

Lots of politics this month, I'm afraid, but there's also some good news on the technical front plus my tribute to Adrian Shooter with some memories of his early years.

Political battle for Williams-Shapps reboot

Network Rail urges greater private sector role in GBR

Luminate Traffic Management marches on

Let us now praise famous men – Adrian Shooter

You might have expected that when the Williams-Shapps Plan for rail (W-SP) was launched in May 2021, the first task for the Department for Transport would have been to convert Mr William's 'guiding mind' into the structure of the proposed Great British Railways (GBR). The second task would be producing a schedule for a staged transition from today's post-Covid howling chaos to a rail network 'under single national leadership'.

But in the 20 months since the W-SP was published, sundry fundamental things haven't happened. Like a basic organisation chart for GBR. Or recruiting a railway-savvy Chairman plus Chief Executive designate to inform the structure of the business they will run.

Meanwhile, within Government, both the WS-P and GBR have become tarnished through association with their creators, former Transport Secretary Grant Shapps and former Prime Minister Boris Johnson. So nowadays in top railway circles it is OK to mention just the 'Williams Review', but instead of GBR you should refer to 'Reform'.

Reflecting this change in mood-music, new Transport Secretary Mark Harper has called a time-out on reform. Appearing before the Commons Transport Committee, he was asked whether it was still his intention to fully implement the plan for rail in the form of GBR.

Mr Harper replied, 'It is very much my plan to achieve the intention behind that idea, which is to get the railways to have a guiding mind behind them, to have a more integrated position between how the different parts of the industry work'. However, he needed to 'take some time' because, 'as you know', there are different views about how exactly we achieve that, not just outside Parliament but inside it'.

It turns out that these 'different views' focus on the concession model for train operations proposed in the WS-P. Under GBR's Passenger Service Contracts (PSC), contractors would manage train operation for a fee. It is now being argued that such concessions would deny the railway the entrepreneurial flair and innovation of the private sector.

Anyway, full Reform won't be happening anytime soon, as the Bill giving GBR its legal powers has missed the current Session of Parliament. Mr Harper said that DfT would be looking at including the Bill in the legislative programme for the 'Fourth Session'. This is likely to start towards the end of this year, with the Bill potentially becoming law during 2024.

Meanwhile the official line is that there are lots of things to be getting on with until legislation is passed. In the column I go into some detail on the activities of DfT's Rail Transformation Team and the GBR Transition Team.

Private operators needed to drive recovery

Complementing Transport Secretary Mark Harper's concerns over the future of Great British Railways, Rail Minister Hugh Merriman sought proposals from the railway industry. One result was a joint presentation from lobby group Rail Partners and the Great British Rail Transition Team (GBRTT). This had the catchy title, 'The sector coming together to agree the next steps of rail reform'.

Since GBRTT is a subsidiary of Network Rail, I assume that the sentiments in the presentation are also supported by Network Rail. In particular that, 'the (rail) sector recognises that it needs the creativity, innovation and efficiency of train operators to succeed'.

And, also, the corollary that, 'to do this, we support progressively dialling up the level of cost and revenue incentivisation and risk transfer within (passenger) service contracts, starting immediately'. In other words a reversion to franchising – the central feature of what former Conservative ministers have referred to previously as 'a botched privatisation'.

As a reminder, the W-SP recommended that GBR would 'specify the timetables, branding, most fares and other aspects of the service and agree a fee with the passenger service operator to provide the service to this specification'. In most contracts, fare revenue would go to Great British Railways, with operators delivering to the specification and managing their costs.

Contrast this with franchising, where each private operator designed their own timetable, set many fares and took revenue on their part of the network. Franchising competitions were based on long term revenue forecasts, involving predicting the performance of the economy. Getting this wrong brought down several franchises.

Despite this experience, the presentation argues that the guiding mind must take policy direction from government, set clear strategic direction 'and then pass on the responsibilities and levers that create the conditions in which all parties can bring their best ideas to the railway and ensure it is run as a system. This will lead to an empowered private sector that can bring forward 'innovative solutions'.

But how does this prescription align with Andrew Haines's speech to Northwest business and civic leaders in December, Andrew was characteristically forthright. Having explained the need for reform he posed the rhetorical question from his audience: 'if the industry needs to change why don't you as a rail boss just get on and do it'?

His blunt answer was, 'The reality is, at the moment, I can't do it. And nor can anyone else in a fractured industry'. One aspect of this fragmented industry is that operators and Network Rail work to different targets.

Another drawback highlighted by Mr Haines was that today's structure 'means it is impossible for anyone organisation to shift all the different train companies' services around in the timetable to unlock capacity, or give passengers services that are evenly spread out where there are multiple operators'.

And yet the return to quasi franchises in the Network Rail/Rail Partners submission for private operators to take revenue and cost risk would make this eminently sensible flexibility much more difficult and expensive to implement.

