

The not-so-beautiful game



ANDREW GOODMAN

As the kick-off for the Industrial Action Cup Final approaches, it's hard for rail professionals to find favour with either of the opposing teams

IT'S A TRADITIONAL BRITISH SPORT, AN END-TO-END GAME of two halves, with the nation as the spectators and the travelling public as the football. Of course, it's been a regular (and wearisome) fixture in the political calendar for many years past, but for the first time this year the competition includes the side known mainly for its terrace chant: 'Nobody likes us – and we don't care.'

Yes, Bob Crow and Dynamo RMT have at last succeeded in getting into the Industrial Action Cup Final. For, like his plucky heroes at Millwall, last month he took the unloved RMT into a David and Goliath-style match with that Manchester United of the railways, Network Rail.

Perhaps that's enough football analogies, but the parallels really are too good to pass up. For as Crow and his union – just like his beloved team, Millwall – enjoy a reputation for being the bad boys on the block, so the bloated and expensive Network Rail, like Manchester United, is saddled with a ridiculously high payroll for a squad of overpaid and underperforming individuals.

As we went to press, further talks were planned between the two sides, so it could just be that the final showdown will be averted. However, call me a pessimist but I can't see that as the likely outcome.

Why? Well, firstly this is a confrontation that has seemed inevitable since Bob Crow became General Secretary of the RMT – the only real surprise is that it has taken this long to come to a head. I have to admit that over the last 18 months I have acquired a sneaking admiration for the way Crow has handled himself. He oozes a real passion for his job and seems to have assembled a team that operates with similar, boundless energy, launching itself head-on into every issue known to working people across the land. His press department is the most prolific within the industry, firing off e-mails outlining The Thoughts of Bob on anything from the war in Iraq to the workings of the Post Office.

It's all total conviction politics with Bob, and he has been pretty successful in ensuring that the union's campaigns receive widespread coverage and support – even where, frankly, those campaigns look woefully unrealistic. And, for me, that pretty much sums up the RMT's demands, currently being put to the Network Rail Board.

First, pay for RMT staff within Network Rail already compares favourably to the average. Then there's the winding up of the final-salary pension scheme. Here, Crow is playing to the gallery of public opinion, which now perceives that Something Must Be Done about pensions – but the facts are that only new employees will be affected (unlike many industries, where a lifetime's graft is being rewarded with long-held pension rights being snatched away).

Then there's the claim for travel facilities for all employees joining Railtrack, and now Network Rail, since 1996. This claim is just dumb, because it lies outside Network Rail's gift to grant. This issue, for the RMT, really stems from its argument for a return to a nationalised single entity for railways.

So, all in all, a pretty unjustifiable collection of demands. And, for once, Network Rail has been doing a sterling job in producing material to back up its position that the RMT

demands don't stack up.

A volley of press briefings from the usually moribund monolith has explained how signallers have had increases of 10 per cent in 2000, 12 per cent in 2001, 11 per cent in 2002 and 4 per cent in 2003, along with a decrease in the number of hours worked per week. Average earnings for signallers, says Network Rail, are now at £32,500, 72 per cent up on 1994 levels, and it goes on to point out that the RMT has already accepted a number of comparable pay offers – 2.8 per cent at Silverlink, 3.3 per cent at South Eastern Trains, and 3 per cent at Alstom, Balfour Beatty, AMEC Spie and Bombardier.

And Network Rail has also taken a leaf out of the RMT strategy in conducting a poll of the public to support its case against possible industrial action. 'Public oppose RMT rail strike plan' headlined the poll release, which stated that '85 per cent say RMT puts own interests before passengers'.

It's a compelling set of arguments, and normally I too would be singing from the terraces about how the RMT's claims were unjustified and would be a total waste of money. Except that, this time, there is a fatal flaw in the moral arguments at Network Rail. And that's the ludicrous, private sector-style basic pay packages at the top Network Rail Board.

Network Rail's own calculations put the cost of reintroducing the final salary scheme for all employees at £18m a year. Then consider the pay packages awarded to the top team; taken together, these come to well over the million mark. Then, on top of this came the bonuses announced last month. The RMT's press release screamed: 'Network Rail's five fat-cat bosses are to receive £350,000 in bonuses worth 20 per cent of their six-figure salaries.'

