

Sir David Bell and the public's right to know

YESTERDAY Lord McAlpine, his frail voice crackling with anguish, described how BBC Newsnight's false child abuse allegations against him had created a 'legacy that can't be repaired'.

'It gets into your bones,' the Tory peer said. 'It makes you angry ... and it gets into your soul and you just think there's something wrong with the world.'

Unsurprisingly, this terrible slur – based on misinformation supplied to the BBC by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism – has had tumultuous consequences.

The Director General has resigned, the BBC, its reputation for journalistic integrity shattered, is in chaos and countless individuals, including members of the BIJ, face paying substantial libel damages.

Which is why the Mail believes there is over-riding public interest in our decision to publish today an investigation into Sir David Bell, who is one of the trustees of the BIJ, and more pertinently into his role as assessor to the Leveson Inquiry into press standards.

For today we reveal that Bell is a leading member of an incestuous body called Common Purpose which has direct or indirect links to two other Leveson assessors.

It was Common Purpose's founder who, with Bell, set up the Media Standards Trust which has played such a prominent role in the Leveson Inquiry.

It was the Media Standards Trust, chaired by Bell, which set up Hacked Off – whose luminaries include those sexual incontinents Max Mosley, Hugh Grant and Steve Coogan – and boasts, with justification, of substantially broadening the remit of the Leveson Inquiry.

It was also Bell's Media Standards Trust which conducted a scurrilously shoddy report on the Press Complaints Commission and awarded a prestigious journalism prize to a writer who, it emerged, had made up his articles.

Indeed, the Mail's investigation paints a picture of how a small, intertwined nexus of Left-of-centre individuals – some with links to Ofcom, the media regulator, and virtually all with links to Bell – have sought to exert huge influence on the inquiry.

We also reveal that Bell is a trustee of a charitable trust that has donated huge sums of money to the Media Standards Trust that he set up.

All of which we believe raises profoundly disturbing questions about the suitability of Bell as an assessor and the impact this may have had on the objectivity and neutrality of the inquiry itself.

The Mail is acutely aware of the seriousness of publishing this investigation. We know all too well that our enemies will accuse us of being aggressively defensive in a bid to pre-empt the outcome of the Leveson report, which is due any week now.

But in the light of the scandal engulfing the BBC, we passionately believe in the public's right to know about a senior Leveson assessor's role in it.

Let us stress that Lord Justice Leveson has no links to Common Purpose and is a man of integrity who has conducted his inquiry with impartiality.

However we make no apology for carrying this investigation. Newspapers have a duty to ask embarrassing questions about the powerful and the self-important people who know best.

The Mail has one final observation: if some form of statutory regulation is introduced because of Leveson, you can bet your life it will be elitist liberals such as Bell who decide what is in the 'public interest' and what newspapers should be allowed to print.

The consequences of this for both a press that has been free of political control for over 300 years and the public's right to know doesn't bear thinking about.

It sounds daft but roads would be miles safer if we tore down the traffic lights

GET rid of almost all Britain's traffic lights, says the chairman of the National Trust – and he's right.

Sir Simon Jenkins thinks most traffic lights are a pernicious form of state control; and, more worryingly, downright dangerous, because they distract motorists from what other road users are doing.

The truth of this came crashing into me at a crossroads in North London. I was stationary at a red light, aware that it was about to turn green, when suddenly a man in his car emerged from the road to my left, careered through his set of lights as they turned from amber to red, lost control and ploughed into the side of my car.

Miraculously and mercifully, my two young children in the back seat were unharmed, but the car was a write-off. If the idiot who drove into us had been less intent on accelerating to make it through the lights in time, the accident would not have happened.

Blighted

Since that incident a few years ago, a steady proliferation of traffic lights has made our streets even more dangerous. Plainly, some traffic lights are vital. Without them, chaos would reign at plenty of major junctions, and at access points to main arteries.

Simon Jenkins says he would get rid of 90 per cent of traffic lights: I would be a little less brutal. Either way, it should not be the end of the road for them. But they have multiplied in places where they are simply not necessary, and where they stop and start the traffic needlessly, making journey times slower and pollution worse.

Moreover, along with signs, barriers and other examples of street furniture – a collective term which sounds rather quaint, yet is anything but – they clutter our roads terribly.

In this crowded little island, transport planning requires resourcefulness and vision. Instead, it is blighted by an almost total lack of imagination. There are now more than 25,000 sets of lights in the UK – around a third more than there were a decade ago –

and London alone accounts for almost a quarter of these.

