



SIGNAL FAILURES

WHILE Labour MPs wake up belatedly to the omission of high-speed trains from the government's consultation on Heathrow's third runway (highlighted in *Eye* 1199 almost a year ago), the growing support for a new electric railway has put the British Airports Authority (BAA), which owns Heathrow, on the defensive.

Last month BAA held a high-speed-rail "conference" to rubbish fast trains as an alternative to a new runway. The *Guardian* dutifully reported the event as a "blow" to "Tory plans".

But hang on. High-speed rail plans have been developed for years without support from the Tories (who only adopted the idea recently), and cutting Heathrow short-haul flights is just one of the justifications for high-speed rail. A new railway up the centre of England, for example, would leave existing rail routes free to carry more local and regional passengers and freight than they can now (currently, mixing all types of train on the same tracks requires clearing the decks several times an hour for 125mph trains). The knock-on effect would be a cut in road traffic on many of England's most congested arteries, to the benefit of those making essential road journeys and the environment.

BAA is now reduced to pleading that Britain must build a high-speed railway *and* the extra runway. As if. Its best hope is that Gordon Brown signs Britain up to the runway in such a way that future Tory ministers could say they can't scrap the project. The omens are good for BAA. On 29 October Brown confirmed: "We said as a government that we supported in principle a third runway." On the same day, transport secretary Geoff Hoon said a new strategy group would study "longer-term solutions" including "consideration of wholly new rail lines, including high-speed rail". Labour has knocked back the rail alternative so often (Eyes passim since 2002) that it's still at "consideration" stage.

PS: The government was delighted last week

when BAA announced £230m for London's £16bn Crossrail, which Brown insists must have some private finance. It must be a coincidence that Brown's Heathrow runway decision is expected next month.

Fuelled you!

WHILE profits shrink at companies exposed to competition, Britain's biggest bus firms are enjoying whopping rises.

This year they blamed fare rises of 10 or 20 percent on rising world oil prices, failing to mention their fixed-price fuel deals (*Eye* 1216). Last week **FirstGroup** boss Moir Lockhead unveiled results for the six months to 30 September, telling investors: "Our UK Bus division has delivered another very strong performance. Total revenue rose by 7.1 percent to £578.6m as a result of volume growth, including concessions, and pricing." Profit increased 26 percent to £60m; passengers increased just 2 percent.

"Concessions" are significant. Free OAP bus travel (paid for by local councils) went nationwide in England in April, so the elderly no longer notice fare rises. People too poor or young to have cars are stuck with buses as "pricing" is adjusted, and on most bus routes there's only one firm.

A **Stagecoach** trading statement showed a 9.2 percent rise in UK bus revenue in the 24 weeks to 12 October. And in the first six months of 2008, **Arriva's** UK buses delivered a 20 percent rise in profits. Announcing the second fare rise in eight months, an Arriva bus boss explained in July: "Like all road users, Arriva is feeling the impact of increasing fuel costs." But last month Arriva told shareholders: "Our hedging policy is protecting the group from material impact during 2008. The final average price paid for fuel in 2008 is anticipated to be 28.2p per litre, before delivery and duty."

Now oil prices are at their lowest for over a year, the big bus firms can fix cheap fuel again; but that's unlikely to prevent fare rises next year. Recession could hit those firms' rail revenues, especially where job losses reduce commuting; but they could make up for that by squeezing even more from their captive bus passengers.

'Dr B Ching'

PLANE STUPID?

WITH decisions imminent over extra runways for Heathrow and Stansted, what of the UK's other airports where operators are pushing for more flights from bigger airports?

East Midlands Airport: EMA has applied for a runway extension, which it says is to allow larger freight planes to land. Planes are already allowed to take off and land at EMA throughout the night because of its distance from a major city. But there are thousands of people living in villages nearby who already suffer from disturbed sleep thanks to the noise (see *Eye* 1166). They fear an extension would open the way for jumbo jets and allow EMA to expand its holiday flights business. A decision from the local planners is expected within six months.

Leeds Bradford Airport: Private equity firm Bridgepoint recently bought the airport and will submit plans for a £70m expansion and revamp of the terminals this month to cope with more flights and passengers – from under 2m passengers a year to 5m by 2013.

Robin Hood Airport: This South Yorkshire airport has launched a draft masterplan, aiming for more than 10m passengers a year by 2030. Bizarrely, the plan includes 750 new homes near the airport access road – all of which will be affected by the noise and pollution.

