

Rail can solve those road problems

Railways are an excellent way to travel in their own right, but they can also make a major contribution to solving road traffic problems, RDS president Michael Caton stressed.

The Government often claims that because BR now carries a smaller part of the total volume of passengers and freight, it can make little overall impact.

In fact, the opposite is the case. Where road congestion is severe, that is exactly where rail can make a significant contribution, he said.

In business, there is nothing more wasteful than driving around in a company car, wasting public money, the firm's money and your own time. On the train, you can do some work - and get to your destination efficiently.

Government Ministers say that we have the highest level of investment in BR but the truth is that in the second half of the 1980s, Government support was halved. In the same time, Dr Caton said road expenditure was maintained and there is now a £1.2 billion road expansion plan.

Investment in BR has actually come from sale of property, service improvements, and fare increases. The fare rises have been so great that they are now proving counter-productive and are pricing people off the trains.

BR also make a farce of the 1974 Railways Act which gave it an obligation to run loss-making services and a grant to compensate. On those very lines that should be supported, services and train frequencies are being cut to such an extent that they have virtually ceased to provide a useful service.

It is not good enough for BR to say to the people of Whitby that there are more trains between Norwich and Birmingham.

At the same time, the Government treats the roads as if they are a social service, providing as far as it can everything that is asked. By doing this, it is intervening in the market and manipulating the choice that people ought to have in choosing their mode of transport.

By putting money into roads but being miserly to the railways, the Government is regulating people's choice.

What's more, the cost is enormous. Analysing the real costs of roads has never been undertaken properly in this country. But you can be sure they are vastly in excess of the absurd claims of the road lobby, said Dr Caton.

RDS has urged Public Transport Minister Roger Freeman to put money into capital projects on the railways and to resist the temptation to rob the PSO grant to pay for it.

If a new railway has a role in alleviating congestion, the Treasury should put up the money for it.

The Government has now promised cash for Manchester Metro, Sheffield light rail and London's Crossrail. Dr Caton called for more good cases for investment to be put to the Government.

If from all parts of the country we ask for money for rail projects, things should start to happen, he said. Local authorities must ask for more rail infrastructure for their areas.

In Scotland, Dr Caton urged campaigners to carry on fighting for Dornoch Firth, Edinburgh Metro and electrification to Aberdeen. He said very

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modest sums of money indeed would be needed for the Alloa and St Andrews reopening schemes.

If the Government doesn't provide all the money, the Treasury should be urged to come up with top-up payments at least. Mr Freeman is now saying that non-user benefits can be taken into account when calculating whether schemes will give an eight per cent return on investment.

We must continue to advise MPs to press for a change of policy. Dr Caton concluded: "That's what most people in this country want."

Must do better: RDS chairman Steve Wilkinson told the AGM that there had been some shocking Ministers responsible for transport in the past - with the notable exception of David Mitchell.

Now it looked as if the Government, having seen how disastrous the deregulation of buses had been, was to press ahead with rail privatisation.

How the society votes went

In a series of votes at the Annual General Meeting, the following proposals were approved:

Not fair to rail: This AGM notes the Consumers' Association campaign for BR's passengers to receive compensation if trains are late. However it also regrets the association's refusal to extend its campaign to BR's competitors or to support RDS efforts to seek compensation rights for BR. The meeting therefore instructs the officers of RDS to dissociate the society publicly from the efforts of the Consumers' Association and to support compensation rights only when these apply to all transport users and operators. *Proposed by Trevor Garrod.*

Goodbye comfort: The decline in quality of BR stock was laughable particularly the seating. Every new breed of rolling stock "seems to be worse" and BR was accused of throwing away the advantages of comfort it has over its competitors. Sprinters were criticised and so too was the mark 4 coach design.

RDS regrets that many new seat designs for BR rolling stock design have such a reduced seat pitch that this causes considerable discomfort to passengers who are on the tall side and calls for urgent action to correct these designs. *Proposed by Trevor Jones.*

Winter blues: BR's disastrous performance in the snow came under attack. It was pointed out that rail always used to be the reliable winter transport but tight purse strings had undermined its ability to cope. Money is needed to make it more reliable.

This AGM notes with concern that in the spell of inclement weather in February, many BR services were reduced to a state of unreliability never before associated with this transport mode, through continuing failures with old equipment as well as design faults in new motive power and rolling stock. We believe that much of this problem can be shown to be the result of short-sighted policies to save money to meet Government targets. We call on BR and the Government to ensure that the system is properly funded and well-engineered and

He concluded that BR had some achievements to be proud of but its end-of-term report could only urge: Must do better.

Joining: Membership of RDS was now around the 2,500 mark, if family members are taken into account, computer officer Trevor Jones told the meeting.

Thanks: A vote of thanks was given to treasurer David Bigg for his stalwart work in sorting out RDS finances and steering the society through the VAT maze. Even Railfreight speaker Tim Hansford paid tribute to the way the accounts were presented to the meeting.

Executive: Five new members were elected to the national executive of RDS at the AGM. They are Chris Borland, Malcolm Conway, Dave Finch, Peter Lawrence and Don McPhee. Retiring from the executive are Chris Amundson, Philip Bissatt, George Boyle, Chris Burton and Dave Sallery.

The new national executive is therefore: Steve Wilkinson (chairman), Ray King (vice-chairman), Trevor Garrod (general secretary), David Bigg (treasurer), Frank Hastilow (membership secretary), Alan Harwood (sales officer), Alan Bevan, Chris Borland, Malcolm Conway, Mike Crowhurst, Dave Finch, Trevor Jones, Peter Lawrence, Don McPhee, Peter Wakefield, and Tony Wiggall.

has suitable contingency plans. *Proposed by G Bestwick.*

Ghost stations: BR was urged to consider various ways of tackling the problem of unstaffed stations. It was pointed out that Felixstowe, with a population of 20,000, had an unstaffed station. Milton Haven and Saxmundham stations were however operated by a travel agent and seemed to work well. Local councils could do more to see that local solutions were worked out.

Unstaffed or understaffed stations are a cause for concern in relation to security for elderly and female passengers, vandalism and fare evasion. While recognising the need for cost-effective staffing policies, RDS requests all railway authorities to consider criteria for determining which stations are partially staffed or unstaffed. *Proposed by P Argent.*

No satisfaction: BR's attempt to abolish the passenger in favour of the customer was giving people another opportunity to make jokes about BR, the meeting was told, although others argued that it did remind BR staff that passengers had paid good money and expected to get good service. The following motion was approved by 29 votes to 26.

This meeting deplored the use by BR of the insipid and colourless word "customer" in place of passenger which has been used by railways for 150 years. Passenger is to railway as patient is to doctor. It implies a duty on the part of the railway to care for its passengers' safety and well-being. It transcends the casual connection between a shopkeeper and customer. This special relationship should be cherished to the benefit of both parties. RDS should make representations to BR accordingly. *Proposed by M J H Ellis.*

Power: A proposal urging BR to build two power stations to supply its own electricity needs was also passed. It would be able to provide its power "a third cheaper".