Stop chasing a chimera

"Competitiveness is more likely to be achieved by making rail more effective than by imposing restrictions on other modes"

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For all the fine words about environmental awareness, and the impassioned pleadings of Green politicians such as MEP Michael Cramer about the need to reduce transport emissions, it seems that little is really being done to encourage modal shift. Last month's sharp fall in oil prices will inevitably make it tougher for rail to compete with road and air, while thanks to the economies of scale the automotive and aviation industries continue to make steady progress with the development of low-emission engines and hybrid vehicles. UNECE Chairman Luiz Bertling has repeatedly pointed out that 'rail is by far the biggest provider of e-mobility', but the message seems to be falling on deaf ears.

Realism suggests that the level playing field may never be reached. Inter-modal competitiveness is more likely to be achieved by making rail more effective than by imposing restrictions on other modes. Suggestions of harmonising rail costs and working conditions with the historic incumbents rather than their best-performing competitors, as touted in France for example, would only make the situation worse. Productivity and efficiency need to be the order of the day.

There is evident frustration across the sector about slow progress implementing the EU-funded Shift2Rail research initiative. Insiders report that the first calls for associate partners and projects are running up to five months late, yet there is an appetite among the railways to get going.

Nevertheless, there is much that they can do already. Last year's Project Marathon trials with longer freight trains offered an encouraging example of how to improve efficiency using existing assets, which could be implemented almost immediately with a few tweaks to some operating rules. CER members may complain about the abnormally high oil prices hammering cross-border operation, but how committed are they to working with the European Railway Agency to standardise, simplify or eliminate them, or to press their stakeholder governments to do so?

Cynical observers might suggest that the larger incumbents want to shift the focus to inter-modal competition in order to divert attention from liberalisation and on-rail competition. But as Bulc made clear, the underlying driver for opening up the rail market is all about increasing the focus on the end customers, both passenger and freight. A key role of this journal is to share best practice around the world, in order to stimulate progress and strengthen the rail mode. Much of the innovative thinking displayed by new entrants is equally applicable to established operators, if only they are willing to engage. Where there's a will, there's a way.