

Fatal Railtrack Wrecks Are Markers of Britain's Decline

by Alan Clayton

Amanda Foster had been to the buffet car on the train on which she was travelling and had purchased a Coke. The Leeds express on which she was travelling home from London, on Oct. 20, was only 14 minutes into its journey. Before she actually managed to get the can to her lips, the car lurched violently to the left, causing her to let go of the can and grasp her seat with both hands. There was a terrible piercing noise of metal on metal and for a second or two the thought of death crossed her mind for the first time in her young life.

Finally the car stopped, and for a moment or two there was an eerie silence. The Great North Eastern Railways (GNER) locomotive had been whipped off its high-speed track by a broken rail. Amanda Foster was fortunate, but of her 155 fellow-passengers, four were dead and 35 injured. Britain had suffered its second major, fatal train wreck in a year's time.

Great North Eastern Railways itself is just one of the 100 privatized rail companies which now operate the train services on the island. Many, like GNER and the Great Western Railways (GWR), have quite preposterously taken the names of great 19th-Century pioneering rail companies, although nobody is fooled, as much of their rolling stock is clapped-out junk. The Frankenstein's monster of this privatized ruin is Railtrack, which owns and operates the tracks, stations, signalling systems, and the infrastructure as a whole, and from which the train companies hire their track time.

The Crashes Were Avoidable

The appalling truth is that this crash, and the much more horrific (in terms of people killed) crash at Paddington Station less than a year before, were entirely avoidable. In December 1999, the maintenance inspectors of the track maintenance company, Balfour-Beattie, had walked this section of track and had stated that they were "utterly horrified" by the condition it was in. On the very bend where the London to Leeds express was to come to grief, the engineers found clear signs of corner-gauge cracking—a technical term for signs of wear along the top corner edge of the rail.

No immediate remedial action was taken by Railtrack—indeed, no remedial action was taken at all—and when Balfour-Beattie further inspected the section of track on Sept. 4, nine months after its original "situation critical" report, it indicated to Railtrack that catastrophic track failure was

imminent. This time Railtrack acted: not to renew the rails, but to authorize a much cheaper remedial process known as "grinding." This "bargain basement" remedial action failed, and a few days later the defective rail broke, killing four and leaving 35 injured.

The Whiz Kids and the 'Big One'

This, like the accident at Paddington a year ago, was an accident waiting to happen, and indeed many within the rail industry believe "the big one" has yet to occur. Given the state of corrosion of many of the bridges and viaducts throughout the island, the utterly horrific scenario of a packed commuter train plunging over a collapsing bridge or viaduct seems almost imaginable.

The man responsible for Railtrack is Gerald Corbett, a City of London whiz kid who worked previously for Dixons and the drinks company Grand Met. He was part of the new post-privatization corporate culture. One senior manager of the former publicly owned railway system likened the privatization process to "the coming of the Khmer Rouge." "The year they took over was year zero; anything that happened before that they did not want to know. Train culture, and all the safety that went with it, went out of the window."

Certainly since Corbett took over, the value of Railtrack shares on the London stock markets have risen remorselessly, even during the months after the Paddington wreck. This is, of course, why Corbett was hired, and it certainly seems unlikely that the priority of "stockholder value before passenger safety" will continue much as before. Increasing stockholder value, while running down a system, is of course the classic model of asset stripping, and the only reason the rail system has not totally collapsed by now, is the continuing massive injection of taxpayers' money to shore it up.

In the 24 hours after this latest crash, for example, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a massive further subsidy of just over \$7 billion to shore up the system for another year or two, although delays and cancellation throughout the island are now endemic, and the railways are now presenting the Blair government with a crisis greater even than the fuel crisis. Indeed, these crises have now merged, as new port blockades and a new energy-emergency declaration from the government, are coming on top of the government call upon Britons

to avoid the trains while a “national inspection” is in progress. Already paying Europe’s highest prices for gasoline, and warned off the trains, the British subject is near to being immobilized.

