

Text of Address

by

Robin Moira White

to

20th Annual General Meeting of West Somerset Railway Association
on 19 July 2014

Fellow members, it is with GREAT SADNESS that I rise to urge you to REJECT the Chairman's report.

I have been trusted to advance a collective position on behalf of those of us who see the need for change in the Association. I am humbled by that trust.

Never, in 35 years of attending Railway AGM's, have I come across a group of Trustees have lost their way SO comprehensively.

The AGM is the formal occasion when the Trustees are held to account by the membership. In calling on the meeting to REJECT the Chairman's report, I am, in effect, calling a vote of 'no confidence' in the approach recently adopted by the Trustees, and so am also calling for the resignation of the Chairman and those Trustees inextricably associated with that approach.

Just a word or two of introduction.

WHO and WHAT AM I?

For those who don't know me, I am Robin White.

I AM and have been a Railway volunteer for 34 years, since the age of 16. In those 34 years I have seen the rise and rise of our

wonderful Railway by the efforts of its volunteers, staff, managers and Committee's.

I am a passionate supporter of our Railway, and I have been a member of the WSRA for over 30 years, and am privileged to be a life member. I have served as Trustee and Association Chairman, and have also held positions on the WSR plc Board and WSSRT Committee.

Many will know me from my efforts, flowing from my professional work as an employment and discrimination law barrister, to ensure fairness in procedures adopted by all parts of our Railway and other heritage Railways

What am I NOT?

I am NOT a member of any group with any perceived or potential conflict with the Association, such as the FoWSR Group

I did NOT oppose the Association's freehold bid.

I am NOT a person who believes that fault lies, at least historically, ALL on one side in the dispute we have endured between the Association and WSR plc for some years now.

I have NOT been calling for the resignation of the Association Trustees over many months over the freehold issue alone.

I might NOT, therefore, be thought LIKELY to be a person challenging the Association Trustees in the way that I am today. Why am I doing this? Why am I saying that we should ALL vote down the Chairman's report?

I will explain.

The background is that we have had some years now of damaging internal strife, and that cannot continue.

There are presently three areas of concern.

FIRST – the manner in which the freehold bid has been conducted, and the way it is now being clung to.

SECOND – the approach the Trustees have been taking to members, and

THIRD - - the way in which this year's elections for Trustees have been conducted.

I will deal with each in turn.

The freehold issue has been the background to recent events, and we will start there.

The Association bid for the freehold did not begin well, with the Association 'springing' its bid on the Company.

We then had a long period when loyal supporters of the Association, such as myself, had little or no useful information from the Association Trustees. I just DON'T BUY the suggestion that this was because of a necessary confidentiality agreement with Somerset County Council. If so, why were the WSR plc, engaged in a parallel bid, able to provide useful information to their supporters?

Where matters have gone COMPLETELY, UNARGUABLY wrong is what has happened SINCE freehold sale has been kicked into the

long grass by Somerset County Council. And mark MY (and the Council leader, Councillor Osman's) words, it is in the VERY long grass. While Councillors themselves are under investigation, SCC won't be selling ANYTHING to ANYONE ANYTIME soon.

This pause was the PERFECT opportunity for an olive branch from Association to the plc.

Everyone would have been DELIGHTED, we could have breathed a sigh of relief and begun to sort the relationship out.

What did we get instead?

FIRST - A press release which completely failed to acknowledge the changed circumstances and would have been worthy of King Canute (if Vikings had had press officers that is)

SECOND - A WSR Journal and attached flyer which was one of the most abject exercises in self-justification I have seen for a long while., and

THIRD - Trustee Nick Nichols standing up at the WSR plc AGM attempting to justify the Trustees position to the complete embarrassment of everyone present – apart, apparently, from himself.

The second significant area of criticism is the CULTURE in which the Trustees have been operating and the way they have been treating members.

The LIFE-BLOOD of Heritage Railways is inclusivity. We find a way for ALL to contribute to the Railway they love.

If I can wave a Union Jack for a moment, INCLUSIVENESS and FAIR PLAY are hallmarks of Britishness.

Instead we have had:

FIRSTLY - Abject failures to keep members informed to which I have previously referred. But also a inexcusable failure to answer reasonable enquiries made to the Trustees,. By way of example, only this week I, as one of the candidates asked a question about the voting arrangements for today and had neither acknowledgement nor answer – and I am far from alone.

SECONDLY - Exclusion, wholly against the constitution of the Association of members wishing to join who might be seen as troublemakers – I have recently had to get involved to have one such member re-instated where, I understand, Trustee Peter Chidzey had directed their subscription be refunded without a SHRED of justification for exclusion. And the member received no word of apology when he was reinstated.

