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Book review

RAILPOLITIK bringing railways back to the community, P. Salveson. Lawrence & Wishart, London (2013) £14.99 (pbk), ISBN 9781907103810

This new, highly political book brings together important themes and concepts developed by the author over the last 20+ years through his extensive back catalogue of research publications and literature on rail policy and communities. However it is much more than that. The author has consistently practised what he has researched through direct engagement and leadership within the rail and communities sector, and as such RAILPOLITIK not only reflects core concepts of ideology, aspiration and hope, but does so through a practical, operational understanding of the reality of the current rail environment.

The book starts with a well-positioned review of rail policy and the changes between public and private ownership, which have been fluctuating on the political tides, since the 1830s. The author demonstrates how there is nothing new in modern rail politics, as everything we debate today has been discussed before and is part of the ongoing repeating cycle of conflicting ideas, political posturing and vested interests masquerading as social responsibility. Within this review, for students interested in modern corporate governance, the book introduces historical examples of ownership and control models either applied or promoted within both the public and private rail sectors of the UK, and the ideas and outcomes of their application. These are shown to apply across a wide scalar range from mutualisation, through syndicalism to capitalism.

At the heart of the book is the exploration of ideas as to how the current UK rail system can be improved both to serve and be more responsive to the needs of the community, whilst becoming more efficient and delivering better value for money. Our current system of rail privatisation has clearly not worked in delivering the aims of the original policies upon which it was based, and this is reflected with a critical review of the failed structures, organisations, ethos and culture which developed in the early years post privatisation. For such an overtly political publication, I was pleased to see the level of balance the author has sought to acknowledge throughout and no more so than when reviewing the options as to how to improve upon the current status quo.

The drivers behind the current neoliberal approach to rail operations within the UK, and our stringent commitment to a vertically separated rail network is challenged, not least through a review of the European policies used in the UK to justify their separation. There are alternatives, lots of them, and the author considers how the same EU policies were interpreted and applied by other member states and what this has meant from a functional, operational, financial and accountable railway perspective.

The importance of both the railway to the community and the community to the railway is central to the proposed solution, and the role of both voluntary rail user groups and more recently community rail partnerships is explored with good examples of how partnerships based on shared goals and aspirations can deliver real tangible benefits for little investment. The policies upon which their development originated is considered, with recognition of the need for a refresh and greater vision.

This all leads to the main purpose of the book, the discussion of ideas for a new approach to the future delivery of rail services in the UK, with genuinely radical conceptual proposals for a significant change in emphasis, control, ownership, governance and funding. However, whilst radical in its ideas and concepts, the author recognises the need to avoid a revolutionary approach and details how the changes proposed could be achieved through a programme of incremental change to existing bodies, and by taking advantage of existing franchise deadlines to both pilot and introduce the alternative railway model.

The book is a stimulating and genuinely interesting think piece. It knows the challenges it faces, and is clearly very political, conceptual and ambitious in its delivery. And rightly so. In an era where all political parties know the failures of the current system, but have no vision to make it better, it is a welcome antidote to the policy vacuum. The book is most suitable for rail practitioners and policy makers, as well for students and researchers with an interest in the railway, governance, democracy and community.

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