

The weaknesses of the Modernisation Plan were the result of government putting pressure on British Railways to reduce the deficit between 1953 and 1961. Is this a correct analysis?

The conspiracy theorists would have us believe that the road haulage lobby singlehandedly managed to manipulate government machinery into a policy of bulldozing through the closure of as much Britain's rail network as possible from 1962 onwards, using doubtful financial criteria as justification, this policy arising from Government's perverse responses to the earlier progress made under the British Transport Commission's [BTC's] Modernisation Plan.¹ The contrasting argument made here is that the actions of both Commission and Government during the 1953-61 period illustrated how individuals in such large organisations usually behave individually and collectively, then and now. It will be shown both why and how Government acted in ways that impaired BTC's already-weak ability to plan and execute 'Modernisation', leading to a 'tipping point' in government policy in 1960.

In fairness to Henshaw, in his text he modifies his headline 'Conspiracy' argument by acknowledging the possibility that his case might not formally constitute a 'Conspiracy';² nevertheless he and others take a very one-eyed view, with numerous actions characterised as being done in bad faith.³ However, when viewed in wider contemporary context, most of the actions of the key participants from 1953-61 can instead be seen as a particular mix of customary human successes and failings.

For example, it is unsurprising that Government in the 1950s became increasingly alarmed at the growing operating deficit of Britain's railways. Herbert Morrison's assumption - widely shared within Labour circles⁴ - had been that nationalised transport should be an asset for the nation, and the 1947 Transport Act required BTC to break even, taking one year with another, with no legal provision for the taxpayer to subsidise it. But in a 1950s Britain where private transport - haulage and private car - was rising rapidly, it became

¹ David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy*, (Dorchester: A to B Books, 2013 ed.), 93-101

² *Ibid.*, 6 and 106

³ *Ibid.*, 93, and Richard Faulkner, & Chris Austin. *Holding the Line: How Britain's Railways were Saved*, (Oxford: Oxford Publishing Company, 2012), Locs 1045 & 5999

⁴ Gerald Crompton, "'Good business for the nation': The railway nationalisation issue, 1921-47", (*The Journal of Transport History* 20, no.2, 1999), 144-5, and 152-3

necessary to specify much more precisely the objectives of the public transport system, and this didn't happen.

For example, Career railwaymen often considered that – arising from their 'common carrier' obligation - they had a duty to provide a service to their freight customers, and the wider public, that was not necessarily directly profitable.⁵ Overall financial soundness was to be achieved by cross-subsidisation, as it was in the state-owned Post Office. Indeed it was clearly legitimate for the pre-1953 BTC for some whole sectors of transport to cross-subsidise others in the annual accounts.⁶ But this missed the opportunity to identify a more strategic economic objective – for example, to achieve a specified contribution to the wider economy (although such a contribution was often mentioned informally)⁷ – or even a 'social' purpose for a railway, though this would not become established statutorily until the 1968 Transport Act.

Unfolding events would reveal why a formalised coherent business strategy was required in the 1950s for Britain's railways – and why politicians were unable to set one. In the absence of such a strategy, Government individuals did what they often do in the experience of this writer, and in the view of Lapsley – they manage by measuring what they can measure rather than by measuring what they might need to measure. Here this meant the eye-catching rising financial deficit, which could be measured, while the other often-mentioned benefits of the railways (e.g. diverting traffic from roads) could not then be measured.⁸ Deficit measurement was the default substitute for a coherent railway strategy.

This strategic shortcoming in Britain's transport policy was serious exacerbated by the rise of road transport, and the increasingly imperative need, for both economic and political reasons, to catch up with comparable countries in building motorways. Although Henshaw and others might see the road haulage lobby as behaving maliciously, in the wider context it must be conceded that motorway

⁵ Derek H. Aldcroft, "Chapter 5: The railways" from Aldcroft, Derek H, *British transport since 1914: an economic history*, (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1975, 127-163), 136

⁶ Harold Pollins, *Britain's Railways: An Industrial History* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), 168-9

⁷ J.S. Dodgson, "Railway Costs and Closures", (*Journal of Transport Economics and Policy*, 18:3, 1984), 226, would no doubt question the value of this, but the point here is that this was not even attempted.

