

THE CASE AGAINST BEECHING

Foreword by

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Foreword

This pamphlet about Dr. Beeching's reshaping of British Railways is, I think, an excellent piece of work. It gives the reader a useable summary of a document which very few people will find easy to master and at the same time offers for consideration a number of thought-provoking quotes and comments. Many of these emphasise and underline the truth of arguments used by the N.U.R. in their struggle to protect the interests of their members.

I think railwaymen and members of the public alike could all benefit from reading it.

S. F. GREENE

Dr. Beeching has done a first-class job of work study on British railways. He has also done a very clever job of propaganda. The fact that the plan, if carried out in full, would be in many ways disastrous for the British economy is not quite so much "no fault of Dr. Beeching," however, as some commentators have suggested. The railways are to be reshaped to suit and serve big business and it is no accident that the man picked for the job came from I.C.I.

Dr. Beeching's Findings

One third of the mileage, we are told, carries 1 per cent. of the passenger miles and one third (not necessarily the same one) 1 per cent. of the freight ton miles. Half the route mileage carries 4 per cent. of the passenger mileage and half also carries 5 per cent. of the freight. Stopping passenger services are heavy losers:

"... even where there is freight traffic capable of absorbing a share of the route cost, stopping passenger services cannot be regarded as paying their full cost below a passenger density of about 10,000 [a week]." (p.17.)

Holiday traffic is uneconomic because it means maintaining coaches which will be idle most of the year. Commuter services outside London do not pay their way but fares cannot be raised unless the municipalities which provide alternative services will raise their fares too. London services "came near to covering their full cost" (for once there are no figures) but fares are not high enough to finance the new lines necessary to relieve overcrowding (why should they be?). What *does* pay is the steady flow of long-distance travel on fast or semi-fast trains: "... these services make a substantial contribution to system cost" (p.13).

Parcels traffic is "not favourable" and the railways are consulting the Post Office about "co-ordination of services and charging scales" (p.23).

When Freight Pays Off

The railways carried 133m. tons of coal out of the 189m. sent out by the Coal Board in 1961. Of the railways' share 39 per cent. moves in full train loads (much of it to power stations). This apparently pays pretty well (no figures are given but coal traffic as a whole brings in £24.8m. more than its direct costs compared with only £7.6m. for minerals and heavy losses on general merchandise). But coal traffic cannot be expected to increase and it is not as profitable as it should be because the Coal Board uses wagons as free bunkers (the report proposes to charge the Board £10m. more for these). Wagon-load coal traffic costs 19s. a wagon to move as against 10s. 7d. a wagon for a full trainload.

Nearly half of minerals traffic (43 per cent.) moves in full trainloads and "the movement of bulk minerals provides some of the best examples of really efficient use of rail transport" (p.33). Only 19 per cent. of general merchandise moves in full trainloads but this is the only field in which the railways can expect to win much new traffic. The profitability of both mineral and merchandise traffic varies very much according to "terminal conditions." What pays best is traffic moving from one private sidings to another "because they give rise to good loading traffics (12.3 tons/wagon), and because a high proportion of the traffic can be moved in trainload quantities" (p.37). About 56 per cent. of traffic in these classes is in fact sidings-to-sidings traffic and another 15 per cent. sidings-to-dock; these two together make a surplus over direct costs of £12m. a year. Over three quarters

of the sidings-to-sidings traffic comes from 855 big sidings, under a quarter from 5,039 smaller ones. This part of the investigation is new and very interesting. Traffic moving from or to a station is said not to cover direct costs by £13m.

Shutting Shop

The proposals for dealing with the situation revealed by the traffic survey are well known and can be briefly summarised. About 5,000 of the 17,800 route miles and 2,363 stations (out of some 7,000) should be closed to passenger traffic; decision on the rest of the stopping services will be reserved. There is a strong hint that commuter fares will be increased (pp.20-21). By the end of 1965 "stock will not be available" for peak holiday traffic: "efforts will be made to control these peaks by seat reservation schemes and by fares policy" (p.15). Inter-city services will be improved: some of the newly-introduced Pullman services "heralded the luxury train of the future." (p.13).*