Yet anyone who drives regularly in the capital is all too aware of the spectacle of acres of empty Tarmac ahead, and a line of stationary vehicles behind. The culprit, practically every time, is a red light. The same applies in most of our major towns and cities.

Too often, it feels as if a three-mile journey, for example, comes to a crunching stop again and again because so many of the lights you must pass through are at red.

If civil servants will not address this nonsense, then MPs must. Ironically enough, it was at a junction close to the Houses of Parliament that the world's first traffic lights were installed in December 1868. They lasted only three weeks before a leaking gas valve caused them to explode. They were then declared a safety hazard, and taken down.

London did not get its next set of lights until 1929. Since then, however, they have become the primary means in this country of regulating the flow of traffic.

Another method is the roundabout – first seen on a public road in Britain in 1909, in Letchworth, Hertfordshire. Yet now many roundabouts have also been fitted with traffic lights – a belt-and-braces approach to planning that creates far more problems than it solves.

As so dispiritingly often in transport-related matters, continental Europe makes us look backward by comparison. We might have an image of the hapless French or Italian traffic policeman frantically blowing his whistle and waving his arms, while presiding over hooting, tooting gridlock, but the reality is that the systems tend to work in those countries, where at least the traffic is generally always on the move. Yet the traffic policeman has all but disappeared from our own streets, replaced by automated technology that makes robots of drivers. And

by **Brian Viner**



robots are programmed to respond to signals, but not to situations.

If traffic lights are removed, drivers are forced to pay more attention to their surroundings, and to other drivers on the road, in order to keep themselves safe. And that means they drive with more caution.

If you think these arguments are all pie in the sky, consider that more than a decade ago, in Drachten in Northern Holland, a town of about 50,000 inhabitants, planners began the systematic removal of all 15 sets of traffic lights, replacing them with roundabouts and expanded cycle lanes. It was a radical experiment, but it worked triumphantly.

Road death statistics diminished by more than 50 per cent, and although there was initially a slight increase in the number of minor collisions, the visionary road engineer behind the scheme suggested that these were almost to be encouraged.

'We want small accidents, in order to prevent serious ones in which people get hurt,' said Hans Monderman. It shifts the emphasis... to the driver being responsible for his or her own risk. We only want traffic lights where they are useful, and I haven't found anywhere where they are useful yet.'

Congestion

Mr Monderman died of cancer in 2008, although not before he had seen his 'shared space' concept successfully introduced in many countries (but not, of course, Britain, beyond a few limited schemes in Kent, Somerset, Plymouth and Brighton). He once invoked the flow of people around ice-rinks to explain it.

'Skaters work out things for themselves and it works wonderfully well,' he said. 'I am not an anarchist, but I don't like rules which are ineffective and street furniture which tells people how to behave.' In

Britain, the amount of street furniture has reached an all time high, but there are some signs that we are beginning to see the light at the end of a fume-filled tunnel.

In London, Mayor Boris Johnson has ordered a review of thousands of sets of traffic lights, 20 of which have already been removed.

And just this week, Cheltenham Borough Council began a three-week experiment, turning off a set of lights in a bus road in an attempt to reduce congestion, not to mention discourage the 'ambegamblers' who see signal about to turn to red and speed up rather than slow down.

Lunacy

If such schemes are themselves to gather pace in this country, then we need to disregard the expensive consultants and the health and safety inspectors who too long have been allowed to collaborate with urban planners, turning our street into over-regulated corridors.

Sometimes, these corridors are regulated at the expense of one form of transport over another.

More than 8,000 sets of traffic lights nationwide are currently programmed to give buses priority over cars, and whereas that often makes sense of paper, on Tarmac it frequently backfires to cause long queues of cars on the main carriageway – thus betraying a grimly myopic, non-integrated transport policy.

As Hans Monderman knew, all road-users, from drivers of lorries and buses to cyclists and pedestrians, should be accorded equal importance.

Simon Jenkins, meanwhile, claims that Britain is 'obsessed' with traffic lights. Again, he is right. But if we channel that obsession into getting rid of all those that are surplus to strict safety requirements – which is to say the vast majority of them – we will become a more prosperous, more free-flowing, less polluted nation.

And there will no longer be as great a danger of sitting in a stationary car at a junction, one moment singing The Wheels On The Bus Go Round And Round, and the next looking round to see whether two children, aged five and three, have survived the lunacy of a driver trying to get through the lights before amber gives way to red.

TOM UTLEY IS AWAY