

Politician study: Herbert Morrison (1888-1965)

The concept of a 'Railway Interest' took on a completely new identity with the advent of politicians such as Herbert Morrison. In most of the first hundred years since 1830 the Railway Interest and its opponents evolved in various ways in order either to protect or to control the interests of the railway companies for sectional commercial purposes, or alternatively to serve the immediate needs of the government of the day. It is argued here that, in contrast, Herbert Morrison propounded an explicitly socialist vision of railways as an integral component of a system of public transport as a service provided to benefit all "working" people.

Previously there had been no such coherent ideology driving the policy of any government relating to railways. In the nineteenth century *laissez-faire* was often cited as the principle that was, or should be, governing these matters (or not),¹ but at an early stage the lauding of free enterprise had been superseded by the fear of monopoly, and from then on the competing political 'interests' in railway matters evolved pragmatically rather than ideologically. Even in the latter stages of this evolution, the governing parties of the day were primarily reacting to the political needs of the moment when they intervened in railway business. As Alderman summarised, after noting the numerous government interventions and Acts of Parliament from 1873, "None of the governments between then and the outbreak of war in 1914 had any clear railway policy."² On his part Parris makes it clear that the 'path' towards increased government intervention during the nineteenth century was by no means a straight one.³

As a self-taught socialist, Morrison's interest in the railways – more explicitly in public transport generally – was of course neither to promote nor oppose their commercial position for sectional reasons, nor to benefit merely the political needs of the government of the day. He developed and advanced a vision of public transport as an integrated public corporation, with his implementation of the reality of this vision during the interwar period taking place mainly in London.

¹ For example, in William Galt, *Railway Reform, Its Importance and Practicability Considered as Affecting the Nation, the Shareholder, and the Government*. (London: Longmans, 1865), Preface, xv

² Geoffrey Alderman, *The Railway Interest* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1973), 23

³ Henry Parris, *Government and the Railways in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: RKP, 1965), 201-11

Morrison had argued for municipalisation of all passenger services in London in his 1916 pamphlet, *The People's Roads*⁴ and so he fought against two early proposed Parliamentary solutions to London's fragmented transport problems which he saw as promoting private monopolies, even though the first of these, the 1924 London Traffic Bill, was making some minor improvements, and was introduced by his own minority Labour Government. After filibustering the second, a Conservative Bill, until Labour's new 1929 Government, he was able to introduce his own Bill as the new Minister of Transport. Here he exhibited the pragmatist streak of this character for which he was noted by socialist colleagues throughout his subsequent career. He realised that direct municipal ownership was not an option for the then London County Council and the separate authorities covering outer London, and he therefore compromised by deciding on a public corporation⁵ – state-owned but with a commercial remit - comparable to the BBC, which had been founded in 1926 by a Conservative Government. He also found that he had to compromise again by agreeing that the London suburban railways would not be included within the new planned London Passenger Transport Board (the legislation was actually finalised by the National government after Labour's defeat and Morrison's departure).

Nevertheless Morrison was moved at the time to complete his 1933 book *Socialisation and Transport*, promoting this model of public corporation⁶. And even in retrospect he asserted in his Autobiography that the Bill creating the LPTB 'was the first major experiment in the socialisation of a complex industry' and 'provided a blueprint on which all the designs for nationalisation of industries were broadly based.'⁷

Despite his own pre-war experience as Chairman of the National Union of Clerks⁸ Morrison represented a broader view of socialism than the promotion of sectional trade union interests, and in this sense he was a departure from the union dominated Labour Representation Committee that had largely founded the

⁴ Christian Wolmar, *The Subterranean Railway* (London: Atlantic, 2005, Kindle edition) Location 4205

⁵ Ibid., Location 4234

⁶ Bernard Donoughue and GW Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1973), 184

⁷ Morrison's *Autobiography*, page 119, quoted by Greg Rosen, "Herbert Morrison" in Jefferys, Kevin, *Labour Forces: From Ernie Bevin to Gordon Brown* (London: I B Tauris, 2002), 31

⁸ Donoughue & Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 25

Labour Party. This mainly principled vision of socialism also led to his lifelong split with Ernie Bevin, as discussed further below. Yet his pragmatist streak meant that he was prepared to compromise to achieve practical progress, representing the Fabian dimension of Labour politics rather than a more radical one. This patient approach did not prevent him from keeping his eye on the long-term prize – hence the idea of the LPTB as the model for future nationalisation of British Transport, as referenced above.

