



Release – 17th October 2003
From: The Paddington Survivors Group

Re: Comments by Transport Minister Dr Kim Howells

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3191432.stm

The Paddington Survivors Group deplores Transport Minister Kim Howells most recent comments on safety in transport.

Dr Howells again times his comments at an extremely insensitive moment, coming as they do on the 3rd anniversary of the Hatfield crash, and only 2 weeks after the fourth anniversary of the Paddington Crash.

No amount of hand wringing over the public perception of rail safety will change the simple fact that companies in charge of the safety of their customers failed in their duty to protect them. In simple terms on the 5th October 1999, the rail industry killed 29 of its customers and 2 of its staff in a single, unnecessary and preventable incident. If this had happened in any other industry there would be public outcry, but it appears that Dr Howells would like the rail industry to be treated differently. How would the country respond to a supermarket chain killing 31 people in one day through appalling management?

Dr Howells talks of a 'fail-safe' railway as if the public demand is for a 100% safe rail network. The Paddington Survivors have never campaigned for a 100% safety, but for one where safety is taken seriously by the companies involved. Paddington occurred (in Lord Cullen's words) because of a "lamentable failure" by Railtrack to respond to safety warnings and "incompetent management" and poor driver training from Thames Trains. Hatfield occurred because the track in the area (in the words of the HSE) "that had been identified as in poor condition and which should have either been replaced or a temporary speed restriction applied".

Dr Howells again compares road deaths with train deaths. He has failed to understand the fundamental difference between rail and road.

- On a rail journey we enter into a contract with a service provider. We expect them to take care of us – indeed they are required to. All the movements of vehicles are coordinated, planned, and controlled by trained, responsible persons. Safety mechanisms are or should be built in to the operating systems.
- On the roads we are normally not in a contract, the journeys are un-coordinated and carried out largely by individuals. Safety has been greatly improved by redesigning vehicles and controlling drink-driving. Driver behaviour plays a huge part in causing crashes.

The road transport equivalent of the Paddington Crash would be a single crash on the M4, involving around 500 cars, killing 31 people and injuring 417, closing the whole motorway for 2 weeks. The crash would have been caused by management incompetence – perhaps by the Highways Agency and a road maintenance company.

Dr Howells suggests that there is "great contrast" between how "relatively minor" rail accidents were viewed compared with the thousands killed and critically injured on the roads. As a Government Minister he should not be suggesting that deaths through incompetent management are acceptable.

The PSG urges Dr Howells to rethink his provocative, ill timed and ill conceived comments.

Ends

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