⁸ Irvine Lapsley, "The Influence of Financial Measures on UK Railway Policy" (*Journal of Public Policy* 3, no.3, 1983), 297

building was seriously overdue in 1955,⁹ and bound to prove politically very popular as well - the road lobby was with the zeitgeist. Barker's figures for person-miles travelled by mode of transport 1952-60 show how even at this early stage, while rail held steady numerically, it shrank in share while bus and cycle reduced numerically, and private car and the total increased substantially.¹⁰ Moreover, road haulage added its own impact, notably in merchandising, as a joint BTC/National Union of Manufacturers 1959 report to Ministers confirmed: by 1958 rail's transported tonnage was 65 percent of its 1948 tonnage,¹¹ even though nationally merchandising business had boomed.

However, not only was road transport seriously eroding the rail market by 1961, but it was by then exposing the strategic problem it has posed ever since – how to 'price' it within an overall transport (and indeed wider economic) strategy.¹² The 'unfairness' that roads are built at the taxpayer's expense, but then get used almost as a 'free good' (with little differential by rate of use), is inferred by some as a success for the pro-road 'conspiracy', although the mundane truth is that politicians almost certainly correctly see any form of road-pricing as a major vote-loser in the short term.

Nevertheless, the consequence of no coherent transport strategy (including thought-through business objectives for both road and rail) was that politicians did in the 1950s what they normally do – react to "events"¹³ – and civil servants did what they normally do – advise based on the information available to them, in accordance with their current understanding of 'policy' (a subject in itself). Modern governments can't manage effectively but they can reorganise, and appoint others to manage, which the incoming Conservatives did from 1951-64, as part of their 'decentralisation-as-the-alternative-to-socialism' policy described

⁹ Peter Merriman, "Chapter 12: Motorways and the Modernisation of Britain's Road Network 1937-70", in Colin Divall and Ralf Roth, *From Rail to Road and Back Again? A Century of Transport Competition and Interdependency*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015), 319 describes the false starts for new roads of the May 1946 'Tea Room Plan' and 1949 Special Roads Act, followed only by Boyd-Carpenter's "downsized" 1955 plan.

¹⁰ T. C. Barker, "Chapter 5: The motorway age" from Barker, T. C., *The rise and rise of road transport, 1700-1990*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993, 92-100), Table 6, 96

¹¹ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure? The Organisation and Management of British Railways 1948-1964" (Durham Theses, Durham University, 2008), 238

¹² Irvine Lapsley, "The Influence of Financial Measures", 295, 297-8

¹³ "Events, dear boy", attributed to Macmillan, as the toughest problem faced in Government.

by Kandiah.¹⁴ In the case of the 1953 Transport Act, the reorganisation involving the Railway Executive's abolition was compromised when political realities prevented the BTC from being compensated for the loss of most of its road transport,¹⁵ while appointing General Robertson as Chairman gave Government someone who "had a convenient tendency to let ministers put him in the impossible position of trying to make the railways pay without holding down wages, putting up fares or closing redundant lines and then stoically shouldering the blame for the resultant deficits."¹⁶ This characteristic proved very useful, since during his chairmanship the Government repeatedly reacted to "events" by taking an action that specifically impaired BTC's financial health, the only measurable success criterion it then had. For example, to avert threatened strikes Ministers persuaded BTC to pay wage increases it knew it couldn't afford in December 1953, December 1954 and May 1958.¹⁷ Government arrangements established by the 1953 Transport Act also damagingly delayed a freight charge increase from 1955 to 1957¹⁸ – not that different from the delay directly imposed in 1952.

But although Government's actions – politicians behaving like politicians - made it more difficult for BTC to operate its business successfully, the Commission still has to take most responsibility for its own shortcomings throughout its existence. Before 1953 it had been given the vague strategic aim – albeit with no measurable objective – of integrating all inland public transport, but excepting a few token actions had made no serious steps towards achieving it (even in a form it could have defined itself).¹⁹ After 1953 it did no better at defining a comprehensive coherent business plan for the railways, and under Robertson's complex organisation structure its Modernisation Plan largely compiled initiatives planned in 1953 by the Railway Executive,²⁰ some of them

¹⁴ Michael Kandiah, "Conservative leaders, strategy and 'consensus'? 1945-1964" from *The myth of consensus: new views on British history, 1945-64*, eds. Harriet Jones & Michael Kandiah (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 58-78

¹⁵ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways 1948-73: A Business History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 137-8

¹⁶ Charles Loft, "Reappraisal and Reshaping: Government and the Railway Problem 1951-64," (*Contemporary British History* 15, no.4, 2001), 75

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74-5

¹⁸ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure?", 167

¹⁹ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure?", 81, found two brief references, and little other evidence, in his trawl of BTC minutes from 1947.

²⁰ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure?", 190

implemented with mixed or at best very limited success, as outlined further below.