An attempt will be made to cut drastically the number of depots to which coal is delivered: "Since the whole country can be covered by a 10-mile radius of distribution from 250 centres, the costs of road distribution would not be greatly increased" if the stations receiving coal were cut from 5,000 to "a few hundred" (p.32). Most of the freight traffic passing through small stations "is of the worst kind, which cannot be made to pay at all, and which the railways would do well

*One railway official is reported to have said: "... the idea is to have 'ordinary' trains and 'prestige' trains costing the earth to travel on —exploiting the expense-account idea. I don't see why we shouldn't take account of the frailty of human nature." (*Observer*, 31.3.63.)

to lose " (p.39). In general the plan is to keep all the traffic which moves in full trainloads, to attract as much as possible of the wagon-load traffic " which moves in the dense inter-city flows but shed the rest by station closures and rate increases " (p.40). It seems that about 14½m. tons of freight will be " shed " in this way on to the roads. The inter-city wagon-load traffic will, it is hoped move in " liner trains," trains carrying containers and moving to schedule. Two of these trains will be in operation by the end of 1964 but the decision has yet to be taken whether there shall be a full network (p.44). Efforts will be made to attract about 13m. tons of traffic, not now on rail, which could pass sidings to sidings " in consignments of considerable size " and a further 16m. tons " judged to be good Liner Train traffics " (p.41). The wagon fleet will be cut " by at least 348,000 " over the next three years (end 1962 stock, 849,000). There will be considerable, but undisclosed, savings in staff.

Finance—Fact or Propaganda?

Dr. Beeching has made a powerful case. " In a sense," as one commentator noted:

" . . . these intricate costings of branch lines and slow trains have been a precautionary exercise, with a high propaganda content . . . an important object has been to influence politicians and public." (*Observer*, 31.3.63.)

It is not suggested that the whole case is illusory. No one would say that there should be no closures and no one would deny where traffic is very light a bus (provided it runs) is more sensible than a train. This does not mean, however, that the whole analysis is unchallengeable, much less the proposals.

The financial figures, for instance, are not of the same order of accuracy as the traffic figures. We are told the costs of this and that traffic in great detail, but these costs are not known, they are in fact estimates. It is admitted that "it is necessary to allocate many costs which are not identifiably associated with particular traffics" (p.7). Further, the losses are systematically exaggerated. Where losses are shown compared with total costs, these total costs include "depreciation calculated in terms of present money values" (p.8). In other words Dr. Beeching is reckoning in the reserves which he thinks he ought to have. This may be desirable but it is misleading. The net revenue deficit for 1961, calculated in this way, is shown as £172m. (p.8), but the actual deficit for that year was £136m. (including £49m. interest etc.).*

There is a further factor influencing the financial position which is of prime importance and is admitted in the report but never referred to again:

"Road competition has forced down rates on good railway traffics to the point where they are quite incapable of subsidising the very costly provision of services to handle poor rail traffics." (p.4.)

This, like the low level of freight on many lines, is the result of the 1953 Act plus no restriction of "C" licences. Given control of road competition there is no reason why the railways, like many other businesses, should not be in a position to do some cross-subsidisation. It is not a matter of principle that every section should be made to pay.

*The figure of £170m. railway deficit which Mr. Marples and others have given is the estimated deficit for 1962 made up roughly as follows: operating deficit £100m., central charges (mainly interest) £55m. and interest on past deficits £15m. (this latter figure was not counted as part of the deficit in 1961 and has been criticised often enough).

How Much Is To Be Cut?

These financial questions apart, there are a few jokers in Dr. Beeching's pack which should be taken out and looked at. First, the question of what happens to the freight carried on the lines to be closed to passengers has been left rather vague. Mr. Goodings, Norwich Area Traffic Manager, told a press conference that:

"The new plans for coal traffic, the plan for sundries traffic and the liner plan will all have to be implemented and working before the local lines are closed to goods traffic." (*Beccles and Bungay Journal*, 29.3.63.)

The report itself suggests however that goods traffic will be "shed" by closing stations as quickly as possible. This can be done at any time. There is no consultative procedure for freight.

