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S E C R E T

C A B I N E T

C.P. 306 (24)

UNEMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE.

FOURTH INTERIM REPORT ON
TRUNK ROAD RECONSTRUCTION POLICY.

In pursuance of Cabinet 18 (24) Conclusion 4 (18), the Unemployment Committee have recently examined the proposals contained in Memoranda submitted to them by the Minister of Transport for ^{the} initiation of the new policy of reconstruction of certain main trunk roads in the country at the sole cost of the Road Fund. The reasons for and nature of this policy are more particularly indicated in the following paragraphs. It has been represented to the Committee that reliance can no longer be placed on Highway Authorities whose resources and energies have all been heavily taxed during the past 3½ years in the execution of road works usually on terms that the cost is shared by the Road Fund and Local Rates. Moreover, it is very doubtful whether the Local Authorities have adequate staff to undertake a new and extensive system of road works. It is accordingly proposed that the Government should assume responsibility for the reconstruction of a category of roads to be termed "Main Trunk Roads", including in the first place about 2,000 miles of principal Highway, such as the Dover - London- Edinburgh and London - Plymouth roads. The progressive adaptation of these roads to modern ^{traffic} conditions being accepted as a State charge, with the exclusion of the sections through urban areas.

The strengthening, widening, improvement, ^{and} /re-alignment of these Main Trunk Roads with the construction of necessary bye-passes could then be undertaken on a wholesale scale either by the direct action of the Government or by an arrangement with the County Councils, provided that the latter would agree to set up a special staff for the purpose, so as not to slacken the progress of work for which they have already budgetted.

The result would be that during the period of reconstruction and possibly for the "Maintenance period" afterwards, Highway Authorities would be relieved of the burden of maintaining certain sections of the main trunk roads and should therefore, in fairness, accept as a charge against their ratepayers during this period, the average annual sum which they had expended on maintaining these sections during the few preceding years.

The Committee have reason to believe that the new policy will be popular with motorists and with Highway Authorities. On the assumption that the £5,000,000 programme is contemplated, of which possibly £1,000,000 could be expended in 1924/25, employment would be provided during that year for about 4,500 men. The Minister of Transport is advised that action within the limits contemplated by him would fall within his existing powers and that no further legislation would be necessary. At the same time the adoption of the proposed new policy will certainly tend to strengthen the pressure which is already being exerted in the direction of transferring the whole burden of the maintenance of the main trunk roads of the country to National funds. To introduce a system of Trunk Roads wholly maintained out of National Funds would involve control and administration

by a Central Department, and for this legislation would be necessary.

The Committee have considered the sources from which the £5,000,000 required to finance the new policy should be derived. Having regard to the recent decision of the Cabinet (Cabinet 30 (24) Conclusion 7 (a)), that the future revenues of the Road Fund are not at present to be anticipated to any greater extent than is entailed by the new £13,500,000 programme, the Committee are of opinion that the best course to adopt will be to defer, for the time being, the construction of the North Orbital Road (which formed one of the items of the new programme and accounted for £5,000,000), and to set-aside the £5,000,000 so released for the purposes of the new Main Trunk Road Reconstruction policy.

In submitting the following recommendations to the Cabinet the Unemployment Committee desire to point out that the proposals constitute a grave departure from the policy hitherto adopted by the Ministry of Transport and indeed from the policy of successive administrations governing the general relations between national and local finances.

The Committee recommend to the Cabinet:-

- (1) That the Minister of Transport should be authorised to initiate a new policy under which the reconstruction of certain main trunk roads will be undertaken at the sole expense of the Road Fund. Such reconstruction involving the maintenance of the roads from the Fund during construction and for a short guaranteed period thereafter.
- (2) That the Minister of Transport should be further authorised to allocate the sum of £5,000,000 out of the additional £13,500,000 new programme for Trunk Road reconstruction etc. purposes, the £5,000,000 in question being provided by the temporary postponement of the construction of the North Orbital Road. At the same time it should be understood that the North Orbital Road Scheme is not dropped; on the contrary the Minister of Transport should be authorised, with the concurrence of the Treasury, to acquire from time to time land at a few points where impending building operations threaten the course of the road and that the Local Authorities concerned should be encouraged to include the road in their town planning schemes.
- (3) That the arrangements to be concluded between the Minister of Transport and the Local Authorities should, inter alia, comprise the acceptance by the Local Authority as a charge against their ratepayers during the "period of reconstruction" of the average annual sum expended by the authority on maintaining the road sections under reconstruction during the few years preceding.

(Signed on behalf of the Committee)

(Sgd.) R. B. HOWARTH.
Secretary to the Committee.

S. WEBB.
Chairman.

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