In view of the great and continuing growth of motor traffic, and the necessity for modernising the layout of our main lines of communication by road, as most other countries are now doing, I have become more and more impressed with the disadvantages of the present system, under which even the great trunk routes are a matter of local responsibility. In such circumstances it is extremely difficult, and often impossible, to secure improvements of layout, and the uniformity in width, surfacing, signalling, etc., which is necessary for the safety of all classes of road users and the convenience of traffic. These difficulties are naturally greatest when the chief interest to be served is that of through traffic. Individual local authorities are not always willing, and in many cases, by reason of their restricted financial resources, are not able, to attain and maintain adequate standards on these roads.

(2) Already it has been necessary to reintroduce special rates of grant for works of improvement on the roads in question, ranging from 75 per cent. to 85 per cent. and even these are regarded as insufficient by many authorities to enable them to proceed. It would seem better to secure a readjustment of burden by a clean cut transfer of a responsibility which may fairly be regarded as national, than to attempt to secure some modicum of progress by a mixture of pressure and special financial inducement which even when successful leads to great delay.

* A census on Class I roads has shown that the number of vehicles passing 4830 comparable points was 34.5% greater in August 1935 than in August 1931.
Moreover, the financial assistance which the Road Fund is able to offer on a percentage basis is most easily claimed by the wealthy authorities whose resources enable them to raise their share of the cost without undue strain, while other authorities in poor areas, where in the interests of through traffic the roads often stand in far greater need of improvement, may be incapable of providing so great a local contribution, with the result that their lengths of through roads remain unimproved, despite the offer of abnormal rates of grant.

(3) The 316 miles of the Great North Road from London to the Scottish Border is an example of the unsatisfactory condition of a through route. There still remain 190 miles or nearly two-thirds of its length, where the road cannot comfortably accommodate more than one line of traffic in each direction, and where, therefore, a stationary vehicle reduces the road to a single track, and where footpaths and adequate visibility at corners have not been secured. The unimproved sections lie for the most part in agricultural counties, such as Bedfordshire, Huntington, the two divisions of Lincolnshire, the North Riding, and the northern part of Northumberland.

(4) Some of the county councils may perhaps suggest as an alternative policy that they should be given 100 per cent. grants from the Road Fund to meet expenditure upon the roads over which they would still retain formal control, and which they would administer through the ordinary system of local government. This is not a solution which could be satisfactory from the point of view of transport, nor is it one which, on general financial grounds, could be regarded as sound.
(5) I am, therefore, forced to the conclusion that the time has come to recognise as national roads some 4500 miles of trunk roads (practically all of which have already been selected under previous improvement programmes for special treatment), and to transfer responsibility for them to the Minister of Transport.

(6) The Local Government Act of 1929 took a great step forward in transferring the highway functions of Rural District Councils to the County Councils, and it is but a further step in a natural evolution to relieved the county councils themselves from the burden of administering the trunk roads which are in truth "routes nationales" here no less than abroad. In addition to the motoring organisations there is a good deal of Parliamentary and public opinion in favour of some change of this kind. Nor will proposals on the lines which I have outlined come as any surprise to the county councils. In fact, the County Councils' Association have for some time been exploring the matter through a special sub-committee which recently recommended that having regard to the substantially higher standard of road construction and maintenance now required to meet modern traffic, the reconstruction, improvement and maintenance of certain roads of major importance should become the financial responsibility of the Ministry of Transport, the work thereon being carried out by the highway authorities as agents.

(7) I have just been furnished with a copy of a circular letter to the individual county councils, issued with the authority of the Executive Council of the Association, explaining the considerations which led the sub-committee to their conclusions. An extract from the circular letter will be found in the appendix to this
memorandum and it will be seen that the view is taken that if complete financial responsibility be assumed by the Central Government as is suggested, such control of policy as the highway authorities still possess with regard to the roads in question must be surrendered, but that with the machinery in existence the actual work could and should be carried out by the county authorities.

"The administrative integrity of the county highway authorities would thus continue unimpaired and it does not appear to the Sub-Committee that in view of the extent to which grant aided schemes already require departmental approval much real difference in practice between the present system and that which they have recommended is in fact likely to ensue". It is significant that the circular letter points out that it is neither reasonable nor practicable for the Association to ask for any appreciable increase over the substantial percentages of grant already available while claiming undiminished control at the same time.

(6) I am thus strengthened in the belief that a scheme of the kind suggested will be welcome as a substantial relief not only from present burdens but from the prospective liability of having to improve these important roads upon which an ever increasing strain of traffic is bound to be thrown, and I hope that one result of affording them this relief would be to assist them to find the necessary time and money for the improvement of the important classified roads and the network of local roads which will still remain in their charge. Indeed, by meeting the position in this way we shall be on far stronger grounds for resisting the other demands which the Association are disposed to prefer for increased assistance to other types of road.
The cost to the County Councils in respect of maintenance of these roads, after allowing for present contributions from the Road Fund, is in the neighbourhood of half a million pounds per annum. It is not possible to estimate even the approximate cost of the improvements which will be necessary during the next ten years, but a provisional estimate of some seventy millions to be expended over a period of not less than ten years has been tentatively formulated. In fact, this expenditure would tend to be spread over a substantially longer period.

