HOUSE OF LORDS

THURSDAY, 2nd MAY, 1963

[*Extracts from the Official Report*]

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE BEECHING PLAN

Speech by LORD STONHAM

LORD STONHAM: My Lords, on Monday in another place the right honourable gentleman the Minister of Transport said categorically that 25,726 jobs would disappear, and I think that illustrates the whole trouble that we are in to-day. It brings me into immediate disagreement with the noble Viscount with regard to his right honourable friend the Minister of Transport, who he said had been the subject of ungenerous attacks. Indeed, the noble Leader of the House paid such fervent tribute to his right honourable friend, that I began to wonder if this was a preliminary to his canonisation as St. Ernest and his transfer to another sphere.

The noble Viscount referred to Mr. Marples's technical awareness, his dedication and determination. I am not prepared to dispute that at all, but I think the most important thing of all is utterly suspect, and that is his judgment. Indeed the whole difficulty, the whole acute public anxiety which undoubtedly exists throughout the country about the Beeching Plan is, in my view, attributable to what the noble Viscount called Mr. Marples's flair for publicity: the terrific public relations job which has been done on the presentation of this Plan, and its blowing up out of all reasonable sense of proportion. That is one of the main difficulties that we have to-day. When we ask vitally important questions about redundancy, and when the N.U.R. ask vitally important questions about redundancy, on which the possibility of a strike may depend, they do not get the proper answers. They certainly do not get the kind of answer which the noble and learned Viscount has just given to my noble friend.

The noble Viscount, Lord Hailsham, said that ten years ago no one understood the causes of weakness in the railway system. He will have to speak for himself, because the Labour Party very clearly understood the causes of weakness in the railway system. It was not fully implemented in the 1947 Act (there was some weakness there), but we fully knew that the essential thing in transport is an integrated transport policy. May I remind the noble Viscount, further, that ten years ago was 1953, and that in that year the railways were still showing a profit, and one of the reasons why they were still showing a profit was because at that time the noble Viscount and his colleagues had not disrupted British Railways by tearing away from them a large part of their road haulage functions. And it is not merely a question of the £8 million or £10 million profit that they were making on road haulage: it was that it gave at least some possibility of integration. When the noble Viscount makes statements like that he shows very clearly that, although he may give correct answers when he is speaking as Minister for Science—and, indeed, when wearing any other of the many different hats he wears—certainly this afternoon he was not very strong on facts.

He said we had been given the railway end of a total transport policy—and that is quite right. Then, dealing with the very reasonable request made by my noble friend Lord Morrison of Lambeth for a cost analysis, a full inquiry into the roads on the same lines as we have now had from Dr. Beeching on the railways, he said, "We cannot possibly wait for such an inquiry". That savours to me of, "My mind is made up; don't bother me with the facts". Because how can you possibly judge a transport system, of which the noble Viscount said we have only one part, if you do not know the other

part, particularly the economic facts? Immediately after saying, "We cannot wait for an inquiry", he went on to say, "This job cannot be rushed. There is no danger at all that it is going to be dealt with and rushed in a short space of time". If there is no danger and it is not going to be rushed, then why can we not wait for a proper inquiry, until we know the facts?

The plain truth is this. What the noble Viscount has just been saying is in direct contradiction to what his right honourable friend said in another place on both Monday and Tuesday. May I quote what Mr. Marples said? After disposing of the third of the railway system which the Plan proposes to deal with, he went on to say [OFFICIAL REPORT, Commons, Vol. 676 (No. 102), col. 725] that the period ending September, 1964, which is only seventeen months hence,

". . . will see the most intensive implementation of the plan on the assumption that closures will go as fast as anyone could reasonably expect."

That does not sound much like "no danger", or "not rushing it". In fact, the precise mention of the number of jobs which are going to be lost indicates that the decision, in so far as it can be made, has already been made; and almost every word that the Minister of Transport says on this subject is proof positive that the minds of the Government have been made up.