Indeed BTC behaved as many large organisations do that are in or close to Government, it put structure before strategy, and thereby gave a lot of managerial attention to establishing²¹ and then operating its complex structure, while failing to define the very purpose of the organisation clearly enough – as exemplified in its Modernisation Plan. Putting strategy first would have meant a clearer focus on either concertedly tackling the deficit, or gaining a formal wider purpose in which ‘subsidy’ would have become a permissible means to achieve that objective. Instead the Plan employed ‘wishful-thinking economics’ projections as its solution to the deficit, an utter hostage to fortune for which BTC was to pay dearly.

Although the figures can be assessed in several different ways,²² by 1955 the pattern of an overall railways’ deficit was already building sharply after its one arguably profitable year of 1952, with even the net working surplus going negative from 1955.²³ Yet BTC never established a pricing policy linking fares/charges to traffics,²⁴ even though a June 1951 internal report had shown how both passenger and freight traffic were each losing money in 1949, and subsequent reports had provided similar specific reports about specific traffics.²⁵ Since then wage awards and the freezing or delaying of fare and rate increases had added to the deficit, but when invited to put forward a plan for investment in 1954, BTC’s projections for a turnaround on the revenue account showed empty optimism rather than measured analysis.

The Modernisation Plan, completed in late 1954 and seeking £1,240m investment (later revalued to £1,660m²⁶), looks plausible at first sight, and indeed was warmly received at the time by many, but very quickly others were questioning the basis for the optimistic projections. Whereas it was not unreasonable to hope for a ‘Sparks Effect’ from electrifying the London Midland trunk line, since

²¹ Bonavia, Michael. *British Rail: The First 25 years*, (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1981), 84-7; and T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 150-6 in some detail.

²² T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 69-70

²³ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 585, Table 1

²⁴ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 97-107

²⁵ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 110

²⁶ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 261 and 296

passenger numbers had certainly increased after the London-Shenfield electrification of 1949²⁷, it was unrealistic to expect merchandise traffic to return and grow because of huge new marshalling yards when the customer could experience from lorries “a service which was more reliable, speedy and free from damage and loss than that provided by the railways.”²⁸ Indeed the overall pattern was a of a series of undoubtedly desirable technical improvements, to be implemented whether or not they brought a specific benefit to potential customers. In modern parlance there was no ‘detailed business case’ – admittedly something not easily achievable at the time – and very quickly the empty optimism of the financial projections became obvious to many, and BTC’s credibility was increasingly doubted.

It should be added that many of BTC’s planned technical improvements were faulty in themselves: diesels were rushed in²⁹, after Riddles’ ‘standard steam’ policy of 1947-54 had delayed their earlier arrival, but ironically with no standardisation themselves, instead constituting a wide variety of models of unreliable manufacture (North British Co) or engineering (Western hydraulics);³⁰ and vacuum brakes became an imposed standard for wagons, even though a technical committee had rightly recommended air brakes;³¹ London Midland electrification soon became both delayed and more expensive than first planned.³² Though ‘Liner Trains’ were in principle a good idea, these other technical failures hardly helped the credibility of BTC.

Overall, the crispest expression to be found of the Plan’s failings is Fiennes’s later pithy summary: “We had made the basic error of buying our tools before doing our homework on defining the job.”³³

On a wider point, decentralisation and delegation are key themes in this story. Robertson was delegated to provide “leadership”³⁴ - and to implement

²⁷ David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy*, 42-3

²⁸ Geoffrey William Buttle, “A Signal Failure?”, 239

²⁹ Greg Morse, *British Railways in the 1950s and ‘60s* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2012), Kindle edtn, Location 313 – see further below.

³⁰ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 286-7; Charles Loft, *Last Trains: Dr Beeching and the Death of Rural England* (London: Biteback, 2013), 59; Geoffrey William Buttle, “A Signal Failure?”, 208-12

³¹ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 157, 290-2

³² T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 301-2

³³ G.F.Fiennes, *I Tried to Run a Railway*, (Ian Allan, 1967. EBook Head of Zeus, 2015), 69

³⁴ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 143, “[Churchill] specifically told me that I should give British Railways leadership” (Robertson)

decentralisation internally - but then the 1950s Conservative Government kept interfering because of “events”. BTC member Lord Rusholme is recorded as explaining that BTC “were under an obligation to pay their way, but no one allowed them to run the business as if this was their object.”³⁵ Meanwhile, within the organisation BTC on its part purported to decentralise and delegate power to the Regions, but in practice reserved too much (or the wrong kind of) authority centrally, creating uncertainty in its own decision-making. Delegation can only work when the organisation’s whole strategic purpose is both clear and well understood at all key levels – this entire story exemplifies how faulty decentralisation leads to disorganisation. Furthermore, Dudley’s general conclusion (after describing a later episode) is apposite here too: “[With agendas of high potential political salience] it must be doubted whether, in practice, it is ever possible either to express clear objectives or to draw fixed demarcation lines between the responsibilities of ministers and agency chief executives.”³⁶