Bristol Airport: A massive two-storey "walkway" (four times the length of the terminal) is being mooted here, which campaigners claim is a sneaky attempt at expansion. North Somerset Council barred the airport from building the structure under "permitted development" earlier this year. Despite being told to go through the normal planning application process, the airport is now asking for a certificate of lawful proposed use or development.

Lydd Airport: Plans for a 444m runway extension and a new terminal in Romney Marsh, an internationally important wildlife site, were condemned last month by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds as "one of the most inappropriate and dangerous locations to run a large airport". Shepway council will consider the application in the new year.

MEDICINE BALLS



Think of the children

WELL done, Department of Health. With the help of assorted royal colleges, it has produced an excellent document, *Commissioning Safe and Sustainable Specialised Paediatric Services*, spelling out why we need to limit the increasingly complex treatment of sick children with rare diseases to centres with the expertise, staff and resources to do the job properly.

The Bristol inquiry made similar recommendations seven years ago that, according to consultant paediatric cardiologist Ted Baker, "have yet to be fully implemented... in particular the need to undertake an adequate volume of work to promote safe practice".

Resistance to reorganisation is still widespread. Surgeons are self-protective about their desire to have a go at rare operations and may not want to relocate to a larger unit, where their work can be properly scrutinised. Politicians are reluctant to close down units in key constituencies and the public and press cry foul if they try. And patients want to be treated as close to home as possible (although most parents would travel anywhere if it meant their child was much more likely to live).

There are now 23 different specialised paediatric services, from bone marrow transplantation to brain surgery, which rely on each other's expertise. This makes planning very complicated but the new report is a consensus agreement on which services need to be provided alongside each other on the same site (eg cancer care needs to have a critical-care unit on hand in case children go into organ failure after

chemotherapy). So there really is no excuse not to get on with it.

There are still 11 hospitals performing child heart surgery, with some struggling with too few staff and trying to avoid another Bristol. Heart surgeons at least know their figures, but there is an equal number of child brain surgeons, some without specialist accreditation, who don't collect and compare results and have no idea about the quality of their care. They get away with it because most parents of children with brain tumours are so grateful for any care they don't question whether it's up to par.

In the absence of legislation, the only way to ensure that critically ill children get a good standard of care is if those purchasing the care have the balls to insist on it. The DoH is now dominated by two surgeons, Ara Darzi and Bruce Keogh, who know little about general practice but should at least be able to bring surgeons into line. The wannabe NHS chief executive, Mark Britnell, is obsessive about "world-class commissioning" and this new document tells him how to do it, with the miraculous agreement of the royal colleges. If we don't stop the dabblers now, we never will.

● Several ENT surgeons have written to M.D. to endorse his view (*Eye* 1220) that the NHS is wrong to deny girls (and boys) the chance to be vaccinated with Gardasil, which protects against more strains of virus than the government's chosen vaccine (Cervarix).

As well as stopping most genital warts and a lot of cervical cancer, it could also prevent many laryngeal warts, which are extremely unpleasant and costly to treat. The virus is acquired during childbirth and some children suffer "gross tracheal problems" that continue into adult life. This might be avoided if the NHS had access to a licensed vaccine widely available in Europe and America.

M.D.

A BLOODY MIRACLE

SURPRISE, surprise. Twenty years after Lord Owen, the former Labour health secretary, was told that key documents relating to his efforts as a minister in the 1970s to ensure the country's haemophiliacs received "clean" blood products had been shredded, they have miraculously appeared on his desk.

Thousands of haemophiliacs and others receiving transfusions were infected with HIV and the fatal liver disease hepatitis C through contaminated blood imported from high-risk donors, prisoners and the like, in America. The practice continued long after concerns were raised and many haemophiliacs have since died or are chronically ill.

After a long campaign by activists, this scandal is finally the subject of a public inquiry by the former solicitor general, Lord Archer of Sandwell.

Lord Owen was keen to give evidence: in 1974, he had promised that the UK would end the importation of unsafe blood products, and that the UK would be self-sufficient. He had been shocked to discover in the 80s, therefore, that after he moved on to the Foreign Office his pledge had been ignored and many more people had been infected. When he tried to obtain copies of his ministerial documents, he was told they had been "inadvertently destroyed by an overzealous junior civil servant". Other key blood-policy documents were also apparently shredded and excluded from the government's 2006 report.

Owen's newly discovered papers, however, counter successive government suggestions that there was no meaningful commitment because the risks were not fully understood.

Campaigners still hope Archer will produce a hard-hitting report that provides at least most of the truth, an overdue official apology and compensation on a scale to match that given in other countries.