The noble Viscount mentioned the Stranraer link. Is he aware that 40 per cent. of the people who go on the boat to Larne in Northern Ireland go by rail to Stranraer; that the steamer's income increased to £286,000 this year from £200,000 the year before, and the Ayrshire County Council are afraid that if the rail link is broken they will eventually lose the steamer and the short sea route to Ireland altogether? But, about the Stranraer line, Mr. Marples said (Col. 737):

"So the people there need not worry that there will not be consultation before it is closed down."

That is the kind of consultation that a condemned man gets when they ask him what he wants for breakfast before they hang him. The fact is that the noble Viscount has not really studied this matter or, in my view, the Plan, or he would not have got up to-day and made the kind of speech he has made—pleasant as it was, although it told us nothing new.

My Lords, I have been a critic of the Beeching Plan ever since it was published on March 27. But I find, as I found when it was first published eight years ago, very much to commend it. Its title then was *The Modernisation and Re-Equipment of British Railways*—the Report I have here. I still think that there is much to commend in the Beeching Plan, although I recall that no one said of the 1955 edition that it was "monumental" or "boldly imaginative", or used any of the other superlatives which have been applied to the current edition. Everything in the Beeching Plan is in this book, and it has been in increasingly large-scale operation for eight years. In fact, we are now half-way through the fifteen-year plan which was adumbrated when this Report was published. Everything is in it except for some of the figures; and many of the figures in the Beeching Report are known to be wrong, although unfortunately none of them can be really checked.

In this book you can read of the plans for reduction in stopping and branch line services; closure of little-used wayside stations, or their conversion to halts; reductions in passenger stock and wagons; great reduction in the number of marshalling yards, plus re-siting and modernising; larger wagons, particularly for mineral traffic; complete reorientation of freight services, to speed movement and reduce costs; provide direct transits for main streams of traffic; and to attract to the railway a due proportion of the full load merchandise traffic which would otherwise pass by road. They are all quotations from this eight-year-old plan, faithfully copied into the current edition—and that is despite the Minister's statement that there has been nothing like it before in the history of British Railways.

But, if it is the same plan, why is it then that in 1955 it was accepted almost without demur but in 1963 it has occasioned anger—anger cutting across Party barriers; anger deeper and more widespread, in my opinion, throughout the country than almost any domestic

issue during the last twenty years? In fact, the only pleasant comment I have heard on the Plan is the advice to use Dr. Beeching's face cream because it removes all lines. I have asked why it is, and I think the answer is to be found in the speech with which the noble Lord, Lord Robertson of Oakridge, introduced his plan on January 24, 1955. I have it here because, by an extraordinary chance, when I got the book from the Printed Paper Office only two or three weeks ago there it was, the Press handout. From it, I would quote three extracts. The first is:

"The Plan is not designed merely to make our railway system self-supporting; it aims at producing far-reaching benefits for the economy of the country as a whole and for the better ordering of its transport arrangements".

Dr. Beeching was not allowed to spare a thought for the economy of the country as a whole. The second is:

"The Plan aims to adapt our century-old railway system to the needs of to-morrow. It will undoubtedly be of special benefit to those parts of the Kingdom which are rather more remote from the great industrial centres. In this connection I am sure our customers in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and the West of England will be looking to see what benefits the plan will bestow on them. Their requirements are very prominent in our minds."

Under the Beeching version Scotland, Wales and the West of England, railway-wise, will have virtually ceased to exist.

Thirdly, here is how the noble Lord concluded his speech in 1955. The Commission

"look forward now to receiving from the railway trade unions and from the men they represent the co-operation which is necessary to assist them in this task. In their last annual Report the Commission put forward as the first of their objectives a loyal, contented, keen staff employed in the most productive manner. We hope that this Plan, if it is approved will put new heart into the whole industry and convince all who work in it that they belong to a live show with a fine future, and not a decaying anachronism."

