

## [Just another day on the trains](#) [1]

Written by [Tom Clougherty](#) [2] | Wednesday 26 March 2008



I had a typically nightmarish journey into London yesterday after the Bank Holiday. I arrived at Ipswich station to discover that all the trains were stationary (they had nowhere to go) and were running hours behind schedule. The wonderfully unhelpful announcements just said, "passengers for London are advised not to travel today". No replacement bus services were offered. I wasn't surprised: I can't remember the last time I had a post-weekend commute that wasn't disrupted by overrunning engineering works, signal failures, or some other problem.

The thing is, everyone blames the train companies (i.e. the privatized rail operators) for these sorts of problems. Yet it is actually Network Rail (the renationalized version of Railtrack) that is to blame. And the trouble with Network Rail is that it just isn't accountable to consumers. The only thing Network Rail are accountable to is the Rail Regulator ? which is set to fine them £14 million for the mess they made in the New Year, when everyone was trying to get back to work. However, this is a particularly imperfect kind of accountability ? it doesn't amount to much more than the government claiming back part of its subsidy whenever things go seriously wrong.

I'm increasingly coming around to the view Iain Murray expressed in [this](#) [3] ASI paper, *No Way to Run a Railway*, that the railways should be vertically re-integrated. That would mean the train companies would take over responsibility for the track, rolling stock and stations in their networks. That would certainly strengthen accountability to customers and increase co-ordination between maintenance and transport (Network Rail did not even tell National Express East Anglia what was going on yesterday). It might also create greater incentives for private sector investment in the railway as well.

*P.S. If anyone is interested in questioning the rail regulator, Bill Emery, he's doing an ASI Power Lunch on May 27. Contact Steve ([steve@adamsmith.org](mailto:steve@adamsmith.org)) or 020 7222 4995 to request an invitation.*

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