

EDITORIAL COMMENT

CHRIS RANDALL EDITOR

When British Rail's freight businesses were sold to the private sector in the mid-1990s, the outlook for the sector was bleak. Britain's coal industry, which for so long had been rail freight's principal customer, was in terminal decline and there was no obvious new business to take its place.

Ten years later, rail freight is in considerably better shape than anyone would have dared to predict. The amount of freight moved by rail has gone up by 55 per cent and market share has risen by three per cent to 11.5 per cent. The three main operators, EWS, Freightliner and GB Railfreight have become competitive by ridding the industry of Spanish practices and replacing them with a 'can-do' culture that has helped win new orders.

The question now is: can this momentum be sustained? The Rail Freight Group, which lobbies on behalf of the industry, believes it can – but only with backing from government. RFG is forecasting a further 28 per cent increase in rail freight between 2003 and 2014, and its main concern is how this level of growth can be accommodated on an increasingly overcrowded rail network.

In a clever move, RFG has teamed up with the Freight Transport Association, which mainly represents road hauliers, to produce 'trade routes', a series of maps that predict where rail freight growth will occur over the next 10 years and the areas that are likely to suffer bottlenecks.



The results aren't pretty. Serious pinch-points are forecast on large stretches of the West Coast Main Line between Birmingham and Scotland; much of the East Coast Main Line; routes in and around Birmingham; and most of the London rail network.

The two lobby groups hope that, by highlighting the potential problem now, they can influence the Government as it starts work on the High Level Output Statement, which will set out what Ministers want from the railways between 2009 and 2015.

If the Government chooses to do nothing, freight will be lost to rail and road congestion will get progressively worse, with disastrous

consequences for business, the economy and the environment.

Over to you, Mr Darling! In a statement to Parliament in July, the transport secretary said the Government recognised the important environmental and economic benefits that rail freight can bring. He also gave an assurance that decisions about the passenger railways would take into account the impact on rail freight.

Well, actions speak louder than words.

The Crossrail Bill, currently going through committee stage, gives priority to up to 24 Crossrail trains on the western and eastern routes into London. If this were to happen – and admittedly it's a big 'if' because serious doubts still exist over the future of the long-delayed project – it would decimate the movement of freight along these important routes, driving goods off the rails and creating thousands of additional road journeys.

Then there is the decision taken earlier this year to merge freight facilities grants with grants for road and water traffic. If that wasn't bad enough, the £50m allocated for rail freight grants in 2005-06 will be slashed to £25m in 2007, for rail, road and water combined.

These are not encouraging signs for rail freight. It has to be hoped that they are only blips and that Darling proves his commitment to helping the industry grow by delivering a solution to those predicted bottlenecks.

LETTERS

FGW barriers are 'shambles not success'

I note that, in common with most of the other trade magazines, you have published the press release put out by First Great Western on its ticket barriers at Paddington (Barrier stops fare dodgers, *September issue*). An 'enormous success' they say. Just tell that to the many passengers arriving with baggage and tickets not accepted by the barriers,

struggling to exit the platforms. Absurd shambles might be a better description. As they crowd around the staff manning the barriers, the quality of ticket check has to be poor and the customer experience negative. And as for improved security, closing off four platforms (without gates on the footbridge) cannot make any difference to the overall position at Paddington. The company seems to assume that most of its customers are potential fare dodgers, but the evasion figure quoted is surely spurious since it

appears not to undertake any proper measure of ticket-less travel on trains.

The notion that ticket gates, designed for urban railway use, are some cure-all for crime on the rest of the system is a myth that should be challenged before this form of revenue control spreads much further. It is neither necessary nor appropriate for longer distance business, and even when magnetic tickets are in the correct format, the software does not adequately support certain period return or train restricted tickets. What was wrong with properly trained and deployed staff doing a thorough job, sensibly targeted? A bit difficult to manage perhaps, but the technical fix is not as effective or customer friendly as FGW would have us believe. And it's not cheap.

Richard Malins

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'Decisions must be made'

Sir

Alan Whitehouse hits the nail on the head

when he says 'don't hold your breath' over the prospect of a TGV style rail network in the UK ('Maglev won't solve capacity problems', *September issue*). What hope is there of building a much-needed new north-south high speed line, when it seems impossible to win approval for schemes such as Thameslink 2000 – bogged down in a public enquiry – or even the simplest of tram links that would ease congestion and reduce pollution in our busy towns and cities?

Sooner or later this Government will wake up to the fact that tough decisions have to be made about long-term transport planning.

Oil is a finite resource and according to some estimates supplies could run out in 50 to 100 years from now. Surely then it is time for politicians to finally come up with examples of joined-up thinking and devise a workable integrated transport plan, instead of making decisions that put road and rail at odds with each other".

Peter Hankham

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Rail industry conference 2005

Policy into practice
06 December 2005
09.00 – 16.30

Glaziers Hall, London Bridge, London

The conference will explore the way in which the rail industry has been shaped and has responded to regulatory pressures. It will look at how privatisation came about, the progress that has been made since and the challenges and opportunities that remain for the industry in the future.

For further details please contact Colette Walley, Special Events Co-ordinator,
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