

An icy grip that paralyses railway

Rayner's Review

I am amazed that no one seemed too worried about large parts of the railway shutting down because of six to nine inches of snow that fell in February.

Eight inches of snow in Germany led to an average 45 minutes delay on the railways there.

Eight inches of snow in London on 2 February shut down most of the former Southern region.

I was disgusted by the response of the industry. On that day I travelled on the 06.26 from Andover to Waterloo in the charge of good careful railway men and women providing a service in difficult circumstances.

My joy was short-lived, for I soon discovered the rest of the Southern region was not running, nor were the buses, tubes and taxis.

I was asked by Sky TV why I thought the railway shut down now but would have kept going a few years ago.

I said it was easier for me because I could cancel engineering work, letting some staff home at lunchtime to come back to snow duties at night.

I could make sure that resources were concentrated on snow clearance and that if need be, engines and staff were diverted to ploughs and de-icing. If then it did not snow, the workers had an easy night and it cost the management.

We saw our main task as staying open to provide a public service. My bottom line financially was less important to me than to give a public service. Now all the train companies are self-interested. Managers cannot take an engine off one train and use it for the general good.

Snow-clearing staff were formerly all railway staff and the civil engineer and the operator and other engineers all worked for a region whose objective was to run trains, not maintain infrastructure so someone else could run trains. As proof of this attitude I quote from my written reminiscences:

"In 1960 I came out during the night to observe the passage of the Royal Train from Sandringham to London. It was a bleak winter's night with heavy snow across the fens.

"During the very bad snow and continuous frost of 1962-63, I spent a long time on the night shift.

"The packed frozen snow and ice under the trains made them so heavy we reverted to banking them out of Liverpool Street with the little J67 station pilot.

"During that very difficult time the Line Manager himself came out and was seen by the staff, visiting

my little gang of night workers along with many others. In 1986 in just such circumstances I set out from Crewe remembering his example and rode amongst my staff keeping the railway running.

"I remember also during the 1970s in Manchester, snow was a regular feature of railway operation when I was the operating superintendent and we all got involved in the day-to-day task. I used to request from Arthur Lloyd-Owen, the civil engineer, a gang of men to be located at junctions and other key places overnight."

Expensive maybe, but overall society benefited. Indeed in my time at Manchester, Buxton was cut off many times by road but never did we stop. Medical supplies on several occasions went up, not by ambulance, but by train.

The real difficulty is that not everywhere is that same sense of public duty the predominant feeling. Had you asked any of us who we worked for we would all have said: The Railway.

Now ask anyone on the trains or track and they will say: First Group, Virgin, Jarvis, Network Rail, Balfour Beattie, Stagecoach, National Express or one of the many others.

How do we get it all back? Well I am getting more and more convinced that if we can start to nationalise the banks then it is about time some of the obvious public utilities like gas, water, electricity and railways should come back inside some public control and public funding.

This particular Government has, and I fear I repeat myself, been worse even than the Tories for they say one thing and do another where rail is concerned. Mark my words, guided busways are being promoted at the expense of rail. And that approach will not offend the present train operators, will it?

The snow and weather problems make a good backdrop to our main challenge which is the guided busway. It will be interesting to see how they operate in heavy snow for they run in ruts to guide them which will be ideal for snow, filling up easily, and stopping the job. By the time their promoters realise that, it will be too late.

This whole question of guided busways can now be seen in its true colours as a nationwide move to replace such trams as we have and to replace old railways and perhaps present branch lines.

In my view it represents not just a threat to the integrity of the current railway but an environmental threat to us all. The Government once again is helping the bus companies who already have a stranglehold on the railway. There seems no doubt that the aim



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of the Department for Transport in the Cambridge-St Ives busway is to make a start at long-term branch line operation by guided bus. Bustransit and rail closure is what we are looking at.

The St Ives busway never even pretended to run into Cambridge. It connects to the station by a devious route which will block any Cambridge-Oxford rail reopening hope, or at least make it more difficult.

I sent my card in on that issue as I hope we all did and my MP has given me a detailed reply from Lord Adonis which, as with all schemes, puts it on the back burner.

We need to get some experts together and start to challenge the safety principles regarding the guided busway.

The Cambridge scheme is well-documented and in my view one of the worst examples of bungled planning I have seen.

Of course any rail line that has a strategic use should not be left to local government. Yet this incompetent New Labour administration persists in talking about local devolution being the answer.

Local councils are local and do not consider other than local issues, to the detriment of the national overall good. The Cambridge scheme has already wasted energy in large amounts making

and laying miles of concrete across the fen, which I gather is sinking. In my opinion, that smells of vandalism as well as incompetence.

It needs to be demonstrated that the braking requirements on an unsignalled system, and driving on sight alone have not been properly risk assessed.

The level-crossing question is pushed under the carpet, and left to the police.

With a rail level crossing, there is extensive regulation and massive anti-rail publicity whenever there is an incident. Double standards! And all because a pro-bus feeling exists in the Government and there is a big bus lobby from the large companies.

Even the attempts to curb the power that came from bus de-regulation has had a difficult ride through Parliament because of the strength of that lobby.

As citizens, we are all now aware of the problems of future oil supply and pollution.

And we can all identify many small schemes to reduce the number of diesel services and replace them with electric traction.

We have listed them and they are well-known but all we get is talk of large schemes years ahead which is the old game of talking big and doing nothing.

Small electrification schemes give a good economic return, after the initial outlay.

Furthermore they increase property values along their routes. Indeed this was recognised as far back as 1956 as an additional benefit of the extension of the electrification from Shenfield to Southend.

It is essential we recognise the DfT has had the power since the 2005 Act to do what it likes and the reality is that the DfT is pro-bus, anti-rail and has Treasury backing.

Consideration of all the much-vaunted big schemes will be dragging on for years while the rest of the railway languishes.

Think how many years it has taken to get Crossrail – which was needed years ago – anywhere near built or how long it has taken to get East Midlands Parkway station open.

We should remind people of the loss of all the tram schemes and point out why they were cancelled – to make way for guided busways.

Disused lines are already being ripped up to make way for busways. How long will it be before the bus enthusiasts in the DfT will want to move on to the surviving branch lines?

In my view this is the biggest pollution threat we face.

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