The crashes have also led to growing hostility to deregulation and privatization policies more generally. As the Scottish daily *The Herald* reported on Oct. 25, “The chaos on the railways has increased demands for Tony Blair to call a halt to New Labour’s air traffic control privatization proposals, with opponents saying that all such privatization would do, would be to create ‘a Railtrack in the sky.’ ”

The paradox is that the public *raison d’être* of privatization was to get the “subsidy junkie” rail system off the taxpayer’s back. Subsidies are now running at around three times what they were to the state-owned railways. Like the fuel crisis, of course, this rail crisis is but yet another tremor of the approaching financial collapse, as international financial institutions loot companies and institutions in desperate attempts to hold off the day of judgment.

History of the Collapse

There is, of course, an even more significant aspect to the collapse of the British rail infrastructure, and that is related to the collapse of Britain itself. Indeed, this has been touched upon by top U.S. economist Lyndon LaRouche several times over the past year or so, as he drew international attention to the “great power” pretensions of “Great” Britain, and the internal reality of economic erosion and imminent collapse. The collapse of Britain can be easily traced to at least 1939 and the outbreak of war with Germany.

There are two examples that highlight vividly this remorseless decline. I found during a recent speaking tour of the United States, that many Americans found it difficult to comprehend that as recently as 1940, the Royal Navy was more or less equal in fleet size and firepower to the United States Navy. Indeed, it was the awesome power of the Royal Navy that prevented German invasion and occupation of Britain in 1940, as the German High Command realized that its entire army would be blown out of the water in any attempt to cross the Channel.

The other is related to Lyndon LaRouche’s current international attempts to return to a Bretton Woods financial system. As late as the early 1950s, the British pound sterling was equal, in fixed exchange rate, to around \$4 to the pound. The pound/dollar exchange rate is now around \$1.50 to the pound. During the 1950s, the British government was forced into several internationally humiliating devaluations of the pound, and was therefore a leading force in the move away from this fixed-rate system.

Enters Thatcher

Into this catalogue of remorseless decline there arrived in 1979 Margaret Thatcher, with a political program of “putting the *great* back into Great Britain.” The extent of the decline

was soon tested, however, when, three years after she came to power, the Argentine government re-occupied the Malvinas Islands, known in Britain as “the Falklands,” which Britain had confiscated from Argentina in the 19th Century. Despite the abusive vitriol and rhetoric about “tin pot dictators” and “banana republics” that Thatcher used, her High Command advised her that it was at least doubtful that Britain, with one modern and one clapped-out aircraft carrier, had the military capacity to reoccupy islands over 7,000 miles away.

Despite that, Thatcher went ahead with her “Task Force.” It was a decision enormously popular around London and the so-called “Home Counties,” counties such as Kent and Sussex, now frequently described in American parlance as the “stockbroker belt,” where dwell many of those oligarchical and landed families who derive their status and security from the House of Windsor. Decisions were made at the highest levels of NATO, the Pentagon, and other U.S. government departments, that, at the height of the Cold War, a principal NATO partner could not be subjected to the international humiliation of military defeat by a minor military power. France stopped the export of the Exocet missiles with which the Argentine Air Force was sinking ships of the Royal Navy, particularly the state-of-the-art “anti-missile destroyer” *HMS Sheffield*.

Most important of all, the United States supplied the British commanders with high-grade satellite intelligence, which kept the Argentine Navy and its huge aircraft carrier off the high seas and unable to give the air cover necessary for successful defense.

The narrowness of the British victory appalled Thatcher, and firm policy decisions were taken to reduce financial assistance to the public sector and plough it into military spending. Additional loot was to be taken from nationalized and public companies to feed to the City of London speculative bubble in stocks, offshore bonds, derivatives, and so forth. Hospitals, schools, roads, pensions, water and sewage, power generation and, of course, the railway infrastructure all had support slashed. It is only now that all these chickens are coming home to roost. The “glory” of the Royal Navy has been officially restored by the commissioning of four huge Trident submarines, with missiles supplied, of course, by none other than that great psychological client-state of Great Britain, the United States.

The railway system is at this time in chaos as “massive emergency repairs,” financed of course from the public purse, are under way in vain attempts to reverse a quarter-century and more of neglect. Delays and cancellations are now endemic throughout the island, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. All this is commentary on a Britain in irreversible decline. It is a factor that international policy-makers, particularly those in the United States, really will have very soon to take on board. The forthcoming international Bretton Woods Conference would be not a bad starting point to do so.