To get the full fizzing flavour of the vitriol, I shall quote the RMT reaction in detail:

'These bonuses are a grubby reward for squeezing Network Rail's workforce,' RMT general secretary Bob Crow said today. 'What are our members supposed to think when they are told to make sacrifices and the gov'nor walks off with a bonus worth more than their annual pay packet?'

'These bogus bonuses are being paid for by those who go out and get the work done – Network Rail's hypocrite bosses should hang their heads in shame. They can call it "financial efficiency" if they want to, but Network Rail are saving money by hammering the pension scheme, maintaining two-tier conditions and attempting to impose a stand-still pay deal.'

'Our members' loyalty to the railways is being rewarded by an attack on their pensions and an unjustified squeeze on their conditions and pay. As our ballot for industrial action draws to close this will be a timely reminder that Network Rail's bosses are lining their own pockets at our members' expense.'

And in this I am pretty near 100 per cent aligned with Bob Crow. High pay packages for top private sector executives – who live or die by their performance, and who are at the mercy of market forces and stropky shareholders – is one thing. But the Network Rail Board are, in reality, little more than nannies of a state quango, and their pay is not representative of this 'no risk' work.

There may be no case for the union demands, but the pious words of disapproval from the board of Network Rail ring very hollow indeed.



Will we see pickets on duty at stations again this summer?

Press Association

Where should the money go?



Here's a question: is the current level of investment in the railway sustainable? And would it benefit the economy more if it were diverted to investment in the road network? Paul Clifton listens to some unusual answers

THE GOVERNMENT IS ABOUT TO AGREE ITS LONG-TERM spending plans for transport. It is committed to chucking buckets of money at the railways; 48 per cent more investment over the next five years than the industry has been accustomed to.

And here's what the railway is up against in the battle for the budgets; an alliance of abbreviations. The AA, RAC, CBI, FTA, RHA and the British Chambers of Commerce have pooled their considerable lobbying resources. Roads, they point out, carry 92 per cent of all passenger traffic and 64 per cent of all freight. They have jointly placed newspaper advertisements calling for five of the busiest motorways to have an extra lane added. The construction bill would be huge.

The business community is constantly asserting that the cost of congestion is damaging to our national prospects. If our transport system grinds to a halt, the argument goes, then so will our whole economy. Really?

'Evidence suggests that involvement in new transport infrastructure brings only a very small impact on economic growth,' asserts Dr Greg Marsden of the Institute of Transport at the University of Leeds. 'A study in Germany found that its total investment in new transport infrastructure is worth a 0.2 per cent increase in GDP.' His views carry weight because he has been acting as an advisor to the Transport Select Committee.

'Big business views good transport as ubiquitous in western Europe. In other words it is not key to decisions on where to locate new investment. Why else would companies locate in the most congested urban centres? They go there despite transport problems and not because of them. They go there because that's where they can find skilled employees. Business will put up with the traffic.'

There is an undoubted link between transport and economic growth, but it is not well understood. Throughout history, our transport system has evolved whenever economic or military needs have required it. The earliest trackways across ridge lines evolved into drove roads and then turnpikes. Canals were overtaken by railways and eventually we got motorways and airports.

So when Labour came to power in 1997 and announced a halt to most new road building it was indeed a radical change of direction. You could even argue that the Government was attempting to overturn a process that had continued over thousands of years. It was therefore unsurprising that road schemes have gradually returned to the top of the agenda.

But a number of the multi-modal studies completed last year rejected roads previously regarded as acceptable. The Government has cancelled others, such as the Hastings and Bexhill bypass in East Sussex, which had widespread local

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support. The Twyford Down cutting on the M3 would undoubtedly be rejected if it were put forward today.

And last month the Department for Transport rejected plans for a £700m container port at Dibden Bay near Southampton on environmental grounds, despite acknowledging that Britain urgently needed new port capacity. Dibden had the potential to transfer more containers by rail than any other port proposal.

A decade ago, these decisions would all have been taken differently. Today, however, Dr Marsden questions the validity of business claims that congestion in Britain costs £15bn or even £20bn.

