

## French farce or tragedy?

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THE European Union's decision to allow competition on international rail corridors, which came into force at the beginning of this year, is already stirring up acrimony even before the wheel of a competing train has turned. Some countries, such as Austria, Britain, Germany, Italy and Sweden, have already gone a stage further by allowing competition on domestic inter-city routes, but while the legal framework may be in place to allow competition, all too often new private operators discover numerous obstacles to starting their services.

The crux of the problem is that while the incumbent national railways are happily trying to launch new services in neighbouring countries, they are often fighting tooth and nail to prevent competition from other national railways or new private operators in their own countries. Coupled with this is some old-fashioned national protectionism dressed up as a concern over safety. Currently a battle is raging on the potentially-lucrative route from London through the Channel Tunnel to new destinations in continental Europe.

There are two elements to the battle: Eurostar's decision to purchase Siemens high-speed trains to expand its services from London, and plans by German Rail (DB) to introduce services from London to Frankfurt and Amsterdam. Eurostar's existing trains were supplied by Alstom and are based on the original concept for TGV with power cars at each end of the train and articulated trailer coaches in between. IRJ understands that the two main bidders for 10 new trains were Siemens and Alstom, both offering 400m-long distributed-traction trains. After what Eurostar describes as a complex, rigorous and transparent tender process in which bids were evaluated under the same criteria, Eurostar awarded the contract to Siemens.

This immediately provoked what can only be described as an outrageous press release from two French ministers: Mr Jean-Louis Borloo, minister of state for ecology, energy, sustainable development and marine affairs, and Mr Dominique Bussereau, minister of state for transport. The statement begins with the ministers expressing "their amazement at Eurostar's failure to take account of the applicable safety rules in the call for tender for replacing its trainsets." The concerns revolve around the introduction of distributed traction in the Channel Tunnel and train length. They also point to the three fires which have occurred in the Channel Tunnel and say that "no deterioration of the safety level is conceivable."

In March the Channel Tunnel Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) completed a review of the safety rules governing the operation of passenger trains following consultation with existing and proposed train operators. The IGC examined whether changes should be made to 10 rules. It rejected changes to the requirements for a train on fire to be able to keep running for 30 minutes to enable it to exit the tunnel, that a train must be able to operate on 1% gradients, exit the tunnel with 50% of traction power available, bring a train of the same type out of the tunnel, and to prevent smoke ingress into trains. It also rejected diesel trains.

The IGC accepted the request to abolish the need to split a train in the tunnel in an emergency. The IGC has also accepted the principle of distributed traction trains provided their traction equipment has automatic fire detection and suppression equipment and fully-equipped cabs at each end. The current rules stipulate a minimum train length of 375m excluding power cars, which is the distance between cross-passenger emergency exit doors. The IGC says operators wishing to run shorter trains or trains in multiple without interconnecting gangways will have to prove that they have satisfactory evacuation procedures. Hence, the recent evacuation trials carried out by DB with two 200m-long ICE trains. The IGC will only grant changes to operating rules provided the current level of safety in the tunnel will be maintained or even improved.

So the French ministers' assertion that distributed traction presents a safety risk is unsubstantiated nonsense as the IGC has stipulated that such trains must have the same level of safety as trains with power cars. In any event, the production of single-deck high-speed trains with power cars has ceased. Only Alstom still produces power cars, but for double-deck

TGVs. The Japanese have been operating distributed traction high-speed trains without incident since the first Shinkansen in 1964.

Are the French ministers trying to say that distributed traction is unsafe? Perhaps all Paris metro and RER trains should be withdrawn until RATP and SNCF can prove that distributed traction is safe underground. To suggest the fires in the Channel Tunnel as justification for banning distributed traction is scurrilous. As Eurotunnel CEO, Mr Jacques Gounon, points out, all the fires in the Channel Tunnel have been caused by trucks on Eurotunnel Shuttle trains. The French ministers are playing the safety card to force operators to buy an old design of French high-speed train or to stifle competition.

Railways often claim that they face stiff competition from air and road. This is true, but it is not the same as having a train from a competing operator standing on an adjacent platform offering a service to the same destination. Fair competition encourages companies to do better on price, comfort, service quality, frequency, and reliability.

The high-speed line between London and Lille including the Channel Tunnel is underused, so the introduction of new services will help to justify the vast public investment in these assets. Competition is here to stay, so it is about time the rail industry and the French government accepts it.