Mr. Marples's deployment of the Beeching Plan has so knocked the heart out of the men, so convinced them that they have no future, that they propose to take the despairing and, in my judgment, mistaken course of striking. In 1955 the same ideas were presented with wisdom as a means of rehabilitation, re-equipment and, in some cases, expansion. In 1963 it has been brutal surgery allied to mishandling so foolish as to appear deliberate. For this I blame the Government; certainly not Doctor Beeching. Indeed, one can only blame such an outstanding technologist for having accepted his task with such limited terms of reference and thus *inevitably producing an intellectual* exercise in a vacuum; as any plan for the railways must be when it is conducted in isolation from other forms of transport and from the economic and social needs of the country.

I want to examine this present Report under two heads—these are distinct heads and not the same thing—first, the immediate need to postpone action on closures until we know what the closures themselves will cost the country; second, the longer-term, fundamental question of the national cost relationship between road and rail. In recent years we have closed 340 branch lines and 4,000 miles of track. This has saved *the railways less than 1 per cent., which* is 2d. in the £, of their total costs. Of course, this microscopic saving has been swamped by other costs to which it has given rise. The nation has, in fact, lost heavily on the deal.

Is there any evidence that the further 5,000 miles of passenger closures now proposed will not also cost us very dear? Surely, common sense dictates that before Dr. Beeching is given the green light on closures we must know what the costs will be, so that the country can decide whether we can afford them. No one, not even the Minister, knows the costs. I will mention some of the items. It is expected to save £18 million a year *on the 5,000 miles of passenger closures.* That is equal to four days' defence expenditure and, if it is not an official secret, many of these lines are part of our defence. Compare £18 million with the £235 million allowed on tax-free expenses —most of it on tax-free cars. *Would an* £18 million branch-line subsidy be a worse way of spending money than the much larger business car subsidy? Which is the more immoral or the less moral? This sum of £18 million a year means 1½d. a week for each one of us. That is the measure of our savings. What shall we have to pay for that 1½d. a week? Some of us will pay with our lives. At present 130 people are killed each week on the roads compared with less than 1 per week on the railways.

I hope that the noble Viscount will listen to what I am going to say now, because I am going to deal with this 1 per cent. which he said was the only difference it would make. This has been said also by the noble Lord, Lord Chesham. Mr. Marples claims that the traffic diverted to the roads by the closure of one-third of the railway system will be only 1 per cent. of the total road traffic. The noble Lord, Lord Chesham, told us yesterday of the method—which I regard as an absurdly unreliable one—employed in arriving at that estimate. Surely, if you want to find out how many people are going to be diverted from rail to road, you ask how many passengers in all and calculate 1 per cent. You ask the total number of passengers and work out what 1 per cent. comes to. We know that in 1961 there were 1,025 million rail passenger journeys. One per cent. of that is 10 million. Therefore the Government claim that only 10 million extra passengers a year will be added to the roads.

I shall be glad to be interrupted if any noble Lord wishes to interrupt me. I am using the 1 per cent. argument. My Lords, you will be aware that some 300 lines and 2,300 stations are scheduled for closure. One line alone, the Southport-Liverpool line, has 5 million passengers a year. The Broad Street-Richmond line has more than the other 5 million to make up the 10 million. I could mention numbers all round the country to show how utterly foolish and ridiculous is this 1 per cent., which is virtually the basis of the Government's whole case.

LORD ALDINGTON: My Lords, will the noble Lord forgive me for interrupting, I had understood that the proposition was that this would add 1 per cent. to the road traffic; not take 1 per cent. off the travellers on the railways. Have I misunderstood the proposition?

LORD STONHAM: My Lords, the idea is that you are going to close one-third of the railway system and that will add only 1 per cent. to the traffic on the roads. That is the statement.

A NOBLE LORD: Now you have it right.

