

THE BEECHING DEBATE

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Introduction

When Britain's railways were nationalized they became part of a vast organization called the British Transport Commission, comprising about half of Britain's buses, its canals, many of its ports, road haulage and London Transport. There was no state support (at least, not intentionally so), its statutory objectives were broad and conflicting, much of the system was severely run down, it operated in accordance with archaic public obligations to carry goods however inconvenient and unprofitable, and it could only alter fares and charges with the consent of both a legal tribunal and (in practice) the Minister. It was a legal requirement to balance its books, though the various modes could cross subsidize, if any of them were profitable. It was envisaged investment would be borrowed by issuing British Transport Stock, the interest on which was a charge on whatever it was that was being improved, so every bit of investment had to 'pay its way'. That was the framework that was imposed upon the new body, one of the largest industrial undertakings in the World. There were few precedents for running even sensibly-conceived bodies of such a size. One couldn't just place a job advert and expect to find anyone with even the most remotely suitable credentials (actually the railways were one of the few industries that could source such people, and they were in demand. Some did quite well).

But the Commission was not sensibly conceived. The new Labour government had no idea how to go about it and anticipated the Ministry having a plan. We know it didn't. So a muddled organization was set up in a tremendous hurry with everything vested in the Commission but actual

day to day operations farmed out to legally constituted Executives separately appointed by the Minister and (so it seems) subtly different objectives. It was a torrid time resulting in the Executives being abolished and General Sir Brian Robertson in charge; he was by no means the only general within the upper ranks of the Commission, the feeling being they understood large organizations. Thus a general staff (yes, that is what it was called) emerged to preside over an organization with no direction, assets aging faster than they could be replaced, and designed to the last detail to carry the traffics of twenty years previously. This is not the fault of the people on the ground, having to do a very difficult job under very trying circumstances. Eventually it all unravelled. The profitable traffics were creamed off by the road network, unfettered by all this baggage, leaving the railways with the most difficult stuff that were expensive to move but where the actual costs could not be charged. As losses mounted to alarming and apparently unstoppable levels the government accepted that heavy investment was needed *provided* it fixed the losses. Whether the resulting modernization plan was well conceived or not, viewed from the standpoint of the day, is open to discussion. What is fairly firm from those reporting at the time is that it was not well executed. The plan foresaw fresh capital expenditure nearly equal to the entire cost of the rail network over the previous 125 years. To simplify the full horror of the situation the success hinged on accurately anticipating future demand for all the railway's traffics, both passenger and freight (and there were dozens of them, mostly hopelessly wrongly guessed), accurate cost analysis based on thin data, good project management, a rare skill then and not available

on anything like the scale required, and assumptions about available technologies, which proved to be wrong. The modernization plan soon got out of financial control and it was obvious very quickly that it was seeking to attack at least some of the wrong problems and about to modernize facilities for traffics that were disappearing, such as the need to build new marshalling yards. It was costing a lot of money and was not going to fix the losses.

It is against this admittedly broad background that something akin to panic arose in government circles and more wide-ranging solutions were sought, confidence in the Commission having been lost. By the way, one of the many responses to losses had been limited line closures and other forms of rationalization during the late 1950s. Unfortunately they were unpopular and the accounting systems were slow to identify what was profitable and what was not. Fares also rose, but the government interfered and delayed some fares rises as it was felt people shouldn't be charged more for a deteriorating service (the railways were compensated for resulting loss, but this only explains a small part of overall shortfall).

In the late 1950s the loss of financial control coupled with doubts about the soundness (costs) of the Modernization Plan caused a government review to take place of the BTC's organization in general and the whole future of the railways in particular. The review, led by industrialist Ivan Stedeford, was uncomplimentary about the Commission and its labyrinthine structure, and was critical about the cost of the railways; the committee had been one of the responses to the arrival of a new government with Ernest Marples (from road builder's Marples Ridgeway) as Minister. The evidence sought by the committee allowed scope for anti-rail lobbyists such as the Railway Conversion League to get an airing—their proposition was that conversion of the entire rail network to high speed motorways or ordinary roads would be cheaper than modernizing the rail network and provide greater benefits. The committee was not persuaded, though rail-road conversion remained on the political radar for at least another twenty years. More usefully the

committee signalled the end of the unwieldy BTC though some of its other conclusions were considered controversial and publication was hugely delayed.

