

Comment

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Don't penalise our rail commuters

BRITAIN has the highest rail fares in Europe, yet our rail services are not conspicuously better than our neighbours'. Sir Roy McNulty's official review of fares, published today, has as its starting point the fact that our railways cost 30 per cent more to run than they should – costs borne by tax and fare payers.

Some of Sir Roy's suggestions are uncontroversial: that Network Rail should work more closely with the rail operators, giving them the same objective of moving freight and people efficiently. This is common sense. His recommendation for no overall increase in fares is sound.

But where Sir Roy will draw fire is in his suggestion that off-peak fares should rise to manage demand. He may be right that there is too abrupt a distinction between peak and off-peak fares. Yet for most commuters, the timing of their working day is beyond their control. Moreover, the fare structure is already bewilderingly complex, as he recognises. There is also a limit to how much the train companies can charge before the burdens on commuters – and on London's ability to create jobs – become intolerable.

The review's other suggestion is that costs can be controlled by reducing staff costs. This is easier said than done; if ticket offices close and staff at stations are cut, the losers will be passengers, not just rail workers. But he is right that staff and management wages should be contained.

The fundamental problem with London and the South-East's railways is a lack of capacity, which can only be addressed by speeding up the programme of lengthening platforms and adding more carriages to trains. But as the Public Accounts Committee has pointed out, the problem is that rail operators' contracts do not include a requirement to increase capacity. There is no legal obligation on them to expand fleets or improve stations to lessen overcrowding. Closer co-operation between Network Rail and the rail companies, and more tightly drawn franchises, could yield results.

What London's commuters want is a decent service and greater capacity on their trains. They already pay high fares for a frequently shoddy service. Their concerns must come first.

Clarke's gaffe

THE Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, has promised to "choose my words more carefully" after the explosive row that followed his careless remarks referring to "serious rapes" – as if some rapes were not. As a lawyer, it should not have been beyond the wit of Mr Clarke to have acknowledged the sensitivity of the subject when he suggested that there could be lesser sentences for rapists who plead guilty at the outset rather than pushing for a full trial. Like murder, all rape is horrendous, but some rapes are more horrendous than others. That is already acknowledged in sentencing guidelines and Mr Clarke could have made the point without gratuitous offence.

The trouble with this episode is that it seems to be part of a recent pattern of ministers announcing policy changes prematurely. Like David Willetts, minister for higher education, Mr Clarke has the capacity to think aloud carelessly. Greater coherence is badly needed.

London's health

IT is plainly true that London's health needs, given its diverse population and concentration of teaching hospitals, are very different from those of other parts of the country. The Mayor's new think-tank of councils and health professionals to lobby for London's needs is welcome acknowledgement of that reality.

EARLIER this week, a veteran City commentator sent round his regular bulletin in which he said that Dominique Strauss-Kahn's arrest for alleged attempted rape just went to show that "bedroom frolics" ought to remain private.

Another, also male, media columnist spoke of Strauss-Kahn being a "sexy beast". In *The Times*, Anatole Kaletsky wrote: "I have no idea whether Mr Strauss-Kahn actually attempted to rape a woman or committed any other serious crime at the New York Sofitel but I do know that a man who is about to achieve his lifetime ambition of becoming president is unlikely to throw it all away for a moment of sexual gratification..."

And Kenneth Clarke, the Justice Secretary, insisted some rapes were not as "serious" as others. When challenged over whether "rape is rape" he replied: "No, it is not."

Anyone who wondered how far we've advanced as a non-sexist society has only had to read and listen to some of the responses to Strauss-Kahn's arraignment to realise the answer is still not very far.

As it happened, I spent yesterday afternoon at the Professional Boards Forum event, held in London. It's run by two women, Elin Hurvenes and Jane Scott, and aims to raise the number of women sitting on major company boards. At the offices of PwC were 36 prospective female non-executive directors – all high-achievers in their own careers, all looking to add a directorship – and 20 or so, mostly male, company chairmen.