In terms of the debates about the prospect of nationalisation described by Watts⁹, Morrison not only came down finally on the side of a public corporation, but he was also clear that this must make a profit. His view was reflected in the 1932 Labour Party policy statement *The National Planning of Transport*, which also asserted the dominant optimistic Labour view at the time that the efficiencies of a single nationalised monopoly would certainly make public subsidy unnecessary.¹⁰

Morrison's Fabian version of socialism put him at odds with Bevin, who argued strongly for trade union representation on the LTPB (but lost), and with the Railwaymen's Minority Movement, who saw the prospect of nationalisation as a monopoly within a capitalist state that would 'spell another turn of the screw of exploitation against the railwaymen'¹¹ In contrast Morrison believed that nationalised industries were to be an asset as a service to "working people" and also a financial asset to government – this would be the way to secure long-term public support¹². His belief was always, as Donoughue and Jones put it, 'that all government should be responsible, efficient and effective. Labour government should add idealism, but not at the expense of competence.'¹³

The pragmatic aspect of Morrison's socialist transport policy in the interwar period is perhaps shown in his handling of the LTPB in practice at its design and inception. In principle he wanted a private quasi-monopoly to be replaced by a public one, so when he moved from his original idea of direct municipal

⁹ D.C.H. Watts, "On the Causes of British Railway Nationalisation: A Re-examination of the Causes, 1866-1921", *Contemporary British History* 16:2, (2002): 1-38

¹⁰ Gerald Crompton, "'Good business for the nation': The railway nationalisation issue, 1921-47" *The Journal of Transport History* 20:2 (1999): 145 and 152

¹¹ Crompton, "Good business", 148

¹² Rosen, "Herbert Morrison", 31

¹³ Donoughue & Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 395

ownership to that of a public corporation during the 1920s, he soon after that moved from seeing the leading duo of Lord Ashfield and Frank Pick as capitalist enemies¹⁴ to seeing them as exponents of effective public corporation management – or ‘converting’ them to that role, according to Donoghue and Jones¹⁵. Although Morrison was disappointed that the Board lacked Parliamentary representatives for public accountability, he was clearly proud of its arrival nevertheless. It seems that the subsequent success in practice of the LTPB in improving London’s public transport during the 1930s reduced the fears about nationalisation with much public opinion¹⁶, including some prominent Conservatives (though for them this might have been because of the Board’s compromised nature).

Morrison’s ‘Railway Interest’ was therefore not about representing a sectional interest but instead about promoting a socialist ideology. Within Watts’s secondary classification of the ‘Left perspective’ he took the ‘socialist’ rather than the ‘Labour Party’ viewpoint¹⁷ – or in alternative language, ‘wide optimistic socialist idealism’, rather than ‘narrow trade union sectionalism’. But by being prepared to compromise in the short term, in keeping with the Fabian approach, he perhaps paved the way for acceptance of rail nationalisation in the long term.

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¹⁴ Christian Barman, *The Man who built London Transport: A Biography of Frank Pick* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1979), 13

¹⁵ Donoghue & Jones, *Herbert Morrison*, 145

¹⁶ Crompton, “Good Business for the Nation”, 150

¹⁷ Watts, “On the Causes of British Railway Nationalisation”, 6, citing E.A. Pratt, *Railways and Nationalisation* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1908)

Biography:

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