

# A Not So Merry Christmas: Great Britain at Year's End

by Alan Clayton

A not so merry Christmas, or even, in quite a considerable number of cases a thoroughly wretched Christmas, would perhaps best describe the situation experienced by the population of what Charles de Gaulle once characterized as "the Protestant island," and which currently could take on the more appropriate appellation of the protesting island, as the appalling crisis on Britain's railways escalates remorselessly, with commensurate personal, social, and economic consequences.

All the myriad railway companies currently operating in the United Kingdom, announced as late as December 12th that bookings made up until that date were not guaranteed, without a telephone call to check whether the train to which the booking applied, were still actually running. The telephone numbers announced for these checks were, in many cases, medium or even long distance, putting extra strain on the personal budgets of old people and families already meeting the considerable expenses of Christmas reunification.

Even this very telephoning process itself was another example of a Britain in continuing decline. Inevitably, the caller was met with a digital voice with the information, "Sorry, all our advisers are busy at this time, please try again later." Later, and later again, and very much later still, when the indefatigable and the utterly determined did establish contact, there was another digital voice advising the caller, "You are 16th in the queue, we apologize for this delay, our adviser will be with you as soon as possible."

At last, five or ten dollars to the phone company later, a human voice is reached. In about five out of six enquiries, the response has an inevitability. "Sorry, that train has been cancelled due to speed restrictions and reduced timetables, and unfortunately there is not another train available at that time." Nonetheless, islanders have learned to be thankful for small mercies, and there is even a small measure of gratitude from a weary populace, when the final Christmas greeting is transmitted to them with the reassuring words of, "You will be refunded in due course."

The 357 speed restrictions applied by Railtrack, which are causing much of the current chaos throughout the island, should, however, not be seen as a consequence of its city-slicker executives suddenly developing a concern for public

safety. In fact, the Crown Prosecution Service in England and the Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland, both roughly equivalent to the Criminal Division of the U.S. Justice Department, indicated after the October 9th Hatfield wreck, that any more passenger deaths on the railways could result in criminal charges of corporate manslaughter, charges which, if successfully prosecuted, could bring substantial prison sentences. Railtrack and train company executives are looking, therefore, very firmly to their own safety, rather than that of the travelling public.

## 'Systematic Failings'

Railtrack faced a further blow on December 15th, when an all-party committee of parliamentarians accused it of "systematic often-repeated failings," which led it to stagger "from one crisis to another in recent years." The report said that appointment of the Board's only engineer, commercial director Richard Madden, was not enough, and the Railtrack board needed more people with "knowledge and experience of running railways." On the face of it, bad news for the stockholder-value brigade, but the oligarchical structures around the House of Windsor which control Britain, are more than capable in dealing with this sort of thing. The British government is currently pouring in around \$15 billion worth of subsidy annually, subsidies without which Railtrack would, of course, collapse. It is worth speculating for a moment just how many instances of this and similar things there are throughout the world, and to what extent the public purse is staving off, for another little while, the reality of financial collapse.

The human cost of the crisis is enormous, with postal services disrupted and the Post Office frantically attempting to hire aircraft to keep the system going over Christmas. Neither is the sight of children and little old ladies stranded on unmanned stations, where waiting rooms have long since been boarded up for "reasons of economy," waiting for connections which will never arrive, a particularly edifying Christmas sight. The stress on drivers has been enormous also, with diversions along unfamiliar track now commonplace. The driver of a freight train operated by the freight train company English, Welsh, and Scottish Railways was removed from his cab on 14th December, 15 miles out of

Glasgow, by British Transport Police after a signalman reported that he appeared to be drunk. He was in fact drunk.

As a consequence of the near-total collapse of the railway system over the Christmas and New Year period, increasing numbers of people are taking to their cars, putting massive pressure on the already inadequate motorway system on the island. The M6 motorway, for example, which begins at the Scottish border and runs south to the industrialized areas of the English midlands, invariably reaches gridlock most weekdays at peak hours, at a massive interchange at Birmingham known colloquially as "Spaghetti Junction." The chaos there over the holiday period will be horrific. Similarly, the M25 London orbital motorway, which carries traffic from the north 'round London to the Channel Tunnel and the channel ports, is now universally known as "the largest car park in the world."

### Scotland's Railroads

There are other aspects to the crisis. U.S. economist Lyndon LaRouche has, for many years, put forward highly creative ideas and initiatives to move the world back from the virtual economy to the real economy. One such initiative was the European Productive Triangle, a concept which received a particularly sympathetic reception in Scotland, whose economy, on the edge of Europe, is one of the most vulnerable in Europe.

A critical key to Scottish participation in such a triangle, would be first class rail links to the Channel Tunnel, and a lot of hope was placed on the "Eurostar Project," a fast direct train link between the Scottish cities and the tunnel. On 13th December, the project was cancelled, and passengers traveling between Scotland and continental Europe will have to cross London by bus, taxi, underground, or indeed on foot to Waterloo Station and the European train. Brian Donohoe, the only Scottish Member of Parliament on the Westminster Parliament's transport select committee, issued a press statement, saying that Scotland had "been cheated and short-changed."


In Scotland, the vitally important Glasgow-to-Edinburgh line, as well as experiencing track problems, is reaching crisis levels in another area, in that its new high-speed trains are failing to meet the specifications demanded of them. The Glasgow-to-Edinburgh line is one of the busiest in Europe, and an obvious candidate for electrification, which successive London governments have refused to contemplate.

Scotrail, one of the most reliable, or perhaps more accurately, one of the least unreliable, of the privatized rail companies, operates all the non-cross-border passenger operations in Scotland. It ordered around 200 combined diesel units from Alstom train manufacturing company in Derbyshire, which were said to have the same acceleration and braking specifications as an electric train. Around a quarter of the fleet of this brand new rolling stock is currently broken down and out of service at any one time. Recently, at an intermediate station between Glasgow and Edinburgh, a train arrived with two

cars instead of six, and the police had to be called, as passenger rage threatened to escalate into a full-scale riot. The service is intended to provide four trains per hour on a 47-minute journey between the two cities. Two trains per hour currently have a journey time of one hour and five minutes, a revolutionary and truly staggering improvement of 12 minutes, on the second-generation steam locomotives which opened the service in 1862!

In a bid to overcome this problem, Scotrail is considering purchasing trains from the Japanese company Mitsubishi, and Hitachi has also been making overtures to the U.K. market, with a more reliable product than can be manufactured on the island. Japan's currently operating high-speed trains are already faster than the next generation of trains currently only at the development stage in the United Kingdom. On some of the main routes in England, only 3 out of 690 trains under order have actually been delivered.

Christmas and New Year's have been a huge commentary on the state of Britain. However, it should be clearly understood that empires in their death throes are often at their most dangerous. As the United States enters a period of four years with a politically crippled President lacking international authority, there can be little doubt that Britain, despite its accelerating internal collapse, will have another try at presenting itself as the principal world power.

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