LORD STONHAM: My Lords, I had it right all along. In order to find out or to check back on the Government's estimate, I asked myself how many passengers that is going to mean. I would invite the noble Lord, Lord Aldington, to read Lord Chesham's explanation of it. It was almost like water divining or something like that; I think they worked out the answer first and then found the way to arrive at it. I am sure that noble Lords from Scotland or anywhere who really know about this, know how ridiculous this is. I have heard it said many times, jokingly, that most people agree with Beeching until his plan is applied to their own line or station. That is because it is their own line. It is not merely a matter of self-interest; it is that they know something about local conditions. This idea about 1 per cent. being added shows no knowledge at all of the actualities.

The other important fact is that most of the traffic in the threatened holiday areas is concentrated in three months of the year. That, surely, will not be denied. There are days in the summer when some of the doomed stations receive a hundred times their daily winter average of passengers. So that 1 per cent. then becomes 100 per cent. That is the measure of traffic which the already choked roads will have to carry in summer if the plan is implemented.

In regard to freight, the Minister claims that if the railways attract all the traffic they want from the roads, it will reduce road traffic by 2 per cent. This also, I think, is untrue. In 1961, road goods transport totalled 28,000 million ton miles. Two per cent. of that is 560 million ton miles. If we generously assume an average of 100,000 ton miles per lorry, that means only 5,000 fewer lorries on the trunk roads. The Plan proposes to have only 100 main freight depôts, instead of some 900, and from every one goods will be delivered by road over a radius of 20 miles. It will need many more than 50 extra lorries from every one of these depôts and they will all be in congested areas. It means that there will be a considerable increase in the number of vehicles on the roads.

I know the West Country very well, and especially Taunton. In Taunton, on an April day in mid-week, it is like an August Saturday used to be. Somebody wrote about it in these words:

"It used to be frustration, then chaos; now it is absolute hell."

The Mayor of Chard last week set out the true position in the West Country in these words:

"To annihilate the unprofitable, but extremely safe, railway system by increasing the lethal propensities of our ridiculous and costly road system will transfer the price to be paid in money to an account which will be paid for in blood."

We shall also have to pay a lot in money.

Recently, Mr. Marples declared that we must make sure that the roads can carry the increased traffic arising from the closures, and that the roads must be "strengthened, or widened or realigned." But he has only just started the survey. It will be at least a year before the Minister can have any idea of the cost of widening, realigning and straightening the roads directly arising from these closures. I have in my hand a letter and report from the Ayrshire County Council, who say that it will cost £4,828,000 for immediately necessary expenditure before the roads can be used for road transport. They add:

"This is only the immediately foreseeable effect. Only a detailed survey will enable us to say what further road works will arise from railway closures."

I should like the noble Earl to deal with this when he comes to reply. This is only one county in Scotland, and the immediate cost is nearly £5 million, just to make it possible for road transport to proceed safely.

Take another example, the closure of the marginal Peterborough-Grimsby line, which will isolate a large part of Lincolnshire, including towns like Skegness, which will be 23 miles from the nearest railway station. The roads are comparatively narrow and wind extraordinarily, and 150 miles will need straightening and widening. At £100,000 a mile, that means £15 million for only one area. In addition, it will put an enormous burden on ratepayers at the very time when they are losing income because people will not be going to the seaside resorts. How much it is going to cost on immediate works the Minister does not know. My guess is that it well may be £1,000 million, and as the estimates come in, that may well prove to be an under-estimate. This cost alone is going to knock the £18 million a year silly. How can the closure procedure be started before this information is available?