Beeching and the need for Change

Before dealing with the arrival of Dr Beeching it is worth noting a prescient article in *British Transport Review* in April 1956 on the subject of unremunerative passenger train services. The author (who was the District Passenger Manager at Sheffield) writes in exasperated tones about the lack of action in closing down unremunerative services. His view was that the so-called 'stopping' services (ie not inter-city or suburban) made up 40 per cent of the loaded train miles and as an entity were entirely responsible for the railway's huge and mounting losses. A substantial number of these services cost more than five times to operate than the receipts they generated and there was no prospect of them contributing revenue even if costs were halved and revenue doubled. Government policy had shifted (he asserted) to one where natural competition was expected to provide the most economical transport options for the public; however, he considered that the prevailing consequence was that these services were effectively cross-subsidized by the profitable parts of the railway and merely made those harder to sell by inflating prices. Providing more modern traction that was still loss-making appeared perverse. He speculated on the reasons but concluded that ultimately drastic action would be needed. One reason that he identified for the vacillation has been identified as the issue of whether these apparently under-performing sections provided feeder traffic to the main lines which would be lost altogether if the feeder closed (before computers it was hard to correlate revenue collected in one place across a whole route. He thought this was nonsense and drew attention to many examples where passengers already changed modes at station, especially commuters, *providing* buses were directed to station forecourts and timetables were co-ordinated—surely a lesson today. With the Commission having vast interests in the bus

companies he considered that co-ordination should be possible and that buses would provide a cheaper (and in some cases better) option than a branch line train at an often inconveniently located station.

This article is mentioned to indicate that the nature of the branch line problem was understood by 1956, largely because (at last) the Commission had succeeded in building up a traffic costing service that was finally producing some useful and worthwhile analysis. The magnitude of the losses that were concentrated in the stopping service sector was probably suspected previously, but was now there for all to see. Despite this, very little was done about it; route mileage was reduced by about eight per cent in the years 1956-62, and stations (passenger and freight) culled by 14 per cent (to 6728). With losses mounting alarmingly and the modernization plan in trouble the good Dr Beeching was asked to sort out the problem and was appointed Chairman. He was an industrialist who came in from ICI but was not a complete stranger to the issues as he had served on the Stedeford committee which had reviewed the Commission's structure in 1960. It would be fanciful to imagine Beeching arrived with no brief; we know that it was to place the organization into a position where it was 'profitable' (ie not loss making and with the capacity to generate investment). We should remember that the Commission and its successors had no public service duty at that time. The equation was simple. Either find new traffic or cut out the losses, or a combination of the two. To judge him on any other criteria is futile.

Beeching's main conclusions were that services that merely contributed loss should be shut down and that the productive railway should be better fitted for modern requirements and should be modernized. There was a middle ground where new working methods could turn loss to profit or even new flows of traffic introduced. Beeching understood that the railway was actually very good at handling certain types of traffic but was not necessarily so appropriate for many of the historical flows and needed to change radically to play to its strengths. He was quite unsentimental about the inevitable reduction in mileage that would result and believed

other modes would handle the traffic better and that the government would be a great deal more supportive of the rest of the network if it could be returned to profitability, as instructed. To facilitate the process, the Commission would be abolished—it was hardly regarded as a satisfactory management tool despite occasional successes—and a new British Railways Board created with more realistic objectives and fewer of the wholly out-of-date carrying and charging restrictions that harked back to a much earlier age. Nor would there any longer be the distraction of the canals, buses and road transport groups which were hived off separately (the BRB retained shipping and hotels as it was awkward to separate them, and also kept other oddments like museums, films, police and Thomas Cook & Sons, though within a decade the latter was sold as a profitable going concern to Midland Bank).

The so-called Beeching report was the result of intensive internal study and had a mixed reception, not least because the list of stations to be closed was set out in detail, tending to divert attention from the investment elements. At the time of the report, twice as much revenue derived from freight as from passenger services, though both service types made a loss after all the indirect costs were added in. The worst culprits (by a long way) were the stopping passenger services and wagonload freight, with so called 'sundries' coming in as the next worst loss maker (sundries were consignments sent in units smaller than a wagonload). The only freight traffic that was actually profitable was coal (there were then 620 collieries, all but 20 rail connected). More detailed analysis revealed some insidious areas of concern. Seasonal traffic such as holiday traffic that appeared profitable on one set of measures was producing appalling utilization on another. Without even looking at the fixed infrastructure that was only needed for one day a week during the summer season, the amount of rolling stock it required was substantial, all having to be maintained and staffed, and this was despite the halving of the summer peak over the previous few years; some 6000 coaches had only been used on 18 occasions the previous year, 2000 of which had

only been used on 10 occasions. Wagon utilization was no better with most of the huge number of wagons spending most of their time stationary. Far from utilization getting better, terminal time had actually gone up from 9.96 days in 1948 to 12.51 days in 1963, and that excludes standing time in marshalling yards *en route*. The report suggested passenger coaching stock could be reduced from 22,500 to around 3000 and multiple unit vehicles from around 11,000 (many new) to 1200 or so.

