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PARLIAMENTARY ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR TRANSPORT SAFETY

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Where next for railway safety?

For many of us, 1999 will be dominated by the events of last week at Ladbroke Grove. In the same way as we remember the 1980s in the images of the Herald of Free Enterprise and the crashed rolling stock at Clapham, the burnt out wreckage of Coach H will be imprinted on our collective memory.

Much of the subsequent discussion has focused, quite rightly, on whether technological solutions to signals passed at danger (SPADs) would solve the problem. The loss of life in the accident has reopened the debate about whether or not Automatic Train Protection – or its equivalent – would represent a good investment for safety. The previous government had decided not to require the fitment of ATP on the privatised rail network. The present government appeared to support that decision by backing Train Protection Warning Systems, the cheaper alternative, when it issued Regulations on TPWS in August. After Ladbroke Grove, that decision is bound to be reconsidered.

The technological solution, however, is only part of the answer. There are a number of measures that the industry and the regulators could take now to support public confidence in the railway system. Many of these were set out in a report published by the Railway Inspectorate in September on the management systems in the railway industry covering signals passed at danger.

The number of SPADs in 1998/99 totalled 643, a rise of 46 from the previous year. As the report pointed out, many of these did not have the potential to cause harm as they resulted from a misjudgement of distance or braking capability. Leaves on the line can really lead to a lack of adhesion. What really worried the Railway Inspectorate was the rise in serious SPAD incidents from 42 in 1997/8 to 52 in 1998/99.

As the column inches on Ladbroke Grove grew in the aftermath, one key point shone through: the issue of signal SN 109. This seems to have been the subject of a number of SPADs yet action to reduce the problem or to resite the signal was not taken. Because of this failure, HMRI has now served an enforcement notice on Railtrack to get action taken. The line into Paddington cannot be used until the terms of this notice are met.

Such a rapid response is welcome as were the other actions taken by the Inspectorate. These followed the points made in the earlier report. There needed to be a clear plan of action to tackle signals passed regularly at danger. There should be better, more consistent briefings for drivers. There should be better training for drivers, including emphasis on defensive driving techniques. Human factors issues, especially fatigue arising from rostering, should be considered in more detail.

Railway disasters enter the national psyche. Although few people travel regularly by train, the British still view the railways with a mixture of pride and nostalgia. Events like that at Ladbroke Grove shake our national confidence to its foundations.

This has led to a number of people making claims that profits are being placed before safety. I find that claim hard to justify since many of those close to the accident were clearly visibly affected by the appalling nature of the tragedy.

In the minds of many ordinary citizens, however, two changes in railway culture have become inseparable: the use of Quantified Risk Assessment (QRA) and the process of privatisation. The two have been running in parallel during the 1990s. Although the industry may have seen them as completely separate, for the public they have become inextricably linked.

There is nothing inherently wrong with QRA as a philosophical approach to safety investment. It asks professionals to identify the likelihood of an event, the consequences, and the costs of taking remedial action to prevent recurrence. It enables the identification of where best to apply resources to achieve maximum

benefit. If we want to save lives or reduce accidents, we need data to help us in our decision making.

If QRA helps to identify where to bring benefits, the corollary is also true: it identifies where spending money is not beneficial. In that sense, it can be used as an approach to cut safety measures as well as to defend them. It can be used, as the Railway Inspectorate pointed out, to justify doing nothing rather than doing something.

That is where privatisation may be interpreted as having an impact. Market forces can improve services for the customer. We are now seeing rises in passenger numbers and journeys on the rail network. But the same forces also encourage providers to find ways of reducing costs. All too often, in every industry, safety is seen as a burden rather than a benefit. For the critics of privatisation, QRA and cost reduction have become one and the same. Any suggestion that we need a rational debate about how best to improve safety becomes impossible to propose.

The last week has seen a growing divide in the public discourse about railway safety. The profession has used the language of reason. The relatives of victims and their solicitors have emphasised the language of emotion and anger. Both are right to use the terms that they do but both are also wrong. Ladbroke Grove has changed the nature of discussions about transport safety. It reminds us of the fallibility of our transport system, of the need for short and long-term measures to make everyone safer, and of the need to bring together both reason and emotion to make real progress.

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