We also seem to have a high degree of PARANOIA amongst the Trustees. My THIRD example in this area is that I understand the Trustees have taken to NOT holding Association Committee meetings in Brunel House on the basis that they believe that Brunel House may have been bugged by the plc..... I ASK YOU!

And then THIRDLY in the significant areas of concern we come to this year's Trustee elections, which is where the present Trustees have REALLY lost ME....

I appreciate that the Trustees have felt under attack. But the Trustees are guardians of the Association's process, and have a

responsibility BEYOND their own preservation in ensuring a fair, open and transparent process. This they have signally failed to do. They have been GERRYMANDERING

What have the Trustees been up to?

FIRSTLY, there was the co-option of Chris Walters.

Since last year's AGM, there has been a vacancy for one Trustee. This raised the prospect of at least one new voice on the Committee.

BETWEEN the request for nominations and the appearance of the voting papers Chris Walters was magically co-opted.

Co-option should be used rarely, to fill an important position where a vacancy cannot be tolerated for a long period.

Chris Walters is, no doubt, a very decent chap but he has no special skills that I can see which required co-option to the Board of Trustees and, in particular, co-option just before a contested election.

I note also that there have been two Trustees' meetings and this AGM since his co-option on 2 June and of these he has attended NONE

This was an act of naked gerrymandering to fill the vacant slot, and , offer our highly valued but plainly more remote members who live away from close contact with the Railway, a further re-electee. Naked Gerrymandering.

Next in time was the banana skin of the candidate missed off the voting papers. Given that this was re-electee candidate Dick Holland, this has to be cock-up rather than conspiracy, but it set the scene for the next item of Gerrymandering.

With the corrected voting papers we got a further electoral address by the three re-electees.

Trustee Peter Chidzey is on record on the public Forum as say that this is FINE as all candidates were OFFERED the opportunity to purchase the membership list and could have sent out a further address themselves. He also comments that there was no restriction to the 150 words we candidates were asked for.

More BALDERDASH I have not heard in a very long time.

If there was an offer to purchase the membership list, no one made it to me, and last time I looked, I was a candidate. David Randles, I know, has been trying to gain access to the membership list for MONTHS and has been denied access, so this alleged access statement is just UNTRUE.

The additional, improper address document went out on headed notepaper, with the corrected ballot paper. It is blank on the reverse, so there was space for a further address from the other candidates – but, of course, no offer was made to us.

Completing this devils trilogy has been third instance of Gerrymandering . A number of members have called me to complain that Trustee Dick Holland has telephoned them at home in the evening, no doubt using the membership information, as he was someone that the members who have contacted me have assured me they had never given their details to. Several are ex-Directory.

The Chairman and Trustees have LOST the confidence of the membership. I have been asked repeatedly for advice from members unable to attend today who wished to put in a proxy form. The usual advice would be to enter their vote, name the Chairman as their proxy and all would be well. This year, many members no longer have that trust in the Chairman. What a terrible indictment.

Phew!

So we have Trustees who:

- have lost touch with reality over the freehold bid,
- who are operating the Association with absolutely the wrong culture, and
- who cannot be trusted with our electoral process

So what now?

I call on ALL members to REJECT the Chairman's Report as an expression of our displeasure.

The Chairman, Trustee Peter Chidzey and Trustee Nick Nichols are inextricably linked with the policy, approach and Gerrymandering I have drawn attention to. THEY, in particular, MUST, in all conscience, take a vote to reject the Chairman's report, either in this Hall or overall, as a vote against them. If they are honourable men, they will step aside.

The other re-electees, Dick Holland and Nigel Bruce-Robertson, should consider whether they should stand down before the election to be held in a little while. Similarly Chris Walters should reconsider what he has been drawn into. (A difficulty, of course, is that Messrs Holland and Walters are not EVEN here.)

I know that there ARE SOME Trustees who have been very unhappy with the approach over the last year and especially in recent weeks. I KNOW the incoming candidates could work with them.

The Trustees should LISTEN to this vote and CONSIDER their position. I respectfully suggest that there be a 10-minute adjournment for them to do so AFTER this vote has been taken.

MEMBERS.

We HAVE a once-in-a generation chance to get the Association's place in the Railway sorted. We MUST NOT have another year of strife.

A vote to ACCEPT the report is a vote for continuing strife, dissent and decay.

A vote to REJECT the report is a vote for peace, regeneration, and a fresh start.

Members, I call on you to REJECT the Chairman's Report.

Thank you.