The Second Beeching Report

The retained network was to be developed to handle the dense traffic to which the railway was best suited. This included development of 'liner' container trains and introduction of block trains for coal and dieselization of remaining passenger services, including widespread introduction of DMUs on remaining local services. The report contained no specific plan for development and electrification is not mentioned (electrification and other schemes already in hand would continue). There was more work to be done.

The Beeching report is really the blueprint for the compact and business-led railway it finally became by the mid-1980s, serving traffics best suited to the railway and in many ways requiring rather different skills to the traditional ones, though at the operating level some things remained unchanged owing to the long life of the equipment provided. It is well known that once the closure programme got going the issue became highly political and required (often on a highly arbitrary basis) the retention of some rural networks and stopping services that subsequently created the 'social railway', supported in whole or part by public funds and becoming the core of the PTE services and the regional network. Nevertheless the inter-city services were further developed and produced growth and the (mainly London) suburban networks were improved as occasion permitted. Liner and merry-go-round services were introduced and the railway got itself out of the sundries and most of the wagonload business by the mid 1970s. Perhaps one surprise was the loss of the

parcels business to a highly aggressive road based market that was simply more flexible and did not require expensive-to-provide accommodation on passenger trains. The seaside holiday market pretty much went away of its own accord. Beeching proposed mileage reduction from 17,800 (over half of which carried just 4 per cent of the traffic) to about 8500 miles.

It will be seen that although there were good words said about modernizing the retained network, the 1963 report was thin on detail about improvements but detail-rich about the areas for closure and withdrawal. Accordingly it is often viewed today as a rather negative document. However this was purely because the loss making elements were relatively conspicuous while the attention required to identify the development potential was a time consuming exercise, some lessons having been learned from the miserable experiences of the 1955 plan. It took two more years for the detail to emerge in what might best be regarded as Beeching Part II.

The second report 'The Development of the Major Trunk Routes' was eventually published in February 1965, just three months before Beeching returned to ICI. The thrust was that 3000 miles of the 7500 miles of retained trunk route should be earmarked for intensive development (by 1984). The process had not gone well. There were huge arguments about the various assumptions that had to be made both at a national level and at a route level, hardly surprising given the crude techniques available and the soundness of the data available.

The routes actually selected for development included: London to Brighton, Portsmouth, Bournemouth, Plymouth via Bath, Swansea, Didcot and Birmingham, Rugby and Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool and West Coast route to Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, Peterborough, York and Newcastle (and then Carlisle), Derby via Birmingham and Nottingham via Grantham, and a small number of cross country routes. The plan was partly inevitable given electrification was already proceeding on parts of it. Policy changes had a further impact over the following few years but inevitably (because the routes were busy

anyway) it remained something of a foundation stone and was pushed forward to an extent. Clearly Reading to Exeter via Westbury, Midland main line and East Coast direct to Edinburgh are significant later adjustments. Just as importantly relegation of remaining trunk routes to secondary status was also a significant piece of network definition, for example Southern route to Exeter. It was also during 1965 that, to reflect in the public mind the concept of modernization, the style 'British Rail' was formally adopted, together with new colours and graphics and elimination of separate regional corporate identities in public communications.

Transport as a social necessity

At the time that British Railways saw one of the key ways forward as drastic network reduction, nobody was overly concerned about the social contribution the threatened lines made. Neither the new British Railways Board nor the government had major concerns (nor did the BRB have any statutory obligation to meet any wider social objectives) and it was felt that the fairly small numbers of people forced to abandon the railway would easily convert to the bus network. Where demand was there, operators would want to run additional services, would they not? However, an issue arose where adequate alternative bus routes did not exist and where those transferring from rail were in such small numbers that bus operators were disinclined to make improvements.

