RAIL CLOSURES

MEMORANDUM BY THE MINISTER OF TRANSPORT

Backbench pressure for changes
I am being pressed by our backbenchers to do three things:
(a) to halt all passenger closures,
(b) to halt all freight closures,
   (in both cases at least until Lord Hinton’s study is completed);
(c) to accept in some form Sir Alexander Spearman’s Bill which would give me power to rescind consents already given to passenger closures.

2. This pressure, I am convinced, is based largely on a misunderstanding of our policy and of the place of railways in a modern, co-ordinated transport system. I recommend that it should be resisted.

Current policy
3. As my colleagues are aware, I took the first opportunity of this Parliament to make a statement of policy in the House on 4th November on the subject of passenger closures. The main points of this statement were as follows:
(a) While regional transport plans were being prepared, I would not consent to any major closure, i.e., a closure likely to conflict with those plans;
(b) Even where I did consent, I would insist on the retention of the track except where I found that this was an unnecessary precaution;
(c) I instituted a new procedure for ensuring that “obvious non-starter” proposals were not, for the present, put forward by the Railways Board at all—and thus did not have to go through the full statutory machinery of T.U.C.C. hearing, etc., before being rejected;

CONFIDENTIAL
These safeguards would ensure that no irrevocable action could take place to prejudice our planning policies and would at the same time enable the railways and the country to achieve immediate financial savings wherever this was justified.

The statement was generally welcomed from our own side of the House and in the country as a whole.

4. This policy is consistent with the principles of our transport policy and with our plans for modernisation. It fits in with other action in this field, notably the establishment of regional planning machinery, the institution of a study on transport co-ordination, and the appointment of Lord Hinton as Special Adviser on Transport Planning. All these are steps towards fulfilling the main pledges on transport in our Manifesto.

Opposition to closures

5. Opposition to passenger closures has always existed. It stems in part from the local people (whether or not they use the trains) and from their Members, in the area of each particular closure proposal as it comes up; in part it comes from the railway employees affected. Even the modifications and restrictions which I announced have not significantly diminished it, but it has recently intensified because of two misconceptions over our own principles—

(a) the fact that closures are still going on in spite of our “pledge” (everyone regards his own line as “major”);
(b) my “failure” to prevent closures agreed by my predecessor from taking place or to take powers to rescind consents which he gave.

6. The attitude of those directly affected is natural and understandable; but this is not to say that it is in the national interest. Moreover, I think it is easy to exaggerate the support for these views in the country. I believe that informed public opinion accepts the case for modernising our railway system and pruning little-used lines.

Place of closure programme in railway modernisation

7. The closure programme is not just an end in itself, though we must not forget the very large financial advantages which it could bring; these were estimated in the Board’s 1963 Report at up to £40 million per annum, equal to more than half the cost to the Exchequer of the recently-announced increases in National Insurance benefits. The programme is even more important as an integral part of the reshaping of our railways. The present system is largely the result of unplanned, competitive private enterprise growth in Victorian times, and it needs drastic pruning and replanning for the needs of the second half of this century. Two examples are—

(a) the closure of 12 stations on the Shrewsbury–Aberystwyth line will assist rationalisation of the through services (enabling through trains to be speeded up by 20 per cent) and achieve annual savings of over £200,000;
the network of coal depots, with an average radius of distribution of 2\(\frac{1}{2}\) miles, was tailored to the age of the horse and cart. The result is that in 1960 60 per cent of the 5,031 depots were either totally or almost unused. With a 10-mile radius (perfectly feasible with motor lorries) 250 centres could serve the whole country.

8. Cutting out the waste and over-provision of both freight and passenger services will not only release resources for productive use but enable the railways themselves to carry out more effectively the jobs they are really fitted for—fast trainloads of freight and passengers over the longer distances, and commuter services.

Implementation of closure policy

9. On the passenger side, I am already holding up “major closures” in accordance with our election pledge; for instance, I have refused consent to the closure of the Manchester–Bury electric line, and the services on the Glasgow–Edinburgh line via Shotts. I am insisting that the East Lincolnshire services, particularly to the holiday resorts, should be maintained for the time being. And the Railways Board have decided to defer the Liverpool/Southport proposal. But there are certainly proposals to which I can properly give consent without causing serious hardship or prejudicing future planning.

10. Closures of freight lines and depots are quite another matter. Almost all the opposition to freight closures comes from the railway unions, who want to protect their members against redeployment. I have no power to intervene and, at present at any rate, I do not wish to have such power. The closures make very little difference to most customers. They are interested not in the route by which goods travel, but in the cost and speed of delivery. Rationalisation and re-routing enable the railways to carry the same traffic more efficiently and economically and so the customer benefits: all this leads to genuine co-ordination by enabling the train (long distance) and the lorry (short distance) each to do its appropriate job. It seems most unlikely that Hinton’s study could produce results inconsistent with what the railways are doing.

The Spearman Bill

11. Acceptance of Spearman’s Bill would re-open the 150 consents given in the last 18 months and create tremendous local agitation and anxiety during the necessarily long time that it would take to reassess each one; and it is most unlikely that a review would justify reversing more than a very few decisions, and perhaps none at all. Moreover, no future decision could ever be regarded as final, and this uncertainty would place the Board in an impossible position over the management and development of the railway system.

Conclusions

12. Our present policy is sound. We lean over backwards to protect the individual from hardship and to avoid prejudicing future
regional planning or the study on transport co-ordination. The Railways Board deal generously with their staff who are affected by offering other jobs (with transfer grants) or adequate redundancy compensation. I see our present rail policy as an integral part of the Government’s plan for modernising the economy. Redeployment of labour is vital to our economic growth.

13. I recommend that we stand firm.

T. F.

Ministry of Transport, S.E.1,
8th March, 1965.