Another urgent question I would like to address to the noble Earl is that of damping down of holiday traffic and getting rid of the surplus passenger rolling stock. When is that going to start? Can it be deferred until the matter has been more fully considered as a question of principle? The Minister indicated yesterday that he had been sitting for nine months on the recommendation that the seaside town of Porthcawl should have a summer service. There are literally scores of what I regard as utterly daft proposals in this Plan. In the Rhondda, there is a two-mile railway tunnel under the mountains. It is proposed to continue the railway for freight but not for passengers. To get to the other side of the mountain by road entails travelling 40 miles and the roads round are not suitable for buses. There is a five-mile branch line into Cardiff. For that area, this line is as important as the Piccadilly Line is to London, and there is no other service. Out of 195,000 miles of highways, there will be thousands of miles which will need major and costly improvements, if they are to carry buses and lorries safely. How can such astronomical expenditure be justified on roads which, by the Beeching yardstick, should be closed because the traffic they carry is too small to justify their existence?

In rural areas, we shall have to foot a large annual bill for buses, because buses have suffered even more than the railways from the wasting disease which is afflicting all forms of public transport. We have been promised bigger buses for carrying luggage, and they will need wider roads. Then we shall have to pay for unemployment in these areas. In parts of Devon to-day one person in five is out of work. Some of them seek work in Plymouth. The journey takes 45 minutes and costs 3s. 6d. return by train, and the alternative by bus *via* Tavistock costs 7s. and takes an hour and a half. In most cases within my knowledge the alternative costs twice as much and takes twice as long. There is a quarry there giving employment, on which recently a lot of money was spent on a promise that the Callington line would stay. It is on the closure list. If these people cannot get work or get to work, they will have to leave their homes and go to the big towns, there to compete for homes and jobs. The

social cost alone of depopulating the countryside will far outweigh any saving on these railway closures.

In many other parts of the country —in Scotland, for example—the situation will be tragic. We heard the speeches of noble Lords, speaking from their knowledge, in your Lordships' House yesterday. On Tuesday in another place the Minister of Transport, knowing that 15,000 square miles of Scotland would be entirely without railways, said that the situation could be met with 100 extra buses. This is in *Hansard*. Noble Lords look astounded; but that is what he said. Seven hundred buses for the entire country: 600 in England and Wales, and 100 in Scotland for 15,000 square miles. How can one respect the judgment of a Minister who is so manifestly out of touch with the situation and talks such utter nonsense? What sort of confidence does it inspire when he tells the doomed areas not to worry because he personally will have to approve every closure? That is precisely what does worry them.

The transport consultative committees can oppose closures only on the grounds of hardship arising on the closure of a particular line or station. Virtually none of the most important considerations, such as alternative costs, trade, employment or congestion come within their purview. The Clerk to the Winchester Rural District Council rang up yesterday, because they are concerned about losing the Alton line, to say: "We are sure it could be made to pay. Is that something we could put before the transport consultative council?" Well, they could talk about it, if the chairman of the committee allowed; but it is quite outside their province.

How is the Minister to judge when all those things come to him which were detailed by the noble Lord, Lord Chesham, in his speech yesterday, and which are to be considered when, certainly in the next twelve months on the most important one, the cost—that is, the cost of the alternative—he just will not know and the information will not be there? But the point is that meanwhile the closure procedure, presumably, is going to be implemented, in the Minister's own words, as fast as possible in the next period of seventeen months. If the position is that the Minister is then going to consider these other things, it may be that in many cases everyone will have been put to acute anxiety and considerable cost for no reason at all. I feel that in common justice and common sense the procedure of closures must be deferred until we know the cost of road improvements.

Last Thursday I presided at a conference organised by the National Council on Inland Transport. It was attended by 400 delegates, including representatives of 170 local authorities from all parts of Britain—county councils, boroughs and district councils. It was the most widely based and representative gathering of local authorities that I have ever attended; not just the fringe areas, but London and many big cities were represented there. They submitted, debated and carried some 40 resolutions on the Beeching Plan; and they finally insisted on summarising their views in a resolution which stated that this conference,

"appalled by the social and economic consequences of Dr. Beeching's Report, demands that it shall not be implemented until all the consequences and costs to the nation have been fully assessed."