In such cases 'Transport Users' Consultative Committees, who investigated closure proposals, could point out that 'hardship' would result. It was then left to the Minister to decide what, if anything, he was going to do about it. Hardship was an infinitely flexible term and inevitably rather subjective. The use of such a term was also not unrelated to the volume and quality of argument of those objecting as to whether they would actually suffer hardship or not. Whether a closure would impact adversely upon the inhabitants of a marginal parliamentary seat was also highly relevant in interpreting 'hardship'. Depending on the force

of argument and the wider political situation the Minister could either refuse to authorize closure (in whole or in part) or could require alternative bus or rail services to be provided or improved, at (ultimately) the railway's expense. This was not a very satisfactory arrangement. Both hardship and the adequacy of alternative services was difficult to assess and the loss of through ticketing and connectional arrangements and possible inadequacy of (for example) waiting and sheltering would all impact on inclination to use alternative services, before even considering actual service quality. Many dozens of railway replacement services were introduced but very few endured, and there was no real attempt to provide any long term degree of service adequacy or security. In that respect reduction to extinction of replacement services was little different to what had been happening on the rail services superseded, or on branch lines that had yet to be culled. Rail lines could be run down to one train a day at an inconvenient time with no sanction other than commercial loss to the railway as it was only complete closure or withdrawal that triggered any formal process—a position that still technically the same today though in practice franchise agreements ought to prevent this happening improperly.

Although the railways later came in for some criticism for their attitude to these replacement bus services, this is at least in part unreasonable. The reality was that all rural bus services were suffering from traffic loss, and retrenchment was happening to networks everywhere. When the BTC was abolished the bus groups were placed in the hands of a statutory Transport Holding Company, required to operate services on purely commercial lines and shorn of any responsibility to co-ordinate. Transport Integration was off the agenda (it had been weak anyway) and the companies were more focused on retaining diminishing traffic, even if it meant competing with branch lines that had the same problem. In 1963 many rural bus services were running at a loss and inevitably service reductions to reduce losses made them more unattractive, driving traffic away even faster. By 1971 it was thought that nearly 42 per cent of the

rural population had no access to anything more than bicycles and owing to bus service reductions relied heavily on neighbours with cars. As bus services were (now) regarded as entirely private entities there was, of course, no sanction that could be taken or formal inquiry that could be brought to bear. The decline was brought about primarily because of the availability of the private car, precisely the same reason that had caused rail traffic to decline. The mantra suggests that car purchase is 'aspirational', and often unrelated to public transport alternatives; unfortunately as car usage rises, public transport quality often suffers in order to match falling revenue, tending to accelerate further switch to the car for those who can and reducing the quality of life for those who can't. Bus operators (as with British Railways) tended to allow cross-subsidization to maintain rural services where possible, but when finances were bad, loss making bus routes were far more conspicuous as revenues and costs per trip were easy to ascertain. Bus traffic fell by a third between 1953 and 1968, without commensurate savings, so as time progressed drastic action became necessary in the bus industry too. The most useful contribution during this time was a change in legislation in 1966 allowing double deck buses to be one-person operated, which allowed significant cost savings to be achieved, but it did not really alter the declining trend.

It is perhaps unhelpful to speculate how much of this rural decline could have been foreseen while the 1962 Act was being formulated and the objectives of British Railways were being agreed, let alone what could have been done about it. However by 1966 the rural 'problem' had manifested itself and the labour government (which had just achieved a reasonable majority) felt moved to try and help, the outcome being the 1968 Transport Act. This had a number of impacts on transport. On rail it authorised the transport minister to make grants (in up to three yearly commitments) to cover the losses of individual rail services from 1st January 1969 where the minister considered it desirable for social or economic reasons. In practice a large number of remaining line or station closures did fall into this category. At first each separate line (most

isolated station closures had been achieved by then) had its own level of grant established. This soon became quite unwieldy and the 1971 annual report sets out 217 such services totalling grant of £65 million. It is quite likely that the majority of these would have ceased to exist had not grants been made available. Having obtained grants on a social basis it then became politically difficult to withdraw them. In 1974 the grants were consolidated and became known as the Public Service Obligation grant, and these carried through right up to and beyond privatization, largely devoted to the regional railway network and effectively today rolled up into the subsidies still given to the rural train operators. In fact the Labour government had already indicated to British Railways during 1966 that they disagreed with the closure policy and slowed down the closure process. It is therefore an unfortunate outcome of history that many lines that had already closed certainly would not have done had they presented themselves later in the process, while some of those still open today and which contribute little or nothing to communities would most certainly have closed had they been examined earlier. A comparable process was followed with the bus network with operators receiving a number of grants to reduce the pain of ongoing losses and local authorities given budgets to allocate to operators to help support important rural services. Nevertheless rural bus services today are but a pale shadow of those provided in the 1950s.