Apologies if all this leaves you wondering what is going on. Anyway, for those who believe that John Major got it right, here is a quote from a GBRTT spokesman. 'Any future model needs to bring in private sector expertise, be attractive to the market and make sure that competition really delivers for customers and taxpayers who fund the railway'.

Welcome to the 1990s!

Luminate Traffic Management to link Regions

This column has been covering the development of Traffic Management on the UK Network since Network Rail began its ill-fated Traffic Management System procurement in 2009. five years later, with requirements descoped and delivery dates missed, Derby-based Resonate offered to supply its Luminate integrated Traffic Management system for a one year trial on the Great Western Main Line at its own expense. If Luminate provided the expected benefits the installation would become permanent, funded through a maintenance and support contract.

What has been very much a joint development exercise followed, with customer and supplier working together to develop and demonstrate both Luminate's capabilities and also its integration within railway operations. With the system acquired, Western has since piloted successive enhancements, most notably integration of Crew & Rolling stock and the Connected Driver Advisory System (C-DAS)

In March 2020, Resonate was awarded a 10 year contract adding the area covered by Anglia Region's Liverpool Street IECC to the Great Western Main Line. This has now been followed by a further contract, signed last November, which dwarfs these previous schemes.

Stage 1 of the new contract will see the extension of Luminate across the remaining routes of the Anglia and Western Regions. Stage 2 is the most significant, managing operation of the Elizabeth line by connecting the existing Luminate deployments on Anglia and Western. The final stage will see extension of Luminate across the remaining parts of the Western region plus the whole of the Wales Route.

Meanwhile, although the pandemic and the subsequent industrial actions have delayed some Luminate developments, Crew & Stock is in use by Great Western and C-DAS is ready to go.

Basic DAS has been in use with certain TOCs for some time. This uses an on-board computer system with a database including the route profile and the timetable. The DAS display advises the driver on the speed required to run to time.

Connected-DAS, as the name implies, connects the train to the Traffic Management system and provides real time optimum speed information. It was demonstrated on the GWML for Intercity trains approaching Airport Junctions from the west, regulating their speed to avoid having to brake as a Heathrow Express service entered the line ahead.

Adrian Shooter remembered

Inevitably, much of the response to the news that Adrian Shooter had died in a Swiss clinic focused on his achievements with the Chiltern Railways franchise. But it was the British Railways career development system which made him.

So for my personal tribute in this month's column I have traced his BR career, particularly his period as Area Manager St Pancras in the 1980s. Having joined the British Rail Graduate Trainee scheme as an engineer, his early career gave Adrian a breadth of experience unavailable today. From Depot Manager at Heaton, to Area Maintenance Engineer, Carlisle, followed by Assistant Mechanical & Electrical Engineer Southern Region.

Then, in 1984, British Rail decided that this promising young man needed a larger stage to employ his talents and Adrian was appointed Area Manager St Pancras. Area Manager was a 'total railway' post, with complete responsibility for running the route between St Pancras and Bedford.

It was also a demanding job because the first stage of Sir Bob Reid's vision of the business led railway was to remove an entire layer of management. With the traditional operating Divisions gone, the Area Managers were the Region's direct

link with their passengers.

In 1985 I shadowed Adrian for my 'One man's day' series of articles. If you can find a copy of the November 1985 Modern Railways you can see the 37 year old Adrian already deploying the management approach that would make Chiltern such a success.

All sort of issues were covered during that day, ranging from catering opportunities at St Pancras, to rolling stock failures and station trading opportunities along the route. The afternoon was taken up with a major policy meeting.

Getting rid of the Divisions had meant that the functional managers within the Areas could not handle the additional work. The afternoon meeting was to start the process of passing on more responsibility to Supervisors.

With privatisation in 1993 the 19 BR passenger business units were reorganised into 24 'shadow franchises'. While all but one of the established business units went to the incumbent, the separation of Thames and Chiltern meant that Adrian secured what only he saw was the great opportunity of running the recently modernised Chiltern route.

As we now know, Adrian's Management Buy Out joined with construction Group John Laing to create M40 trains. Unlike many of the franchise bidders, which based their subsidy profiles on cost cutting, Adrian saw that the way forward with his freshly refurbished railway was to go for growth – and M40 Trains duly won the franchise.

What follows is recent history. But I believe it showed Adrian to be the pre-eminent entrepreneur of the privatisation era.

Roger's Blog

It's been all on-line events since the New Year, including an excellent session with the Lead Director of the Great British Railways Transition Team organised by the Railway Forum. This was followed by two two-hour sessions on Network Rail's Target 190 plus programme to bring down the cost of signalling renewals.

I'm not sure whether my attention span is still up to 'Zoomathons' much over an hour. Clearly I must get out more.

Several planned site and factory visits have had to be deferred since the industrial disputes began. However, there's one just down the road I have been waiting for, which is now ready for a visit to show me some hardware and software.

Meanwhile there's plenty to research and write about, even though the uncertainty over GBR and the on-going industrial dispute means that the industry continues to drift.

Roger