

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Castle showed how to get things done

Harold Wilson said he wanted a ‘tiger in the tank’ of his transport policy when he appointed Barbara Castle - and that’s what he got

► On September 8th more than 350 people took part in the first of the ‘Gender on the Agenda’ events that Urban Transport Group is sponsoring; a good indicator that this is an issue whose time has come. Meanwhile on October 9th a statue will be unveiled in Blackburn of former local MP Barbara Castle, on what would have been her 111th birthday. Seems like a good time then to tell the story of Britain’s first female Secretary of State for Transport. She is arguably the most significant and dynamic Secretary of State for Transport there has ever been. And the author of what was the largest piece of non-financial legislation since the war - the 1968 Transport Act.

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.

Government transport policy was a bought-and-paid-for mechanism for encouraging the growth of the motor industry. Terraced houses and steam engines weren’t beloved and desirable as they are now: they were an embarrassment. The car and lorry were in the ascendency (by 1966 the roads were carrying 90% of passenger mileage and 60% of freight ton mileage).

Meanwhile Britain’s Victorian railway had been worked to the bone during the war.

Post-war it had to modernise as quickly as state funds would allow whilst taking a battering from road competition. By the early sixties the railways were struggling with a mountain of debt and had fallen out of fashion compared with the liberation of the car and the open road. The Beeching axe was seen as just the start. Phase two would have butchered what was left - the East Coast Main Line would have gone from London to Newcastle and stopped there. Bus use was in free fall.

At the same time there was carnage on the roads. 8,000 deaths a year - 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.

And then, in 1966, came 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. But in the end transport was the job she enjoyed the most. Harold Wilson said he wanted a “tiger in the tank” of his transport policy and that’s what he got.

**“Despite her reputation as the ‘red queen’ there was pragmatism as well as radicalism”**

In many ways the role played to Barbara Castle’s strengths. A gift for harnessing positive publicity in her favour - helpful in what can be a high profile department. And a determination to craft the right solution to difficult and complex problems where the typical politician would have chosen the path of least resistance. She also realised that at transport she had the opportunity to bring all her long held views on the need for a planned approach to the economy to fruition through the prism of one important element of government policy.

Despite her reputation as the ‘red queen’ there was pragmatism as well as radicalism in what she did in her short time in the post.

On the radical side, she established Passenger Transport Executives for the major conurbations, whose job it would be 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 era. With London Transport also now coming under the control of the Greater London Council for the first time, the city regions would have accountable transport authorities whose job it was to provide high quality and integrated public transport.

The PTEs’ initial tasks included getting to grips with welding local bus services into integrated wholes and deciding what to do with the ailing rail networks they inherited. Tyne and Wear went for the radical option of converting their decrepit local heavy rail network into a new and integrated Tyne and Wear Metro. Merseyside utilised ‘loop and link’ tunnels in Liverpool to turn around its urban rail network. Greater Manchester had less luck in getting funding for a rail tunnel (the ‘Picc-Vicc’ tunnel) to link its southern and northern rail network - though ultimately the successful Manchester Metrolink tram network has proved to be a more than adequate alternative.

Castle complemented the creation of strategic city region transport bodies by raising urban public transport investment, so that it was more on a par with roads, and providing more funding for bus services. She also established the concept of the ‘social railway’ - the principle that government can subsidise unprofitable railways where they bring wider social and economic benefits. The era saw a significant write off of BR debt, too, and much of the publicly owned canal network was saved



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Barbara Castle,  
Minister of Transport (1965-68)

growing demand for car ownership and use (whilst improving road safety), rescue and revive public transport, pave the way for traffic restraint and integrated networks in urban areas as well as tidy up a host of other transport miscellany (from the canal network to the safeguarding of historic transport relics).

She fought to keep as much of her vision intact as she could: the new Act required a record-breaking 45 committee sittings and faced considerable parliamentary opposition (Enoch Powell described the bill as ‘evil’). But she left transport before the process was completed, and her successor Richard Marsh was all too amenable to ditching what he could, including some radical proposals which would have kept more freight on rail through a new system of licensing for lorries which was felled by the road haulage industry and its unions (thanks lads).

So what are the lessons for today for anyone with clout in transport and who wants to do something with that clout? A stand out is that you need to go out there and relentlessly sell radical change: Castle always had her press people in for the key decisions, and led from the front on making the case. But perhaps more than anything it is to heed these words of hers: “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 becomes 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

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.

for leisure use.

On the roads Castle took what she saw as the pragmatic approach, accepting that acting as King Canute was not an option: the country had made its choice and an increase in private car use was inevitable. The original Beeching rail closure programme was largely allowed to play itself out - although she did pluck some routes from the inferno and set a floor for the network well above what was envisaged in the second Beeching report. There’s no doubt that we should now have a bigger rail network than we do (some of the largest annual contractions of the network happened on her watch) but we could have had a lot smaller one if she hadn’t steadied the ship. And the railway’s decades long slow comeback also has its roots in her

tenure.

Castle was also determined to make the roads safer. Just as sensible measures to reduce death, injury and risk on the roads now are drowned out by vitriol in the media and by boorish petrolheads, so they were then. This included death threats which she turned to her political advantage (she made sure the press got pictures of her going to the pub with her husband and the newly assigned detective on tow). She persevered (naturally) and speed limits, breathalysers and seat belts were the result.

The 1968 Transport Act was where it was all meant to come together (and mostly did); a grand design for an all encompassing new integrated transport policy. It was a policy that would accommodate the reality of