Nevertheless it was finance that was eroding the credibility of BTC from 1955 onwards. As outlined earlier, to the politicians footing the bill who had no other success criterion, and with genuine subsidies not permitted under the 1947 Act, there was the worrying sight of a clearly deteriorating annual deficit, and a series of unconvincing promises by BTC that more investment would eventually make the problem go away. Indeed Robertson tried to head off pressure by confirming that the problem would get worse before it got better,³⁷ though this only heightened the need for very much more convincing projections – which weren’t, and probably couldn’t, be made.

In March 1956 new Minister Watkinson sought a reassessment of/by BTC after it sought a freight charge rise, and although Government continued to be supportive in words and investment after the result, published as a White Paper *Proposals for the Railways*, anxiety continued behind the closed doors of MoT [Ministry of Transport] and Treasury since it offered little new. The 1957 Transport (Railway Finances) Act enabled a short-term solution of borrowing

³⁵ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 86

³⁶ Geoffrey Dudley, “The Next Steps Agencies, Political Salience, and the Arm’s Length Principle: Barbara Castle at the Ministry of Transport 1965-68” (*Public Administration* Vol. 72:2, 1994), 238; and a similar point made by Geoffrey William Buttle, “A Signal Failure?”, 96

³⁷ Geoffrey William Buttle, “A Signal Failure?”, 252

instead of subsidy, but railway finances were still heading south.³⁸ BTC's credibility suffered again with Gethin's (correct) publicised accusations that its purchasing and contracting decisions were expensively poor – Gethin may have personally been crushed, but damage was done.³⁹

In September 1958 Watkinson sought a second reassessment, after agreeing further deficit advances, and this was published in July 1959 as a White Paper *Reappraisal of the Plan for the Modernisation and Re-equipment of British Railways*. Although some of the *Reappraisal's* projections can be plausibly defended, the passenger and merchandising projected figures seemed merely to fit the total figure first thought of⁴⁰, and compounded BTC's growing lack of credibility – perhaps close to the final tipping-point.

BTC made many complaints about Government action, some of which are certainly justified. The interferences in (effectively) awarding wage rises and withholding/delaying fares/charges rises greatly exacerbated BTC's annual revenue problems, and consequently the politicians' annual noises about the deficit sound a bit rich. Nevertheless, BTC's focus on seeking capital restructuring of its loan burden was ill-made when this would clearly have only brought short-term relief – no solution to a chronic revenue problem - and its accusations that it was generally starved of investment don't withstand scrutiny.⁴¹ (Though in fairness the stop-start pattern of Government investment 1955-60 was hardly helpful.⁴²)

Critically, it is hard to see that the increasing pressure to tackle the annual deficit was in itself an additional handicap, other than in the distracting attention that it might have required from managers at the time. Morse is the only author I found that specifically mentions Government pressure to reduce the deficit as a direct cause of a Modernisation Plan weakness – the rushed purchase of diesels after 1956⁴³ – and one could perhaps also link this to the Government desire to see

³⁸ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 296-7,

³⁹ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 159-60

⁴⁰ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 298

⁴¹ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure?", 329, Table 6: a higher proportion of GDP spent on rail than roads every year 1948-60! Gourvish, 296: £221m 1956-8 alone

⁴² T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 284

⁴³ Greg Morse, *British Railways in the 1950s and '60s*, Loc 313

BTC help British jobs (North British Co),⁴⁴ and not spend dollars on American machines. But while these latter points do illustrate the wider theme that Governments often interfere for political and wider economic reasons (they certainly didn't help BTC), taken together they make a weak case for seeing 'Government pressure to reduce the deficit' as a decisive factor in itself.

'Government interference generally' certainly created difficulties for BTC, as already outlined, though even that was a small part of BTC's overall problem.

For, though one doubts that BTC managers would have done much better if Government had interfered less, it must certainly be conceded that the combination of a declining market and very adverse wage-labour politics⁴⁵ would have made it extraordinarily difficult to achieve the necessary major strategic and operational changes to the business in the context of political and public opinion at the time. That's why 'Government pressure to reduce the deficit' was the least of their worries. Nevertheless, by failing its own Plan BTC precipitated a complete loss of confidence by both politicians and civil servants during 1957-9.

