip Hammond recently installed as yet another Secretary of State for Transport, it is as well to remember that the previous 10 or so have been ludicrously helpful to the franchised rail companies, so much so that even the failed ones make a profit.

Now it seems possible they will get cash rewards for cutting trains as well as for arrogantly causing strikes.

Not much chance of the public service ethic being respected. Public services may become dirty words again. We shall see.

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

Passengers are still waiting for the loo

Passengers want to see more station toilets, waiting rooms and better real-time information on train times at stations.

That was the initial conclusion from research commissioned by Passenger Focus and Network Rail before a programme to improve stations was implemented.

Now, however, the coalition Government's cuts have put much

of the station improvement programme in doubt.

The National Stations Improvement Programme has been designed to improve facilities at a minimum of 150 small to medium-sized stations.

Passenger Focus found that passenger satisfaction is lowest with cycle and car-parking facilities. Chief executive Anthony Smith

said: "This research backs up what passengers tell us time and time again. We want the industry to start listening and act on passengers' requests."

One rail campaigner commented: "Who is really surprised that passengers want toilets?"

He added: "What they also want is connecting buses to take them to their local rail station."