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Chasing other peoples' dreams in his Presidential Address, Wim Coenraad broke through the ruling political correctness and gave us a signal engineer's dispassionate analysis of the European Rail Traffic Management System (ERTMS). Wim is uniquely qualified to present this long overdue professional assessment, having been a founder member of the ERRI A200 working party which began work on the ERTMS specification over 17 years ago.

True, quite a few railways have ERTMS schemes in service, but the key aim of cross border interoperability, allowing trains to race across Europe unhindered by borders, is still a long way off. Reflection this lack of progress the latest aspiration is to set up five international corridors, the first to be operational in 2012.

Wim queried whether our industry can be considered sustainable given the cost and timescale of ERTMS. I would argue that the lack of sustainability rests not with the industry but the European visionaries who imposed a signalling system designed to meet political objectives rather than, as in the past, exploit new technology or respond to the needs of railway operators.

ERTMS had three political objectives: to break the power of the old state railways by enabling open access operators to run international services unconstrained by signalling standards; to break the link between national railways and their domestic suppliers, using open specifications to encourage competition; and to encourage new entrants to the market from outside the industry, ideally driving down prices even further in the process.

But, Eurostar, Thalys and other services happily run non stop across borders. Their bogies may be covered by aerials, but interoperability doesn't seem to impose reliability penalties. Signal engineers have already risen to this challenge.

Equally, on national preference, the signalling industry is already pan-European, the major suppliers having subsidiaries throughout the community. When it comes to technology, 'thinking global, acting local', is already a fact of life. As for innovative new entrants bringing down costs, that simplistic slur has been exposed many times in the past – sometimes expensively.

Of course, ERTMS will roll on and one day become the standard signalling system across Europe – at a price. And equipment from different manufacturers may be interoperable. But my immediate concern is that in the UK, the eventual success is being used to justify current inactivity.

For example, the Department for Transport argues that investment in new electrification schemes should be deferred until ERTMS is available to avoid the cost of immunising signalling against traction return currents. Waiting for ERTMS cab signalling would also avoid signal sighting problems caused by the support structures.

Even more worrying is the widespread belief that ERTMS Level 3 will increase capacity, avoiding the need for investment in extra tracks. That was the big idea behind the West Coast Main Line modernisation in 1985 and 22 years later moving block on the main line is no nearer.

So our new President's Address should be mandatory reading within Whitehall and throughout the railway industry. Meanwhile, as outgoing President John Francis pointed out last month, the priority has to be getting the day job under control, not prematurely chasing other peoples' visions

**Roger Ford** *ComprIRSE*

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