The formation of the National Bus Company from (in effect) the old railway-owned operators, and the subsequent deregulation and privatization of the industry has had only a marginal effect on the rural bus networks and even less for co-ordination. It is of passing interest to note that the majority of the privatized bus companies are now all owned by a small group of transport conglomerates who also engage in rail business, so perhaps these companies may be said to have come home again. Today it is competition law that provides a brake on the concept of transport co-ordination between modes, even where under a common private sector owner.

Network Size

It was around 1968 when Transport Minister Barbara Castle wanted to switch policy to network improvement rather than endless rationalization, and at BR's suggestion the final rail network size was determined as around 11,000 miles, the difference between that size and the notional 8500 mile 'commercial' railway was effectively the 'social' railway supported by grant, as just explained. It was still necessary to make closures as the existing network was still around 15,000 miles and these processes rumbled on in a desultory way until about 1975 leaving a handful of exceptional and contentious cases left. The most notable of these was probably the Settle & Carlisle closure proposal; suffice to say here that the person put in to close it found matters not as they initially appeared and with competent marketing (coupled with fortunate economic upturn and an appreciation of its value as a diversionary route) the issue of closure was finally abandoned. One cannot help speculating about if, and how many, other lines might have been able to respond in a similar way with such treatment: a few, at least.

Attention then focused on cost reduction by track simplification and various other measures that drastically reduced operating costs. In this area new signalling was found to manage train paths more efficiently, allowing the faster freights to travel around with far fewer loops and track infrastructure than before. Much track was singled in the belief it would be perfectly adequate for all time, and track mileage therefore fell from 33,976 to 23,518 single track miles over the period 1968-1990 (a fall of 30 per cent). Unfortunately some of this pressure haunts today's managers, now trying to put back double track to cater for rising demand; this is often not a problem but sometimes high

costs can be incurred where land has been sold (or built on) or unsuitable bridges and structures have been erected.

Freight services

The wagonload traffic fell dramatically after 1962. In that year there were 5175 stations handling freight, but by 1968 this had been culled to 912 and ten years later it was under 500. At first, traffic serving the smaller or more far-flung stations was diverted to a much smaller number of large stations as part of a concentration process; from these larger depots inwards and outwards goods traffic was sent by road. This reduced trains and costs. In parallel with this, the number of marshalling yards fell from 602 in 1962 to 184 in 1968 and 79 in 1979. There was a huge drop in the number of private sidings, falling to a third of its peak of around 6000. There was a commensurate drop in wagons. In 1968 there were still 437,400 wagons, dropping to about 240,000 wagons in 1974, half still with no power operated brakes and only 5 per cent having modern air brakes. To give an indication of the huge changes taking place, by 1990 there were a mere 21,970 freight wagons (virtually all air-braked), though this excludes a number of modern privately owned vehicles that British Rail had encouraged to be built. Most of these vehicles could run at 50 mph or more.

The nature of freight changed drastically. Trainload traffic was never completely alien to the railway, but it was historically very much the exception. In 1959 a block train service was run overnight between London and Scotland, named the *Condor*. This carried the small railway containers in use at that time but its success put down a marker for the future (there were about 35,000 containers in use at that time); a feature of this service was a charge per container, irrespective of contents. Being successful, several more trains of the same type began operating on other routes. In 1962 a 'Speedfreight' service was

introduced between London and Manchester using new 10-ton containers carried on high speed 4-wheeled vehicles. There was a definite strategy for converting inefficient wagonload traffic into trainload traffic, with the first 'company train' contracts announced in 1963 and with two thirds of freight tonnage converted by 1972, though the bald figures disguise the loss of some loads while new types of traffic were gained, partly as larger wagons with heavier axle loads became available.