'Studies show that people aren't working shorter hours as a result of congestion. They're spending longer getting to and from work, which is different. It's largely leisure time that is being lost sitting in traffic jams.'

'The ESRC carried out a study into the percentage of people satisfied with the number of hours they work. The figure has fallen sharply between 1992 and 2000 across all levels of society – from high level professionals to unskilled manual workers. All feel less satisfied now.'

'Social sustainability is about meeting people's needs – and outside the conurbations, public transport is slower than the car for most journeys to work. It is not making social standards better, so it is not "sustainable". In the past

Road...



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decade more parents have said they feel they do not spend as much time with their children as they would like – the figure has increased, partly as a result of the increased journey times!

Politically we are not really geared up to change this situation. The talk of improving the balance between work and home life is not backed up by promotion of changes to the journey to work, or the work itself.

In next year's General Election it would be surprising if transport were to be on the election agenda of the main parties. The Conservatives have not, as yet, published any policies which differ radically from Labour. The politicians appear to have put it in the 'too difficult' box. That's a view shared by Dr Marsden: 'Look at what Michael Howard said in March: "We want to concentrate spending on our key public services that so desperately need reform: health and education." No mention of transport.

'Transport issues are much harder to grasp than the others. Choosing to buy a new life-saving drug is not a difficult concept. But should road surfaces be renewed after 20 years, or be forced to wait for 25 years? Most voters can't judge the relative merits of the options. Why should they have to? Transport spending is not really a party political issue.'

Despite the bad press on punctuality, rail has become very much more efficient at carrying people and goods. Passenger numbers are at their highest level for half a century without building additional railway lines, and in some cases without even buying new trains. Although punctuality is still down compared with a few years ago, it has not put people off travelling by train. One could argue that investment in road transport has been rather less efficient. And certainly less sustainable in the long term.

'We're not getting the most from our efficiency gains,' Dr Marsden told an audience in Southampton. 'We're designing more fuel efficient cars, but then buying ourselves bigger vehicles and driving them more. We're trading up. So the indications are that our total CO₂ emissions will actually rise slightly by 2010.'

Picture this: an environment-conscious commuter gets a bus to the railway station. There, on the platform, is an advertisement for Ryanair, offering £1 flights all over Europe. How can that be an incentive to encourage people to choose slower, more inconvenient but more environmentally sustainable transport?

For some years now, many of us have recycled our glass, tin cans and newspapers separately. As individuals, we have taken ownership of the waste issue, accepting responsibility for it. But we have not yet taken individual ownership of the transport issue, preferring to regard it as someone else's problem to solve. That puts the ball firmly in the Government's court.

Does rail offer real value for money?



Alan Whitehouse wonders whether the chance to relax, watch the scenery drift by and eat (or not, as the case may be) makes the case for rail versus road compelling enough

THIS IS THE STORY OF A RAIL JOURNEY; QUITE A LONG ONE, from Huddersfield in West Yorkshire to Kingussie, a small town just south of Inverness on the Highland main line. No, not a nightmare trip. Nothing went dreadfully wrong, but I concluded my weekend away wondering if, next time, I would prefer to drive.

Any trip begins with a ticket. In this instance a GNER Advance Saver at £59 a head from York to Kingussie. It is valid only on GNER services – and they operate just one train per day to and from Inverness, so there is little margin for error if things go wrong.

In fact, the sales clerk at GNER's telesales centre helpfully offered to book me through from Huddersfield. That's logical, I said. That'll be £30 extra for each ticket, he replied. £30? I asked. Surely it would be cheaper just to buy two Huddersfield-York tickets on the day? Yes, he agreed, but if we travel on GNER tickets and our connecting train was delayed we would be allowed to use a later train.

This is roughly the equivalent of my last visit to Curry's, where, having spent about £500 on a new TV, the salesman turned to me with a straight face and said words to the effect of: 'They don't make 'em like they used to, guv, better have the five year guarantee as well.'

And in fact a Huddersfield-York period return costs a whisker over £14, meaning GNER's offer of a through ticket with additional peace of mind was going to bag them an extra £16 of my cash. Hmm...