When I assume administrative responsibility for trunk roads, I must necessarily also assume financial responsibility. It is, however, a matter for discussion how far local authorities should contribute towards the expenses which will be incurred by me in the future. It would not, I think, be appropriate that they should pay a specific percentage of the costs which will actually be incurred. Inability in some cases at all events to find, in relation to the schemes necessary in the future, the moderate percentage of cost which now falls on the local authority, is indeed one reason for the present proposal. Moreover, such a scheme would inevitably lead to a claim for a share in the administrative responsibility. Any contribution would have to be based on the expenses now and recently incurred from which, apart from a contribution, local authorities will be relieved.

It is not practicable to require a contribution even on this basis towards improvement costs which vary considerably between authority and authority and between year and year. Local authorities will therefore obtain complete relief from their liabilities for future improvements. As
regards maintenance costs, there has been less variation in
expenditure though even here it is still appreciable. After
discussion of the whole problem with the Chancellor of the
Exchequer, I propose that only such financial contribution
should be required as can be obtained by operation on the
general block grant to local authorities. A substantial
reduction of local expenditure justifies an immediate
reduction of the block grant in order to bring it to the
appropriate percentage of the new total local expenditure.
Whether more than this should be demanded should, I propose,
be a matter for consideration in the general review of the
block grant which is now being undertaken in consultation
with local authorities by the Minister of Health and the
Secretary of State for Scotland.

(12) The roads which would be selected for transfer are
as shown on the accompanying map. Subject to certain
additions amounting to about 500 miles of road (e.g. the
London-Portsmouth Road, a connection from Newport to
Shrewsbury, a road from Southampton through Oxford to
Birmingham, Warrington and Preston with a spur to Chester, a
road from Peterborough through Lincoln to Grimsby, and several
cross-country connections in the North of England) of which
the general character and situation justifies their inclusion
from the present point of view, the roads selected have long
been regarded by the Ministry of Transport, and accepted by
the highway authorities, as forming the backbone of national
communication, and in that respect distinguishable from the
ordinary classified roads. Although some of the latter may
carry as heavy a traffic, much of that traffic is of a more
local character.
(13) In general, therefore, it should not be difficult to defend and secure acceptance of the selection of these roads, on which a practicable scheme can be based, though in order to provide for changes of circumstances, it is for consideration whether power should not be taken in the Bill to add to the original schedule other roads or parts of roads which assume the character and function of a trunk road. It may be advisable to make the exercise of any such power subject to the approval of Parliament.

(14) It is not proposed to include within the scheme the portions of roads, in continuation of trunk roads, which lie within the boundaries of county boroughs, large burghs in Scotland, or the administrative County of London. The Local Government Act, 1929, distinguished between county boroughs and counties by including classified roads within the scope of the block grant in the County and Metropolitan boroughs, on the ground that in their case even these roads possessed a high degree of local importance and in Scotland the Local Government (Scotland) Act, 1929, contained corresponding provisions with regard to classified roads in counties and large burghs. The same argument applies, if not with quite equal force, to the category of trunk roads, and while no doubt there is something to be said for the view that the sections in these boroughs constitute and should be treated as part of the through route, it must be admitted that for a variety of reasons the opportunity for effective central control is much less. In many cases, moreover, the proper solution is a by-pass lying outside, or mainly outside, the boundaries of the borough itself, and where this solution is adopted the expense will, under my proposals, fall upon the Road Fund, while the borough will be relieved of the congestion of traffic.
On the financial side, I understand that the Treasury consider that there is an overwhelming case for excluding the county boroughs, the large burghs, and the administrative County of London from relief of the general burden of maintaining and improving these roads.

As between one county and another the relief, though widely, will not be equally spread, but practically all will benefit, no serious anomalies would appear to arise, and it is, therefore, not proposed to complicate the scheme by any attempt at special adjustments through a formula. At the same time, in their final negotiations as to the adjustment of the general Exchequer contribution to the block grant for the next quinquennium, the Treasury will be able to pray in aid the fact that in this important respect the burdens of the counties, and particularly their prospective burdens, are being lightened.

Administratively, the basis of my proposal is the simple one that the Minister of Transport should, as from the 1st April next (in Scotland 15th May) assume the functions and obligations of a highway authority in relation to the specified roads.

The intention is, by a process of delegation analogous to that permissible under the Local Government Act, 1929, as between county councils and district councils, to use the county councils as agents for purposes of maintenance and minor improvements, and wherever possible also to utilise the existing organisation when it is suitable for supervising major improvements, which will usually be carried out by contract. The employment of direct labour by the Minister of Transport would thus be avoided or kept at a minimum.