The idea was that they networked, tackled a daunting fictitious problem that could beset a board, got to meet the men sitting at their tables, and, hopefully, further down the track, would themselves become directors. I say hopefully because the omens are not good – at present only 13.4 per cent of directors of FTSE 100 companies are women, while 14 FTSE 100 companies currently have all-male boards.

Those figures, as Hurvenes and Scott would quickly point out, are better than they were. Since February this year and the publication of Lord Davies's *Women on Boards* report for the Government, in which he said the target should be one-third women directors and if that was not achieved voluntarily the proportion might have to be enforced, there has been an improvement. The Professional Boards Forum is today launching BoardWatch to monitor that progress.

Even so, the journey is not exactly a sprint. Anyone doubting that had only to look at the calibre of the women present yesterday and question why it is that they are not already serving as non-executive directors.

Confirmation came from Sir Roger Carr, president-elect of the CBI, who was also there as chairman of Centrica. "We are on a positive wave," said Carr, "but we need to keep moving on."

Carr's heart and head are in the right place – he's more pro-equality than many of his CBI predecessors. But he continued to speak of the need for boards to boost their "diversity" and could not help himself when referring to company chief executives as men.

Since when does opening up power to a body of people who constitute half the population equate to "diversifying"? As one of the women hopefuls said: "If companies are thinking of us in terms of diversity", it invites them to ask which other minorities they should also be considering."

After the Professional Boards Forum,



Gender politics: Justice Secretary Ken Clarke is confronted by campaigners after his comments yesterday

Business needs new laws to bring women on board

The Strauss-Kahn and Clarke rows show we are still a long way from being a genuinely non-sexist society

Chris Blackhurst
City Editor



Carr went to the CBI annual dinner at the Grosvenor House Hotel. The employers' organisation can claim, rightly, that the outgoing president is a woman: Helen Alexander, the former boss of the Economist Group.

But any doubt as to the extent of the gulf that exists was surely laid to rest by the sea of men in black tie. It was a sight that has changed little over the past couple of decades.

They may nod and smile at the notion of sharing their boardrooms with the opposite sex but the lack of women and the choice of words, in the City and elsewhere, in reference to Strauss-Kahn, tell a different story.

We've had a woman Prime Minister and chief of the CBI. We've had the "Blair babes" entering Parliament (and now "Cameron cuties"). But, in truth, we're nowhere near achieving equality.

Legislation against discrimination has made an impact on the workplace – not conclusively by any stretch but there has been a marked shift. At the top, though, we fall shamefully short and until that alters, nothing else profoundly will.

Reluctantly, we have to accept that quotas are the only solution – in politics and in the City. Men will huff and puff, and complain that there is not a suffi-

cient talent pool to justify the giving up of seats at Westminster and on boards. But until they're required to make the concession, there never will be (it also implies that males who reach such heights only do so on merit – which is patently, and frequently laughably, not the case).

The fact is that women had to chain themselves to railings and leap under horses before they secured the vote: but for the bravery of the Suffragettes, they would have been patted on the head by men and smiled at and denied a meaningful voice.

Other countries have introduced legal measures. In Scandinavia, companies are obliged to create women directors. In Spain, 40 per cent of directors must be women by 2015. In France, Christine Lagarde, the finance minister and possible successor to Strauss-Kahn at the IMF, is moving in the same direction.

Here, we prefer the non-mandatory but slow approach. Women in the UK may get there in the end. Why, however, does it need to be so stuttering and uncertain? The attendees I witnessed at the Professional Boards Forum yesterday were perfectly capable of ascending, yet for now they must sit and wait.

For some, it was an enlightening experience. One of them said: "I've sat next to chairmen of FTSE 100 companies and realised I am no different from them."

Sadly, that remark and the reaction of many men to the Strauss-Kahn case highlight how far we still have to go.

The omens are not good. Only 13.4 per cent of FTSE-100 directors are women... and 14 of those companies have all-male boards



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