Come the day, come the journey. A cab from home to Huddersfield station costs another £9 (I know, I know, we could have caught the bus). Heeding GNER's warning about making the connection at York, we chose to travel half an hour earlier than we needed.

Well, almost. Horses on the line brought a 20-minute delay. Nothing Trans-Pennine Express can do about that, but they could have told us what was happening. Apart from one automated announcement of a three-minute delay, passengers were kept in blissful ignorance. In fairness, when I tapped on the supervisor's door to ask what was going on, they were helpfulness itself.

On board the train, gasping for a cup of tea, we asked about the refreshment trolley. 'There's one on board,' a totally uninterested conductor told us. But in the space of the 58 minute journey it never arrived at our seats in the middle of the train.

Still, there was plenty of tea on board the Highland Chieftain. Exemplary at-seat service all the way to Kingussie, with the trolley making a pass roughly once an hour. I deliberately booked seats in coach D – the 'quiet' coach – which these days comes adorned with little signs featuring puffy white clouds and legends such as 'drift away' and 'relax'.

Impossible when everyone ignores the quiet designation and GNER staff choose not to police it. I spent roughly three hours listening to someone else's second-hand music.

Arrival in the Highlands was to the minute, and instead of feeling frazzled by the long drive we were admiring the scenery right up to the last moment.

Although travelling to Kingussie, we were staying in Newtonmore, one stop back along the line. The Highland Chieftain does not stop there on weekdays, but it does on Sundays. Could we get the train back from Newtonmore, I asked the GNER sales clerk. No, was the response. I still do not understand why. All I wanted to do was not to use a tiny portion (three minutes' travel time) of a ticket and reserved seat I had already paid for. So, no flexibility meant another trip for our host, ferrying us back to Kingussie.

Heading south was another chance to admire the scenery, and not just in the Highlands. The ECML north of Newcastle is a gem, swooping along the clifftops as it heads through the Borders.

We would cheerfully have paid for Sunday lunch on board – we left at 10.33am and did not arrive in York until shortly after 4pm, so we were a captive market. Alas, there is no weekend restaurant service on GNER.

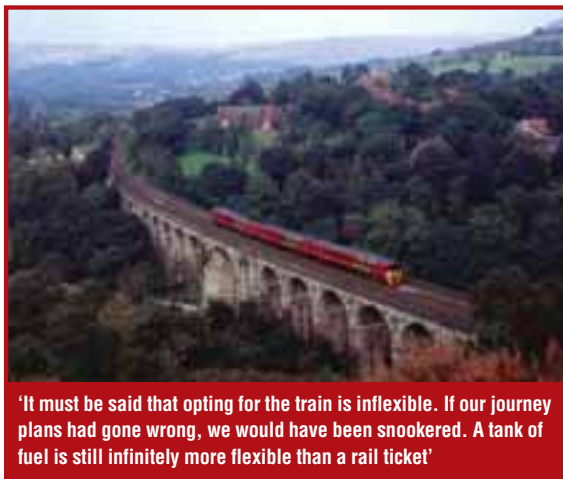
The trip home took exactly seven hours, including another cab fare. Totting up the total cost really set me thinking. £118 to GNER, another £28 to Trans-Pennine and £20 in cab fares comes to a hefty £166 for the two of us. I reckon about one-and-a-half tanks of diesel in my car would have covered the same trip at a cost of roughly £60.

So, broadly speaking, we paid a £100 premium for the privilege of travelling by train – £50 a head. Was it worth it? I am honestly not certain.

It was great being driven there and back, being able to read, have a cup of tea and look out of the window whilst constantly on the move. I think it would have taken roughly the same length of time to drive if the coffee breaks had been kept to a minimum.

But it must be said that opting for the train is also inflexible. If our journey plans had gone wrong, we would have been snookered. A tank of fuel is still infinitely more flexible than a rail ticket. And bear in mind that our GNER tickets were bargain basement ones, costing considerably less than a walk-up fare with the flexibility that would have allowed to spend an extra day with our friends, for example.

And there was no unique selling point, no 'wow' factor that made taking the train almost irresistible. Like being able to get Sunday lunch while flashing through the Borders scenery, for example. Maybe you can tell me. Next time I make the same trip, should I buy rail tickets? Or do what the majority do, and drive?



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