With the concurrence of the Treasury and other Departments concerned the drafting of the necessary Bill has been well advanced, and subject to
approval of its principle, could be submitted to the Home Affairs Committee at a fairly early date. But before it is put into final shape, it would I suggest be advisable to take the county councils into confidence as to the main features of the scheme and it would be most helpful if I were free to consult them fully upon its administrative details. Certain points of difficulty, including the complications arising out of the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act, 1935, need adjustment on lines which could be most usefully discussed with the county authorities which are so intimately concerned.

(30) The authority of the Cabinet is therefore requested:

(1) To complete the preparation of a Bill for transferring the control of specified trunk roads from county councils to the Minister of Transport as from the beginning of the next financial year (or some later date to be appointed by him), with a view to the introduction of the Bill in the autumn. The Bill to be submitted to the Home Affairs Committee in the usual way.

(2) To make an announcement in Parliament in general terms of the Government's intention to introduce a Bill to transfer the Trunk Roads to the Minister of Transport.

(3) To explain the proposals, and their financial effect to the local authorities generally in the course of the discussions as to the adjustment of the General Exchequer Contribution which are now being conducted by the Treasury and the Ministry of Health and Scottish Office and to pursue discussions with the County Councils' Association at once in such detail as may seem desirable of the nature of the scheme with a view to enlisting their cooperation.

7th June, 1936. (Int.) L.H.B.
5. As is well known, the basic grants for improvement and maintenance are, and have for some years been 60 per cent. in respect of Class I roads and 50 per cent. for Class II roads. So far as major improvement works are concerned, however, it has long been the practice of the Ministry of Transport to give larger grants in special circumstances, and this practice has now been regularised under a system by which, following the application of a formula similar to that prescribed for the purposes of the Local Government Act, 1929, grants as high as 85 per cent. (in areas not built-up) and 80 per cent. (in built-up areas) are payable, the maximum percentages being available in respect of trunk roads in the least wealthy counties. It is nevertheless contended by many county councils that, apart from the question whether the formula operates equitably as between the various counties, the balance left to be borne by the rates represents too heavy a burden, mainly in consequence of the substantially higher standard of construction and lay-out now required to meet modern traffic conditions.

6. With this contention the Sub-Committee are, as will be seen from their report, entirely in agreement, and they do not think that anything less than a 100 per cent. grant in respect of certain roads will meet the case, especially in those counties where the rateable value is low and there exist important roads mainly used by through traffic.

7. If, however, complete financial responsibility be assumed by the Ministry, as is now suggested, it appears to the Sub-Committee to follow logically that such control of policy as the highway authorities still possess with regard to the roads in question will pass to the Department but, with the machinery in existence, they see every reason why the actual work should be carried out by the county authorities. The administrative integrity of the county
highway departments would thus continue unimpaired, and it does not appear to the Sub-Committee that, in view of the extent to which grant-aided schemes already require departmental approval, much real difference in practice between the present system and that which they have recommended is in fact likely to ensue.

8. In other words, it is neither reasonable nor practicable, as the Sub-Committee visualise the problem, for the Association to ask for any appreciable increase over the substantial percentages of grant already available while claiming undiminished control at the same time.

9. But financial considerations alone have not been responsible for the proposal now under discussion. As your Council will doubtless be aware, the past few months have witnessed a strong campaign in the public press and elsewhere for the nationalisation of roads, attention being drawn to the very large number of highway authorities, with the result, so it is alleged, that there is an undesirable lack of uniformity in methods of construction and maintenance. This campaign is, of course, not new, but the Sub-Committee are impressed by the circumstances that, in contradistinction to the past, the transfer of roads to some central authority is now being advocated by people and journals of unimpeachable responsibility.

10. That the number of highway authorities dealing with roads of national or semi-national importance is in fact excessive must, the Sub-Committee think, be admitted, and there is, in their opinion, considerable danger that, in the absence of some counter-move on the part of the authorities themselves, nationalisation of roads on a substantial scale will eventually take place. Therefore it is for this additional, and in their view, important reason that the Sub-Committee have recommended the limited transfer described above.
11. Finally, as regards the roads to which the recommendation applies, it will be observed that the phrase "certain roads of major importance" has been used in the Report. This is intentionally vague, as there does not appear to be any precise definition of the kind of road which the Sub-Committee have in mind. The principal trunk roads would, of course, be included, but there are, so the Sub-Committee are informed, certain other Class I roads in respect of which the burden of through traffic and consequent expenditure is such as to justify 100 per cent. grants. The Sub-Committee do not contemplate for a moment the wholesale transfer of highway administration to the Ministry, and they venture to suggest that, on this assurance, a closer definition of the roads involved should remain in abeyance pending such negotiations with the Ministry as they may be authorised to undertake.

12. In view of the importance and urgency of this matter it is hoped that you will be able to take early instructions from your Council and inform the Association of their views without delay. In the event of disagreement with the Sub-Committee's recommendation, the submission of a constructive alternative proposal for dealing with the problem would be helpful.

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PROPOSED TRUNK ROADS

MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT
JUNE 1936