

FABIAN REVIEW

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POLL POSITION



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Fabian Review is the quarterly journal of the Fabian Society. Like all publications of the Fabian Society, it represents not the collective view of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

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Switching track

We need a revolution in transport planning that truly learns the lessons of the past, writes *Robin Hickman*



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THE RESHAPING OF British Railways – commonly known as the Beeching report after its author, Dr Richard Beeching – was published in 1963. It is now 60 years old and represents one of the largest mistakes ever made in British transport planning.

Of course, this judgement is made today, in the context of very different public policy priorities. In particular, environmental and social sustainability objectives have become critical and need to be considered in shaping infrastructure investments. But the Beeching debacle has left more than a regrettable legacy. It has also left us lessons – lessons which policymakers are yet to learn. Of all the issues likely to trouble a Starmer government if Labour wins the next election, transport planning will be one of the most crucial to get right. What might be included in a new, progressive transport strategy? To succeed, Labour can draw on recent good practice, especially from abroad; but crucially, it must also learn the right lessons from past mistakes.

The Beeching report was published eight years after the launch of a railway modernisation plan which was perceived as failing to stem the losses of British Rail. For the first time ever, a national overview of the rail network was produced; but the infamous recommendation was for closure of much of the rail network across Great Britain. It begins with a backhanded compliment: “The changes proposed are intended to shape the railways to meet present day requirements by enabling them to provide as much of the total transport of the country as they can provide well.” The implicit – and pre-emptive – conclusion was that rail was not appropriate for much of the country, particularly for frequently stopping services serving the smaller urban areas and more inaccessible locations.

The extent of recommended closures was dramatic: 2,363 stations (55 per cent) and 8,000 km of railway lines (30 per cent of route miles). The majority of closures were implemented as planned, with many connections lost between urban areas (e.g. the Great Central Mainline from London Marylebone to Leicester and Sheffield, the

Woodhead line between Manchester and Sheffield, the Oxford-Cambridge Varsity Line), and linkages to rural communities and coastal resorts (e.g. in Cornwall, North Devon, East Anglia and the Lake District). The rail closures meant that many locations were left with no rail connections. Public transport usage fell dramatically, and there were wider socio-demographic effects, including population change. Thousands of jobs in British Rail were lost.

The context for Beeching was rising car ownership, more road usage and increased road freight haulage – and heavy governmental support for increased motorisation. There was a possibility that public transport by rail could be substituted by bus, but replacement services were never fully planned or funded, and so provision remained woefully inadequate. Bus deregulation from 1986 onwards led to further disintegration of bus services, and socially necessary public transport provision has declined even further. The private car became the only choice for travel in many locations as a direct impact of the Beeching cuts and subsequent public policy applying market principles to all of the modes except cars – which remain very heavily state supported.

It is no great surprise that, 60 years on, we are still suffering: the economic analysis used by Beeching was wholly inappropriate for the task, failing to quantify the environmental and social benefits of an extensive rail network. A narrow economic analysis assessed each line for passenger and freight flow relative to operating costs and revenue from passenger fares. Any lines that were deemed ‘uneconomic’ were put forward for closure. 50 per cent of stations were assessed as contributing to only two per cent of revenue – and they were hence deemed ineffective. This analysis overlooked many issues, such as the social capital and social mobility benefits of rail connections from disparate locations, and the environmental problems of reduced use of public transport and increased motorisation. There were no recommendations on safeguarding the lost rail corridors



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for potential future use, and important sections were lost to redevelopment.

While it was put forward as a comprehensive and objective assessment, hiding under the surface were many normative assumptions – most importantly support for motorisation. Beeching failed to apply any similar cost-benefit analysis to highway projects. He could also have assessed highway usage relative to the cost of building, operating and passenger revenue. Highways were allowed to operate with no direct access charges applied; instead, indirect taxation was used via a low level of fuel taxes that did not cover even the environmental costs.

Given how readily apparent these issues are, we might look back at Beeching and think him simply incompetent. But that is not the full picture – not least because we are making much the same mistakes today. There has been no effective national transport strategy since John Prescott in 1998 – only failed experiments in rail privatisation and bus deregulation, marginal investments in active travel (walking and cycling), and a continually weakened system of spatial planning. We have lived through successive wasted decades for sustainable transport and spatial planning. Instead, the political choice has been made to continually and significantly invest in the highway system – as the totem of individualised travel and so-called freedom of choice. In contemporary times, this continues via the Road Investment Strategies 1 and 2, despite the many adverse impacts of motorisation. RIS3 is currently being planned by Highways England, amounting to further billions of road investment.

There have been some local community objections and campaigns for improved public transport. A small number of railway lines and stations have reopened (such as the

Valley Line from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff and the Waverley line from Edinburgh to Galashiels and Tweedbank), some as heritage railways, others as corridors for light rapid transit (the Midland Metro), and some routes have been incorporated into the National Cycle Network. There are many more lines that could be reopened, and new routes could be opened in other locations. But, thanks to Beeching, the public have largely become used to organising their lives around use of the private car.

The Beeching report and subsequent support for motorisation has left us with a mammoth task in urban areas and regions – almost all contexts are very car dependent and use of the car has become normalised for most people. The critical lesson is that decisions about public investment in transport systems, including new highway, public transport and wider projects, should not resemble a book-balancing exercise in the style of small-business accounting. Instead, projects should be assessed against multiple and changing public policy goals. Sustainability objectives, including environmental and social goals, should frame transport planning and project appraisal. More specifically, public transport does not need to be self-sustaining from farebox revenue, because it provides public goods above and beyond the benefit afforded to individuals. Increased car usage, on the other hand, has led to many very significant adverse problems, including high energy consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, dire air quality, traffic casualties, obesity relating to inactive travel, and vehicle-dominated cities, towns and rural areas. Perhaps we can understand the civil servants of the postwar period for neglecting these issues – but with 60 years of damning evidence behind us, we should not be so generous to policymakers today.

The challenge for public policy is to shape and implement a more comprehensive and progressive transport planning approach. Part of this will require changes to the discipline of transport planning, including revised approaches to strategy development and project prioritisation. There should be much less investment – indeed, a moratorium – on highway building. RIS3, in particular, is inconsistent with current climate change and environmental commitments and should be cancelled. Evaluating transport planning projects on the basis of environmental and social equity goals would produce a very different list of projects: new railway connections; light rapid transit or tramway projects in urban areas, including in communities requiring regeneration; extensive, segregated cycle networks across all cities and towns; street space reallocated away from the car to public transport, cycling and walking; new public spaces; and traffic demand management. Such a list recasts transport policy as less a problem to be solved than a remarkable tool with which we can support our most important policy objectives.

Sixty years on from the Beeching Report, we need a revolution in transport planning, with environmental and social sustainability objectives framing the projects that gain funding, facilitated by intensive participation and deliberation over local strategies to ensure greater public involvement in decision-making. It is this level of ambition that is required to reshape public transport and cycling and walking networks, and to progress to more sustainable travel behaviours. ■