So-called 'liner' trains were mooted during the modernization plan and were intended to provide a nationwide service. These were designed to convey a new type of international container that was seen as the way to facilitate the transport of goods around the world, drastically easing the problems of handling and moving loads between transport modes. Containers were to be carried on specially constructed 62ft vehicles mounted on bogies. This activity took a long time to get off the ground and the first freightliner (London-Glasgow) only began in November 1965, on an experimental basis. This was a clear success and BR decided to press ahead with the 'liner train' block-train concept as fast as possible, requiring substantial investment in new terminal facilities. Roll out was dogged by industrial disputes and late delivery of terminal equipment, but was eventually reasonably successful. One issue was the matter of making Freightliner terminals open to any haulier, not just vehicles operated by BR; the National Union of Railwaymen took some persuading that it was in their longer term interest to co-operate as BR's road vehicles were also manned by NUR members.

In parallel with this, negotiations with the Coal Board and Central Electricity Generating Board resulted in the idea of adopting so-called 'merry-go-round' block trains running continuously between pit head and power station with new 32 ton high-capacity wagons able to

discharge their load on the move. This was akin to using the railway as a giant conveyor belt. There were some territorial issues about who was going to invest in the new plant but eventually sense prevailed and this very cheap mode of operation became the norm for that type of traffic. The first such train served West Burton power station and began operating in 1965; it was followed by quite a few others including some serving cement and steel works and certain commodities like iron ore. This kind of block train concept was exactly what the railways needed and it is significant that train load traffic rose from 31 per cent in 1968 to 86 per cent only ten years later; in 1979 the number of wagons had fallen to a low of 137,600. Unfitted freights were finally phased out and traditional guard's vans eliminated, guards riding in the rear driver's cab of the locomotive, or not carried at all.

From the railway's point of view, reduction of unprofitable freight was greatly assisted by the 1968 Transport Act, though BR was critical at the time. Until this Act came into force the railways were still saddled with the so called 'sundries' traffic (predominantly freight in units of under a ton but sometimes individual consignments were heavier), together with what was left of the old collection and delivery service and the residue of wagonload freight. The new Act established a National Freight Corporation (NFC), which created a subsidiary called National Carriers Ltd (NCL). The latter took over sundries and collection and delivery work from BR, while the NFC additionally found itself parent to British Road Services, Pickford's and other Transport Holding Company freight bodies. Sundries traffic had already been established as a separate business in 1966 and was removed from regional control into a new Sundries Division in which BRS Parcels¹ participated, the idea being to use road or rail for the

¹ This was a Transport Holding Company, once part of the old BTC Road Haulage Executive.

trunk haul, whichever cheapest. In the run up to implementing the 1968 Act the Sundries Division became an autonomous unit reporting to the BR Board, including all terminals, road vehicles, staffing and sales responsibilities. Financial responsibility was substantially passed to depot level, where decisions could be made about the mode used to convey goods, staff having the ability to negotiate prices for rail cartage with the regions or BRS Parcels as required. Perhaps unexpectedly sales increased through this strategy, arresting long term decline. In November the division was transferred to the new company, anticipating take-over by the NFC on 1st January 1969. NCL took over roundly 25,000 staff, 9,600 motor vehicles and 23,000 trailers from British Rail, and many railway premises. The activities were known to be loss-making and grants were provided for a time thought sufficient for NCL to turn the business round (or at least stem the losses)². The company did not finally go into profit until 1977 after shedding staff, somewhat changing its business model, entering the contract distribution business and implementing a regionalized management structure. The NFC complained its performance was severely hampered by NCL and the heavy liabilities it had inherited from BR, where they appear to have been less visible. The railway was delighted to be rid of the responsibility for the historic and burdensome sundries traffic while still being paid to carry quite a lot of it at profitable rates and leaving NCL with the shortfall.

NCL's initial brief was to operate a door-to-door service for small and middle weight freight (in range one hundredweight to three tons) and its mostly ex-railway fleet was the largest in the Country. It consigned a great deal of trunk haul freight and parcels by rail (it contracted with BR to haul 1.1 million wagon journeys in 1969) and

began chartering overnight trains; much traffic was also placed in containers and despatched by Freightliner, soon making up 10 per cent of Freightliner traffic and becoming its largest customer. In fact the NFC was required to use rail for trunk haul loads where economic, but road haulage dominated. Of the other predominantly rail-based activities taken over by the NFC might perhaps be mentioned the 'Tartan Arrow' overnight parcels service from south-east England to Scotland, based on dedicated containers and wagons. This had been an independent road-haul venture but British Rail (jointly with the Transport Holding Company) obtained ownership in 1967 and transferred much of the business to rail; although the initiative showed promise, it provided only lacklustre performance and was closed in 1976.

