

# IN MY VIEW

# DAVID BEGG

**As Britain's railways prepare for another period of reorganisation, Professor David Begg argues that the latest government intervention has given the industry a clear sense of direction**

What a year on the railways! Twelve months ago no one would have predicted that so much change or so much progress could be achieved so quickly.

You only have to look back to the beginning of 2004 to see how, in the intervening period, a basket case has been revived. Then, we were still getting daily stories about third-world railways, late trains, crumbling infrastructure, lack of direction and a personality-driven industry.

Network Rail was a public whipping boy, the ORR was engaging in a war of words with the SRA and re-franchising was stuck in the sidings. And, as industry costs spiralled, the Treasury took issue with them all. It was an industry where the passengers were stuck in the middle, wondering what was going to happen next.

Today we have a railway with a purpose. Infrastructure is getting better, punctuality is improving, passenger numbers are creeping back up and there had been no passenger train accident fatalities for well over a year until the tragedy caused by a car on the level crossing near Ufton Nervet. And no one is suggesting the railways are to blame for that.

The daily drip, drip of negative publicity for the railways has fallen away and the broadcast volume has been turned down. The industry has been quietly going about the business of improving services.

Some of the changes are on slow-burn issues, others have delivered an immediate result. New rolling stock is progressively replacing some of the South East's vintage fleets, the Pendolino fleet is in service, shortening journey times between London, Birmingham and the North West, and the southern end of the WCML

upgrade is complete. Across the nation, Network Rail is exerting a grip on track maintenance since it took the work back in-house. Slowly but surely, performance is improving and confidence is growing. Operators and passengers are noticing the difference.

Network Rail and the operators are boosting performance with their joint control centres and thinking constructively about infrastructure improvements that don't cost the earth but ease congestion at pinch points.

The franchise map is changing, delivering greater consolidation, a commitment to value for money and an emphasis on performance – with a ruthless termination for operations that cannot meet the new standards. The Cross Country decision was a case in point.

New franchises have been let. TransPennine has started, ownership of the first two super franchises has been decided, and ScotRail has a new proprietor.

Just as importantly, the Competition Commission seems to understand that the real competition for the train is the car, and not the

railway, and the decision to end the delay-blame attribution system is long overdue.

There will be greater accountability for railways strategy and an end to the tug-of-war between the DfT and SRA. This will give operators greater clarity and allow them to plan ahead with some expectation that policy will not face another re-focus within a year.

So what do all these changes mean for the future? Money will be spent more wisely. More extravagant initiatives will be sidelined and services, infrastructure work and new franchises will have to play to the numbers. The PTEs will get their new-found freedoms to help shape their services and introduce bus alternatives at the margins to free up money for other schemes.

Train operator contracts will be more tightly managed, performance will improve still further as the infrastructure improves and as the consolidation allows for more on-track harmony – as we shall see at both Liverpool Street and Paddington as new integrated timetables kick in.

And what of high-speed rail? The Government

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bus – paving the way for much better co-ordinated journeys and a more comfortable door-to-door experience for public transport users.

And all this without a single word so far on the most fundamental change of the last year – the brutal re-structuring of the railway industry signalled by the Government's White Paper, *The Future of Rail*, and the subsequent Railways Bill published in November.

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Health and safety will mean just that. Measured judgements on difficult issues recognising the inherent safety of rail travel.

Network Rail's greater responsibilities will help produce a more joined-up and dynamic

has now published the SRA's research a few months after the Commission for Integrated Transport's own work. New high-speed lines would have the obvious benefit of significantly shrinking journey times between our main cities, but, importantly, they will also help us tackle the capacity constraints that are fast building up on the West and East Coast Main Lines.

Yes, we have to get the basics right before new high-speed lines can be built. But the clock is ticking for track capacity and we need to start thinking now for the longer term. We have learnt the hard way of the long lead times for major infrastructure projects. We also need to learn lessons on cost control and project management. Let's not get caught out again.

*The author is chairman of the Government's advisory body, the Commission for Integrated Transport.*