Second the immediate closures suggested are by no means the end of the story. The report says that:

"... there is promise that freight and passenger traffics will prove mutually supporting over most of that half of the total route mileage which carries 95 per cent. of all traffic at present, while very little freight or passenger traffic will be lost if most of the remainder is closed." (p.24.)

The route mileage at the end of 1961 was 17,800 so if half is to be shut this means a further 3,900 miles on top of the 5,000 proposed. If all the lines with under 10,000 passengers a week are to go Inverness will be cut off and there will be no lines in Scotland north of Inverurie (the reprieved Fort William line would go), the Carlisle-Whitehaven line would close and so would two of the few lines left in Wales, the Shrewsbury-Aberdovey line and the coast line from Aberystwyth north to Pwllheli. In East Anglia the Kings Lynn line and the

Ipswich-Norwich line would go and in the south west the Exeter-Barnstaple line; Newquay and Falmouth would both be cut off.

It follows that the number of men to be made redundant is very uncertain. The N.U.R. believes it may be 100,000 and most of these will be in areas where there is already heavy unemployment. The final joker is that the prospect for freight is extremely unclear. As we said above, the decision on a liner train network has not yet been taken and the future of all the sundries and parcels traffic depends on this.

The Travelling Public Comes Last

What is to be said of the report's proposals? Is the claim that half the present system should be shut and that any opposition is unrealistic, watertight or not? The plan certainly pays no attention at all to the convenience of passengers, whether they want to work or play. Among the holiday resorts which will have their rail links cut are Minehead, Ilfracombe, Bude, Padstow, Helston, Fowey, Looe, Kingsbridge, Exmouth, Sidmouth, Bere, Lyme Regis, Bridport, Rye, Skegness, Whitby, the Northern Lakes and Stranraer. The Exmouth-Exeter line carries about half a million passengers a year (*Exmouth Journal*, 30.3.63). The closure of all the lines running west from Peterborough will cut East Anglia off from the midlands, whence most of its holiday visitors came. Over 400,000 go to Skegness and neighbouring resorts; they would fill 27,000 buses. (*Hansard*, 29.4.63). All this will not only cause hardship to holiday makers and holiday resorts, it will add to road congestion not only in those places but much further away. For

instance if a Londoner going to north Cornwall is obliged to get off the train and finish his journey by bus, will he not be more likely to go the whole way by bus, thus adding to the congestion which is already notorious on the main roads west?

Some quite heavily loaded lines are marked for closure in the first stage, e.g., the Nottingham-Lincoln line, shown on the map as carrying 50,000 passengers a week. This goes too for some of the commuter lines, e.g. Richmond (London)-Broad Street which carries 25-30,000 a week and the Manchester-Buxton line. On this the *Northern Echo* commented:

"Yet this carries thousands of commuters from Manchester. The road, the A.6, is appallingly congested . . . the A.6 goes through ten miles of built-up area." (28.3.63)

The paper added:

"The cynical will note that the little-used line to Hunstanton (Norfolk) used by the Royal Family on the way to Sandringham, is preserved . . ."

The Southport-Liverpool commuter line, also down for closing, is shown as carrying 100,000 a week.

The provision of buses is uncertain, and in many cases they are not a good alternative:

"Buses cannot carry any great amount of luggage, and they take double the time to travel the 25 miles to Ipswich compared with the trains." (*Leiston Observer*, 20.3.63.)

Miss Herbison (N. Lanarkshire, Lab.) quoted the case of the 'Caledonian' railway. Men put out of work by the wholesale pit closures in this area now use this line to go to jobs in Glasgow or Edinburgh, which takes them 35-55 minutes each way:

" . . . many people who are to be thrown on to the roads—if the roads can take them—will find themselves faced not with a 35-minute or a 55-minute journey but with one lasting an hour and a half." (*Hansard*, 29.4.63).

" Mr. E. B. McKay, North Lorne, said that at the same time as the railways were being hit, bus companies in his own area were withdrawing services." (*Scotsman*, 29.3.63.)

" The City of Oxford Motor Services Ltd. has rejected as 'uneconomical' a suggestion that it should operate a regular bus service between Oxford, Thame and Princes Risborough . . . inconvenience is being caused to many people following the withdrawal of passenger trains . . ." (*Oxford Times*, 29.3.63.)