The NFC was quite a substantial organization at its peak and was sold off in 1982 to its management (there is little trace of the railway connection today, but remnants of the NFC are identifiable in DHL-Exel and Lynx Express, bought by UPS, and the name Pickford's is still around).

In order to promote its liner trains BR set up a company called Freightliner Ltd in 1965 and trainload container traffic was thenceforth moved under this brand name. Until 1969 BR invested £25 million in terminal facilities, locomotives and vehicles, mainly 62ft wagons with low decks to take 8ft containers. Under the 1968 Act control of Freightliner Ltd was split with the NFC whom it was envisaged would handle the road traffic movements to and from the rail terminals; BR retained ownership of the rail vehicles. BR was uneasy with this relationship having only a minority shareholding and felt that the NFC had too much control given the point of the exercise was trunk haul by rail, though it was not until 1976 (and against bitter NFC opposition)

² Losses at transfer were £25 a year and the grant was £16m (1969) and £13.4m (1970)

that this aberration was corrected and the company returned intact to BR control.

A word should be said of seasonal traffic, of which there was at one time a vast amount to carry, all perishable, and all compressed into short cropping seasons many of which inconveniently overlapped. Many fruit and vegetable items were taken by rail up to the early 1960s but within ten years it had substantially switched to road (releasing a huge number of very poorly utilized wagons). The traffic was partially geographically based; Penzance for broccoli, Tamar Valley, Swanwick and Wisbech for Strawberries, West Yorkshire for Rhubarb, for example. Many areas were famous for watercress (often packed on passenger trains). Many imports were handled and distributed from France and the Channel Islands. Potatoes were another important commodity at one time. The intensity of seasonal traffic was so high that it spurred British Transport Films to make a film about the broccoli traffic in the 1960s, recently released on DVD; its content is rather more interesting than the title suggests, and the scale of the operation and logistical requirements are thought-provoking.

Coal was traditionally a hugely important part of the railways' business but the use of coal for the home and industry (ie excluding power station and export coal) had begun its slow decline in the 1930s and diminished rapidly after the war. The Clean Air Act of 1956 and, from about 1970, a move towards central heating, dealt a mortal blow to the business, the speed of whose decline seemed to be regarded as a surprise by the railway; another bad smog in 1962 accelerated the distaste for coal. Many stations had coal yards from which local merchants received coal in bulk and arranged local domestic delivery but during the 1960s most bulk deliveries to station yards switched to road from rail-fed coal concentration depots, allowing tracks to be lifted and parts of station yards to be turned over to more useful car

parking. Rail delivery to stations had pretty much ceased by 1970 and as domestic coal fires diminished towards oblivion over the next couple of decades or so, the remaining station-based coal merchants disappeared, taking their coal bunkers with them and allowing car parks to be extended further.

The Railfreight Era

The introduction of air brakes compounded the problems of shunting as groups of air-braked wagons had to be marshalled next to an air-braked loco while groups of vacuum-braked wagons had to be shunted adjacent to a vacuum-braked loco. Only a few air-braked wagons were 'piped' for vacuum brake formations and still some wagons had no power brakes at all. This endured until the 1980s when all vacuum braked wagons in normal service had been withdrawn. Trains that were entirely air-braked no longer needed a brake van, which is of course the position today.

The spread of air brakes offered new opportunities. In 1974 a country-wide air-braked network was defined and a new service was offered by fully air-braked stock for transmission of freight on a siding to siding basis, next day delivery was guaranteed. In September 1977 the air brake programme was accelerated and this service was christened 'Speedlink', initially operating 29 services a day but soon increasing—it had reached 85 by the end of 1982. Trains could operate at up to 75 mph and wagons were designed or adapted to accept loads on pallets. The service was marketed as 'overnight scheduled services in wagonload quantities' and was an opportunity to encourage business to make use of freight grants of 50 (later 60) per cent to shift goods by rail rather than by road on environmental grounds, much of which went into provision of, or improvements to, private sidings and terminals—by 1986 Speedlink was operating between 65 terminals.

Sometimes wagons were collected from and delivered to customers and coupled together for a scheduled trunk haul Speedlink service.

Conclusion

It would be a gross miscarriage of justice to call the British Transport Commission incompetent. It was a misconceived and poorly thought-through aspiration, given a job that was extremely difficult without the tools and resources needed and with no mechanism to cope with the profound change about to occur to its traditional traffics.

