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The best transport secretary we've had?

Half a century after Barbara Castle's landmark 1968 Transport Act received Royal Assent, it's a good time to examine her legacy

► Barbara Castle was the first woman to be secretary of state for transport, but was she also the best secretary of state for transport we ever had?

Fifty years since her landmark Transport Act received Royal Assent on October 24 (at the time, the largest piece of non-financial legislation since the war), it's a good time to look at her legacy on transport, and the relevance of what she did for today.

First, the context. In the mid-1960s Britain was going through a crash transformation from muddling on with clapped out Victorian transport systems and urban forms, to full-on consumer boom modernism. Towns and cities were being rebuilt along clean lines, tower blocks were reaching upwards and the roads were getting wider. Transport policy was now a bought and paid for mechanism for encouraging the growth of the motor industry. Terraced houses and steam engines weren't cute and desirable as they are now - they were an embarrassment.

But at the same time there was carnage on the roads, 8,000 deaths a year - compared to 1,800 today, which is not surprising when people could drink as much as they liked before driving as fast as they liked and with nothing to restrain them from hurtling through their own windscreen as a consequence.

On the railways, Beeching was seen as just the start. Phase two would have butchered what was left. Bus use was in free fall, and traffic congestion was on the rise.

Which brings us to 1966 and enter Barbara Castle. Transport was a job she never wanted. After her first ministerial appointment at overseas development she was hoping for one of the top three cabinet posts. In the end, transport was the job she enjoyed the most.

PM Harold Wilson said he wanted a "tiger in the tank" of his transport policy and that's what he got. There was both pragmatism and radicalism in what she did in her short time in the post. Most Britons live in urban areas and it was in the largest conurbations where the

challenges of mass motorisation were being felt most sharply as the bulldozers moved in to reshape them around the car.

In this climate she saw the largest urban areas as where the need and opportunity to provide comprehensive, integrated urban transport networks was most acute. She therefore established Passenger Transport Executives for the major conurbations with wide ranging powers, and a job to produce master plans for transport in their areas, run local bus services and turn around the urban rail networks that had survived the Beeching cuts era. With London Transport also now coming under the GLC, for the first time the city regions would have accountable transport authorities whose job it was to provide high quality and integrated public transport. This was complemented by putting urban public transport investment more on a par with roads, and providing more funding for bus services.

The railways desperately needed a fresh start. The slashing of the network by Beeching in pursuit of a core profitable service was not working in its own terms - never mind the incalculable social and environmental damage that would inevitably result from it. And the original Beeching report would have been just the start - the next wave would have reduced the network to an Amtrak-style rump with nothing north of Aberdeen, west of Plymouth



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and the East Coast Main Line severed at Newcastle. Massive debts were also weighing the railways down, and freight, the lifeblood of the railways, was being eaten away by road haulage companies benefitting from a road building splurge they weren't paying for.

In response, Castle put a limit on the contraction of the railway network to a baseline of 11,000 miles with a further 3,500 miles given the possibility of reprieve. She also made a significant shift in the way the railways were funded, writing off a billion pounds of debt. The concept of the social railway was also established (the principle that government can subsidise unprofitable railways where they bring wider social and economic benefits). While she stabilised the railways, at the same time a formidable rail closure machine did roll on during her reign with 750 miles closed in 1966 and 300 more in 1967.

On the buses (and under the 1968 Act and other related legislation and policies) more of the struggling bus network came under the umbrella of the National Bus Company, fuel subsidy grants were increased and a 25% grant was brought in for fleet replacement. Postbuses were also brought in, licensing for minibuses was relaxed and a rural bus grant introduced.

At the same time Castle also saved from the Treasury's axe the publicly owned canal network for leisure. Or as she told the Commons: “new hope for those who love and use our canals, whether for cruising, angling or just walking on the towpath, or want to see stretches of canal in some of our unlovely built up areas, developed as centres of beauty or fun.”

On the roads, she took what she saw as the pragmatic approach - acting as ‘King Canute’ was not an option - an increase in private car use was inevitable. But she was determined to make the roads safer. Naturally, she was opposed tooth and nail by the more extreme petrolheads of the day but despite death threats (which she turned to her political advantage) she persevered and maximum speed limits,

MORE ONLINE

You can read more about the story of Barbara Castle and the 1968 Transport Act in the brochure Urban Transport Group published to mark the naming of a Class 158 train after her on the fortieth anniversary of the Act, and which can be downloaded from www.urbantransportgroup.org



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Barbara Castle

breathalysers and seat belts were the result.

She fought to keep as much of her vision intact as she could (there were a record breaking 45 committee sittings) but she left transport before the process was completed, and her successor was all too amenable to ditching what he could, including some radical proposals on freight which would have kept more freight on rail. These were to make lorries cover more of the costs they impose on the road network and ratchet up safety standards in road haulage (including tachographs and limits on driver hours). She also sought to ensure that more freight went by rail through a system of licensing for lorries that would have directed heavy and long distance freight to rail unless a strong economic case could be made to a National Freight Authority who would manage the new licensing system. Meanwhile, a new National Freight Corporation would weld together the successful Freightliner operation with the State, and British Rail's remaining

road freight services to create a competitive and integrated whole.

So, 50 years on, what is the legacy and the relevance? You can argue long and hard over whether she was in the end too radical or too pragmatic - or whether the positives are outweighed by the scars that haven't healed from the lines that closed on her watch (and she would have loved to have the argument with you!). But you can't fault her for ambition, determination and brio. She showed that you need to go out there and sell radical change (she always had her press people in for the key decisions and led from the front on making the case). Or as she put it: “There are great temptations to play safe, and then I think a slow moral corruption sets in... the higher you go the more you've got to lose. It became easier to argue with yourself. And it can be a very tricky thing indeed, this. You need timing and you need judgement and you need courage.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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