During the snow more than convenience was at stake in many places, nor is this a once-in-a-lifetime question. Alston, on a branch of the Newcastle-Carlisle line, was cut off by road for 10 weeks last winter. Hawick, on the Edinburgh-Carlisle line, a town of 17,000 people with hosiery exports worth £4½m. a year was "virtually isolated for weeks on end, with all the roads completely snowed up" (*Scotsman*, 28.3.63).

" Wick and other communities in Caithness, Sutherland and Ross and Cromarty were completely dependent on rail transport for as much as three months of the year when the weather made roads impassable." (*Glasgow Herald*, 28.3.63.)

Mr. T. H. Summerson, chairman of the North East Railway Board, has suggested that local authorities "might be interested in making financial contributions so that services would not be withdrawn." (*Northern Echo*, 28.3.63).

More Freight On The Roads

On the whole though the plan is that the passengers should be turned on to the roads, along with the freight which is rejected. This last will not be limited to the 14½m. tons of traffic from small stations. If the concentration of coal depots is carried out there will be much extra coal traffic by road and an unknown extra amount of sundries traffic if the liner-train project does not come off.

It is true that 14½ m. tons is not a lot of traffic; but it is a lot more than 5 per cent; it is nearly 16 per cent of all railborne minerals and merchandise. And the freight, like the passengers, will be either cluttering up heavily congested urban roads or will be on rural roads which are quite unsuited for heavy traffic. As the *Daily Telegraph* said in a leader (9.4.63):

" . . . it is bound to increase urban congestion—however slightly—and congestion in holiday districts at holiday times. Such congestion is already frightful; so are the casualties arising from it."

According to the British Road Federation, congestion already costs £500m. a year. The roads are like the railways: the busiest 5 per cent. carry 45 per cent. of motor vehicle miles.* To make the rural roads fit for heavy traffic will cost a sum of which neither Mr. Marples nor anyone else has the least idea. Mr. George Chetwynd, chairman of the North-East Development Council, said:

" . . . this must involve a massive capital works project on the roads. You can't suddenly dump a lot of stuff on the roads and expect our present roads to carry it." (*Northern Despatch*, 27.3.63.)

" Ross and Cromarty County Council had estimated that if the rail cuts proposed by Dr. Beeching are confirmed, it would cost £1 million to bring the main road through the county up to the 18 ft. standard required, and £2,250,000 to improve roads in Wester Ross, it was stated yesterday by the County Convenor . . ." (*Scotsman*, 6.4.63.)

Maintenance is also very much more expensive where heavy lorries are using the roads. Studies in Ohio have shown that the "cost responsibility" of buses and lorries is \$30 for a one-ton lorry, \$600 for a 5-ton and \$2,000 for a 10-ton lorry (E. R. Hondelik, U.N. consultant on inland transport, *Northern Echo*, 29.3.63).

* *Sample Survey of the Roads and Traffic of Great Britain*, DSIR 4s. 6d.

Economic Disaster for the Depressed Areas

The most serious objection to the Beeching plan however is that it will sharply increase the division between the prosperous and the depressed areas of this country and make planning in the national interest almost impossible. The clearest possible light is thrown on the Beeching point of view by the complaint that commuters, by cluttering up the lines near London, prevent the railways from "drawing passengers travelling daily to London from distances up to a hundred miles" (p.21). God save us! At the same time a number of overspill towns—and three new towns—are being deprived of their passenger stations. The three new towns are Corby, the steel town in Northamptonshire which has a population of 37,000 and is planned to grow to 75,000, East Kilbride, south of Glasgow, and Cumbernauld, 15 miles north east of Glasgow and planned to grow to 70,000. Among the overspill towns which will be affected are Haverhill, in Suffolk, planned to expand to 18,000 under an agreement with the L.C.C., Hawick (17,000) which has recently signed an agreement with Glasgow and Girvan, which is not only an overspill town for Glasgow but also a development district, i.e., an area of high unemployment to which it is hoped to attract new industries.