That it didn't play very strongly the few good cards it had to hand is all too obvious now. That it was a succession of well-intentioned governments that set all this up and presided over all the dubious decision-making, interfering when they should not, and failing to act decisively when they ought, and failing to give clear direction about what railways were supposed to be for, is less frequently ventilated. Put the two together, and it is toxic.

We also know that one of the outcomes of the dreadful 1955 railway strike was a change in government policy to pursue more vigorously the development of motorways. Self evidently (to the author at least) to discover that one of the reasons for railways losing traffic is diversion to roads, and then to build better and faster roads parallel to the railways, can only be a sign that further railway losses will increase, and do so more rapidly and with greater consequences. The decisions must have been taken knowing that. If you had set out to inflict damage on the railways deliberately (not I think quite how it was viewed) then it is hard to see how one could have done it better. One then puts a road-builder in as minister, with a clear remit to build more motorways and bye-passes. What are we to think, looking back objectively?

Whether Beeching could have done a better job I would not care to say, but against the background I have just painted I have come to my own conclusion that taken in the round he probably did a pretty fair job, looked at from the railways' viewpoint. Had someone else gone in then there might have been even more cut and slash and without any of the positive aspects that eventually led to the business-led railway.

We can of course be sentimental about these things. But let us be clear. First, there was no duty set by parliament upon the railway to serve communities that wouldn't use the services. That is a political decision and criticism, if justified, needs to be aimed in that direction. Second, if it is considered desirable to run trains all day up and down a branch devoid of passengers then that is absolutely fine, but it comes at a cost which the politicians felt could not be afforded. Again, if that is considered the wrong answer then it is to the politicians to whom one must turn. Indeed Ernest Marples himself said that the job of the British Railways Board was to present to the minister proposals for closure based on purely commercial grounds, and it was for the minister to consider the wider issues and make a decision about whether a railway was to close. It seems pretty clear to me where responsibility lies.

Beeching may have been over-optimistic about bus companies rushing in to provide alternative services, given the problems they were having themselves in maintaining traffic levels. He said bus alternatives would be needed but there was no duty on the new Board to provide them (the government could have imposed a duty) and where government imposed a duty for specific closures they were short term and had no quality element. Labour minister Richard March openly admits that the 1964 government had no intention whatever of setting out to provide specific road transport solutions for communities left without a railway. One may consider this a wrong, and perhaps even

duplicitous, but it appears to be a clear matter of public policy and one can hardly blame Beeching for that.

Closer to home, though, are the processes put in place to determine which lines were 'unprofitable'. Many lines were unprofitable beyond doubt, but there would have been a rump (maybe a quarter of closure candidates, maybe a third) where had the traffic tests, the accountancy procedures, the analysis of future development potential, and more imaginative medium term cost cutting and marketing potential all been done a little differently then the outcome would have been different. I would suggest that the imperative for speed and the immediate lack of internal skills were a contributory factor in these opportunities being lost. Maybe Beeching should shoulder some of the blame for shortcomings in the above areas. I'd really like to see some proper analysis of this. It would only have affected the outcome on some lines and again so many closure took place after he had gone that he should not shoulder any blame alone.

He may reasonably be accused of being naïve about the way his report was presented, with hindsight almost guaranteed to cause outrage. You can't have it both ways! Had it been done by less straightforward and more insidious, shadowy figures using modern elliptical and devious language then closures might have been swifter and more rapid. As it was, the outrage probably formed a modest check on the process and saved some lines. Adviser Wynn Jones was present at a cabinet meeting when a raft of closures were put forward, including the Central Wales line. After pointing out that it ran through seven marginal constituencies, closure was out of the question. There are some clear messages here. Beeching didn't really do politics. If there is a good book on all this, I have thus far missed it. If there isn't one, there should be.

If the railways should have, or even could have, done better during the 1950s then there is plenty of scope for debate, but I don't think we can blame the shortcomings of the 1950s on Beeching. He wasn't there. Perhaps he would have done a better job than the generals if he had been.

As a bit of a postscript I noticed the appearance of the article (click the link following) about, let us say, rather surprising goings on at the ministry connected with closing railways. I had forgotten this, though I now dimly remember the rumpus. I have no idea whether the described behaviour was typical, but it if it were it might explain some of the railway-closing zeal. Again, there is nothing to connect this with Dr Beeching: I think he was a straight guy trying to do what to him was the 'right thing' with too little data and masters well versed in the dark arts. I look forward to the book that gives the full story!

[Link relating to the Railway Closure Secrets affair.](#)

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