Consequently the combination of the series of increasingly worrying reviews and the arrival of both a new Permanent Secretary and Minister at MoT led to a 'tipping point' in 'policy'.⁴⁶ James Dunnett was appointed Permanent Secretary in April 1959, released data in July showing that now 56 percent of freight was being road-hauled,⁴⁷ and then Ernest Marples arrived as Minister in October 1959,⁴⁸ leading to a new Select Committee on Nationalised Industries that reported in July 1960. Marples had by then received a critical joint Treasury/MoT memorandum that took into account the prospective findings of the Guillebaud Report on pay comparability (published in March 1960).⁴⁹ In turn he commissioned a Special Advisory Group under Stedeford that worked from April to October, and a Ministerial Group on Modernisation starting in August 1960, ending the year with the December White Paper *Reorganisation of the Nationalised Transport Undertakings*.⁵⁰ Meanwhile at the Treasury initiatives

⁴⁴ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure?", 212; Gourvish, 285-6

⁴⁵ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 214-256, details fully

⁴⁶ Geoffrey William Buttle, "A Signal Failure?", 227, describes as "watershed".

⁴⁷ Peter Merriman, "Chapter 12: Motorways and the Modernisation of Britain's Road Network", 332

⁴⁸ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 299

⁴⁹ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 300

⁵⁰ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 319

under Matthew Stevenson and Sir Thomas Padmore led to the April 1961 White Paper *The Financial and Economic Obligations of the Nationalised Industries*,⁵¹ advocating a more commercial approach from such ‘enterprises’ – though criticised later as narrowly financial.⁵² These initiatives all led to the 1962 Transport Act, which epitomised the shift of policy mantra from ‘decentralise but then worry about it and regularly interfere’ to ‘since roads are clearly the future⁵³ then reduce unremunerative railways to the minimum that is politically acceptable’, a continuing mantra for another 20 years. Marples had some unattractive characteristics personally, but typecasting him even now as simply an anti-rail pantomime villain ignores the wider mood of the times described earlier, and also ignores the ‘Railway Problem’ memorandum he received from the recently-arrived Dunnett early in 1960 that summarised many of the collective concerns outlined above.⁵⁴ (Marples’ pithy analysis that the Modernisation Plan sought £1,600m to save £28m [per annum] was not far wrong.⁵⁵) Civil servants’ transition from passive anxiety to actively seeking solutions was a key element in the combination of events producing this policy ‘tipping point’.

Conscious of a rapidly increasingly motorised electorate, as well as the road haulage lobby, Government in the 1950s pressurised BTC over its deficit (and associated declining market share) because it had not devised any other measurable criteria for assessing BTC performance, and BTC had not offered any coherent business plan of its own that could have included its own measurable criteria. In this context, for political reactive reasons Government did repeatedly intervene unhelpfully – often exacerbating rather than alleviating the deficit – until its own ‘policy tipping-point’ was passed in 1960, after which its interventions under Marples were comprehensive and policy driven. Nevertheless, BTC’s failure to manage its own Modernisation Plan was still

⁵¹ T.R. Gourvish, *British Railways*, 307

⁵² Jim Tomlinson, “Conservative modernisation, 1960–64: Too little, too late?” (*Contemporary British History* 11, no.3 1997), 21

⁵³ Geoffrey Dudley & Jeremy Richardson, “Why does policy change over time? Adversarial policy communities, alternative policy arenas, and British trunk roads policy 1945–95” (*Journal of European Public Policy*, 3:1, 1996), 80, captures the ‘roads perspective’ on this policy tipping point – and its maintenance in Geoffrey Dudley, “The Next Steps Agencies, Political Salience, [etc]”, 222-3

⁵⁴ Charles Loft, *Last Trains*, 114; Geoffrey William Buttle, “A Signal Failure?”, 230-1

⁵⁵ Geoffrey William Buttle, “A Signal Failure?”, 259

largely of its own making, and can hardly be blamed specifically on Government's anxiety about the deficit. This failure was mainly a consequence of that lack of a coherent business plan and associated poor organisation – not that devising one would have been easy to achieve at the time. Rather than an account of the genesis of a special 'Railway Conspiracy', this episode instead illustrates a not untypical human story of members of a modern government failing to direct strategically, and of a national bureaucratic organisation failing to organise themselves to plan and implement their own 'business case' successfully.

[3147 words, plus 132 in footnotes]

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