

EDITORIAL COMMENT

CHRIS RANDALL EDITOR

Alistair Darling's press briefing last month to unveil changes to the franchise map in the Midlands was a curious affair.

Hearing the transport secretary address the assembled hacks as 'you lot' brought to mind the angst-ridden press conferences of Graham 'do I not like that' Taylor, the former manager of the England national football team. Every time England lost, which was quite often, Taylor would berate the media for not finding something positive to report. 'Come on, smile,' he would demand angrily.

There was a similar feel about Darling's performance although, to be fair to the transport secretary, there is a lot to be positive about at the moment. Train punctuality is better than at any time since before Hatfield, there are hundreds of new trains carrying record numbers of passengers, and a confident Network Rail has announced ambitious plans for a £4bn development of stations.

So why then did a business-like Darling feel the need to gently admonish at least one journalist for a lack of enthusiasm? Could the audience's mood have been affected by the downcast appearance of Mike Mitchell, director general of the DfT's Rail Group, who was making a rare public appearance?

Mitchell spent 45 minutes grimacing and frowning as his boss fielded questions. He had the look of a man who would rather have been elsewhere – and he might just as well have been.

A briefing on a significant reorganisation of the



rail network ought to have been the perfect platform for Mitchell to raise his worryingly-low profile. Instead, the former First Group executive failed to say one word. After six months in the job, that's simply not good enough.

THE REACTION of victims of the Hatfield rail crash to the fines handed out to Network Rail and Balfour Beatty was both predictable and understandable. So, too, was the anger of survivors and the bereaved of the Potters Bar crash on hearing that senior rail managers will not face manslaughter charges.

Both events have led to calls for new corporate manslaughter laws. But threatening rail bosses with prison will not improve safety. Despite high-profile

accidents at Southall, Ladbroke Grove and Hatfield, safety on the railways is better now than at almost any time since the Second World War.

Of course, where there is negligence, as with Hatfield, companies should be made to pay. But the good safety record the rail industry now enjoys is a result of learning lessons from past tragic accidents – not the echo of a closing cell door.

A *WHICH?* report into Transport Direct, the government-funded online journey planner, has once again shown how horribly glitch-ridden the multi-million pound system can be.

In February this year *Rail Professional's* Paul Clifton spent a fortnight testing Transport Direct and decided he couldn't trust the advice it gave. Ten months later it seems little has changed.

A *Which?* reporter was told that a seven-minute walk was the best route between Yoker in Glasgow and nearby Renfrew. There was no mention that 200 metres of the 'walk' crossed the River Clyde. The report contains many more examples of comic advice that would make most travellers contemplating public transport reach for their car keys.

The £50m spent on Transport Direct could have been better used on more worthy projects, such as fitting out the new Thameslink station that is lying empty under Midland Road next to St Pancras station. Transport Direct is not only unreliable; it is a scandalous waste of taxpayers' money.

LETTERS

Sleepwalking into an energy nightmare?

Sir,
Paul Clifton's article on fuel and energy issues confronting the UK rail sector (*Rail Gets the Blues over Going Green, October issue*) was timely and very much on target. The position is obviously complex but it does suggest that the industry has been sleepwalking on the whole energy supply issue for some time. I suspect a long-term addiction to high sulphur gas oil will be a difficult habit to shake off.

The redeeming comment from Atoc's engineering director about the need to consider more investment in electrification was encouraging. Perhaps, at last, this issue will start to move up the agenda as rail is the only mode of transport able to use a cocktail of primary fuel and energy inputs. Some innovation in relation to the financing and technology could

dramatically reduce the cost of capital, which is always held out against more network development.

The autonomous energy requirements of the road, aviation and maritime sectors leaves them hostage to fortune in relation to fuel supply and price. The implications for the road transport sector are particularly onerous as the fuel issue, combined with the Working Time Directive, congestion charging, access limits, tolling and inter-urban motorway congestion, suggests the logistics networks and capabilities built around a less constrained environment will not be tenable. I hope that the rail sector does not go into passive mode and expect traffic to troop into its domain as the carrier of last resort. Rail surely needs to be repositioning itself on the basis of merit and energy efficiency, although there is not much evidence of that so far.

Phil Mortimer
Bognor Regis

Confused? You will be!

Sir

Richard Malins is absolutely right about the barriers at Paddington (*letters, October issue*). He could go on to say that, owing to the vast throngs of people around the barriers, it is impossible for those of us with tickets to see which barrier is for entrance and which for exit until we are actually right upon it. Then we are waved around the information kiosk as though we are a fly buzzing around the member of staff's head, only to have to fight through the disorderly rabble yet again. Matters are not helped when there seems to be no consistency over which is the entrance and which the exit. Recently, I went to the wrong one in the morning but, in the evening, what I thought was the exit was, by now, the entrance. I was waved away again. I have had a similar experience at Brighton.

John Brandon
Tonbridge


Offer of training help

Sir

I read with interest comments earlier this year about how the demise of the British Rail Management Training Scheme has been of detriment to the development of future management in the railway industry. As an ex-BR training professional I am surprised no one has picked up on this and looked for a way of delivering benefits to the new and evolving structure. I would be happy to discuss with any organisation ways to put a scheme into place. I am thinking of a rolling development programme, linking with workplace training and experience.

While recognising the need for something new, it would be useful to see a 'template' of the BR Scheme to stop us re-inventing the wheel while devising something that can deliver the same or improved benefits.
Richard Gutteridge
Arrowhead Training and Consultancy Services

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