The list of development districts, indeed, reads like a roll call of the places whose railway stations are being closed: in the south west Gunnislake, Ilfracombe, Helston and Looe, in the north west Cockermouth, in the north east Bishop Auckland, Crook, Shildon, Blaydon, Blyth, Whitby, in Scotland Ardrossan, the Calder, Cumnock, Girvan, the Highlands, north Lanarkshire, Peterhead,

Shotts, Stranraer, in Wales Blaenau and Caernarvon, and so it goes on. At least five of the 13 places where the Government has just said it will build small advance factories are having their stations closed.

Everywhere from the north of Scotland to East Anglia the cry has gone up: "You are killing our hopes of attracting new industry":

"A withdrawal of services could cripple the area and might put off those industrialists who had been showing interest, said Coun. Joseph Gordon, chairman of Bishop Auckland Urban District Council." (*Darlington and Stockton Times*, 30.3.63.)

The chairman of the Chamber of Trade at Stranraer, which has a 9.4 per cent. unemployment rate, said:

"We have been fighting for 10 years to attract industry, but this will mean a very slim chance of any industrialists coming." (*Glasgow Herald*, 28.3.63.)

Girvan is likely to keep the distillery which Grants propose to build but the fate of a promised pulp mill was still in the balance at the beginning of last month. A pulp mill has saved the Fort William line but as Lord Polwarth, chairman of the Scottish Council (Development and Industry) said:

"If the Fort William line had been closed ten years ago, the Scottish Council would have been unable to interest industry in a pulp mill in that area . . . At the present time, the council is dealing with another large project which is likely to be sited on a line from which passenger services are to be withdrawn. If there is not an assurance that the line will be kept open for freight, this project will not materialise." (*Scotsman*, 28.3.63.)

To this railway officials reply that if there is a definite commitment they will look at a line again to see how much traffic there will be: "but we cannot wait for pie in the sky—there must be something definite." (*Ibid.*)

It is now publicly recognised that the drift south of the population in search of jobs needs urgently to be put into reverse. Dr. Beeching's proposals however will greatly intensify the pressure to drift south, this adding incidentally to his own commuter problems and, curiously enough, putting him at loggerheads with a number of other ministries such as Labour and the Board of Trade.

The welcome given to Dr. Beeching's proposals in certain circles is partly due to Tory mythology about "deficits" and "subsidies." Though a subsidised railway system is looked upon as a cause for shame the 1961 deficit of £136m. is only one third of the subsidy of £399m. paid to the farmers. It is much less than the £300m. spent on roads* and if the Beeching plan goes through expenditure on roads is going to eclipse any railway deficits in years to come. Britain is not the only country with a subsidised railway system: the French railways make a loss of about £125m. a year, the German £117m. Moreover a warning for the future comes from the United States where the Senate has just voted \$750m. (£268m.) towards the re-establishment of public transport (railways, underground and buses) to relieve the appalling road congestion problems there.

A Plan for Profits, Not for Prosperity

The Beeching plan is not a plan for closing a few little-used branch lines. Nor is it a plan for large-scale modernisation though the public-relations efforts of Dr. Beeching have perhaps given that impression. It is a plan for concentra-

*Government expenditure for 1963-4 is put at £172m. and local authority expenditure in 1961 was £125m.

ting on full trainload freight between private sidings and especially the 850 biggest sidings, in other words the traffic which interests the biggest firms. Freight from small firms, and commuters and holiday makers will be carried on sufferance as long as they do not interfere with this plan. Rejected traffic can clutter the roads, local authorities can be forced to find enormous sums to improve the roads and those who live away from the "dense inter-city flows" can whistle for transport and jobs. Never has the possible conflict between the commercial interest of one industry and the economic needs of the nation been more clearly demonstrated.

It is one thing to say that railway deficits must be cut down and that Dr. Beeching's traffic survey has been useful in showing where the losses are made. It is quite another to say that *all* unprofitable traffic should be cut, regardless of half the causes of railway deficits—lack of a transport policy and the existence of depressed areas.

It is possible, though not certain, that Dr. Beeching's proposals would make the railways "pay." But how will it benefit us if making the railways profitable makes so many other things unprofitable? How will it help if by paying a little less in subsidies to the railways we pay much more in terms of unemployment, road congestion and accidents, worsening living conditions? What is the good of making the railways "prosperous" if this undermines the nation's prosperity as a whole?