Since then the County Councils Association of England and every major authority in Scotland, Wales and the West of England have made similar demands. This adds up to a unanimous and overwhelming demand from non-Party organisations representing virtually the entire population. Any Minister, in my view, would have to be either mentally subnormal or morally delinquent to ignore this overwhelming demand and the local knowledge and facts on which it is based.

I would now ask your Lordships to consider briefly the fundamental question of the national cost relationship between road and rail, and the extent to which we subsidise both forms of transport. The Minister constantly refers to the need to leave the consumer freedom of choice, but insists on destroying true freedom of choice by constantly increasing subsidies to road freight traffic. I submit that there can be no real freedom of choice until we have the same cost analysis for the roads as we have had for the railways, and accord to both the same measure of public support, or no support at all. I ask the noble Earl who is to reply whether the Government accept the principle of

equal public support, and, if so, whether they will institute this cost analysis for the roads—and I do not mean just the Buchanan traffic survey. If they refuse to do so, I submit that they lay themselves open to the charge that, while declining to subsidise railways to provide a necessary public service, they are willing to use our money to provide ever-increasing subsidies for privately-owned lorries so that they can profitably quote freight rates which put the railways out of business. That is the economics of Bedlam.

There is, I admit, no precise information, but from various sources my Council have compiled figures to show the costs to the nation involved in the use of the roads, apart from the historic cost of the free track. These are, first, road construction and maintenance, now rising to £250 million a year; cost of accidents, £230 million a year; police signals and traffic control, £130 million a year; cost of congestion—this is not my estimate, but the estimate of the Road Federation —£500 million a year; and damage to buildings, £100 million a year. That is a total of £1,210 million a year, apart from the cost to the Health Services arising from noise, fumes and so on. And if you deduct the receipts from fuel duties and vehicle taxes, it reveals a net subsidy to road transport of over £600 million a year that is, four times the railway deficit. In other words, the roads are a far bigger national loss maker that the railways. The remarkable thing is that, despite their favoured position, we have demands from road haulage interests for reduction of fuel duties and doubling of expenditure on roads. It must be the first time in history that a tenant paying half the economic rent has demanded at one and the same time that the landlord should halve the rent and double expenditure on the property.

Translated into terms of single vehicles, we estimate that a 3-ton lorry is subsidised to the extent of £10 a week, and a 20-tonner by £100 a week. Consider the effect of this on the railway freight services. The railways have now established the successful Condor freight service, 12 hours London to Glasgow. Alongside, on the roads, we are providing £100 a week for every 20-ton lorry which competes with it. That is not free consumer choice; it is not co-ordination; it is financial madness, and it must be stopped. The Government cannot dispute my figures, because they have not any of their own. But it is in the national interest that they should get figures and ascertain the facts with the least delay by means of a really searching, comprehensive and objective inquiry.

I began by saying that there was much to commend in the Beeching Plan, and this applies particularly to the freight proposals. But they cannot succeed unless we see to it that they get the chance to compete on equal terms. For the rest, we should ask Dr. Beeching to look again, not at how easily he can close lines down, but at what must be done to keep them open. Give them a face lift; apply with goodwill the many methods whereby costs can be lowered by running modified services, rather than destroy them altogether. Use and foster the growing interest of many local authorities in their railway and their anxiety to increase its business. Jettison the idea, which our people will never accept, that they must holiday abroad because British Railways will make no provision for holidays in Britain. Above all, I would say to Dr. Beeching: "Play your part, which could be a decisive one, in stopping this strike; and then start the long, hard struggle to put heart and hope back into the men; because without that no plans can succeed." Before the war, students used to come from all over the world to watch and learn from British Railways. They will begin to come again if we call a truce to amputation, and, by infusing modern efficiency with the old spirit of public service, restore our railways to their former position as the envy of the world.

Printed in England by St. Stephen's Parliamentary Press, Pocock Street, S.E.1.
(24138) 3000