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Transport Solutions**
Representing
Britain's
Passenger
Transport
Executives

BARBARA CASTLE

AND THE STORY OF THE 1968 TRANSPORT ACT



‘The secret really of public life is to be a person. Winston Churchill, for instance. People felt he was a person. For some reason - some of it through their cramping themselves with self restraint - women often emerge as admirable administrators but not as people. You’ve got to be yourself. You’ve almost got to defy the public: that’s me. Take me or leave me.’

INTO CABINET

When the Labour Party won the 1964 General Election, Barbara Castle was very unsure about whether the phone would ring from Number Ten the morning after. Twenty years an MP, and a former Chair of the Party, she knew that her reputation as a fiery left winger, who didn’t suffer fools gladly, might make her too hot to handle for the calculating Harold Wilson. She had been a ‘Bevanite’, a leading anti-apartheid and anti-colonialism campaigner, and she was in favour of the capture of the commanding heights of the British Economy. To a fascinated media she was the Red Queen.

However, the call did come, and with it the offer of the role of Minister for Overseas Development, giving her a seat at Cabinet. Clever, energetic and hard-working – this was the opportunity to put her years of political campaigning and activity into practice. The ambitious youngest daughter in a political household in Bradford, when she entered Parliament in the Labour landslide of 1945 she had been the youngest female MP in the House. Now she was only the fourth woman to ever have held a Cabinet post.

‘Put yourself in my place. Twenty two years as a backbench MP – a good one as a matter of fact – party activist, constituency member, the whole of whose political life up to then had been given meaning by representing, quite deliberately, a certain sector of society, and expressing its aspirations. Coming out of that Cabinet Room very excited, I was charged with a responsibility, the Ministry for Overseas Development... [the Permanent Secretary] is there on tap, filling the horizon. One goes into the office the first thing in the morning. Oh Minister, we had prepared for the fact there might be a Ministry of Overseas Development. Here is the whole thing worked out... there it is, waiting for you to take on board. Civil servants have been working away at it while you have been battling for your political life.’

Her tenure at Overseas Development wasn’t an easy one. Although there was the excitement of bringing a fresh and less self-serving approach to overseas aid in a de-colonising world, her ambitions for her new Department were often frustrated by the ‘realpolitik’ of Rhodesia, British military interests and budget pressures. Nevertheless she had high hopes that her next posting would be to one of the ‘Big Three’ of Foreign Office, Treasury or Home Office.



Pictures from top:

- *The youngest woman MP in the Commons*
- *Overseas Development Minister*
- *Into Cabinet*

TIGER IN THE TANK

Instead, in December 1965, it was the disappointment of being offered what is often perceived as one of the duller outposts of Government – Transport. But many politicians have made or damaged their reputation at Transport because transport affects everyone’s daily lives and everyone has an opinion about it.

Barbara Castle may too have regarded being offered Transport as, at best, a sideways move, after her time at the ODM, but she certainly got over that disappointment quickly. Harold Wilson told her he needed a ‘tiger in the tank’ of his transport policy and with Barbara Castle that’s what he got. In many ways the post 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 solutions to difficult and complex problems where lesser politicians have chosen the path of least resistance, in playing off rival lobbies and in doing so avoiding any risk to their future careers.

She soon 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. For a believer in the planned approach to policy-making – transport in the mid-Sixties presented the perfect challenge.

At that time the car and the lorry were in the ascendant. By 1966 the roads were carrying 90% of passenger mileage and 60% of freight ton mileage. However the regulatory and safety framework had not caught up. Seatbelt provision in cars was voluntary, drink-driving was commonplace and thousands of people a year were being killed on the roads. Parking controls, and systems for the licensing of lorries and drivers, were stuck in the 1930s. Towns and cities were struggling to cope with the onslaught of traffic.

Public transport was in no fit state to compete with the rise of the private vehicle. Britain’s Victorian rail network had been worked to the bone during the War. Post-war it had to modernise as quickly as state funds could allow whilst taking a battering from road competition. By the early Sixties the railways were struggling with a mountain of debt and fell out of political fashion in favour of the ‘liberation’ of the car and the open roads.

Under the Macmillan Government, Dr Richard Beeching was seconded from ICI and given the job of tackling the railway debt. He employed some curious pseudo-science to justify backing the core railway, whilst slashing the secondary and feeder network as rapidly as the cutter’s torch and the wrecking ball would allow. The first Beeching report in 1963 was drastic enough. It argued for an accelerated closure programme of 5,000 miles of the network (the network stood at 17,000 miles, and falling, in 1961). The second Beeching report of 1965 would have been a truly staggering act of stupidity if it had ever been implemented. Under Beeching Two only 3,000 miles of the network would be developed. Routes excluded from development (and thus open to possible closure) would have included the rail service west of Plymouth and North of Aberdeen. Even the East Coast main line north of Newcastle could have been closed!



‘...And so I said my tearful farewells at Overseas Development and took on the job I did not want and which, in the event, I enjoyed more than any of my ministerial posts.’



*Launching the 1966
Transport White Paper*

‘We must plan transport now as an integral part of all our other planning – our planning for national economic expansion, our planning for regional development, our planning to protect and improve our environment’

**SPEECH TO THE 1966
LABOUR PARTY
CONFERENCE**



THE BUILD UP TO THE ACT

Vigorous, decisive and speaking as she found, the men from the Ministry of Transport were in for a shock. And many of them didn't like it! Indeed the stale males at the Ministry's higher echelons did everything they could to tame the Barbara Castle whirlwind. The consensus at the Ministry was that once the Motorway network was complete, and the railway problem dispensed with (one way or another), their job was largely done.

Bending a hostile civil service to her will wasn't Barbara Castle's only challenge. She inherited some controversial road safety legislation, which was now ready to be re-launched after it fell ahead of the 1966 General Election (where Labour was returned with an enhanced majority).

The motoring lobby was just as voluble (and prone to the boorish celebration of vaguely threatening ignorance) as it is now. And just as sensible measures to reduce the current carnage on the roads are drowned in vitriol by the road lobby and the media – so they were then. In 1966, 8,000 people a year were dying on the roads – more than twice the current number. Not surprising when people could drink as much as they liked and drive as fast as they liked. The modest response of the Bill was to introduce the breathalyser, extend the 70 mile per hour speed limit trial and require new cars to be fitted with seat belts. To the Clarksons of the day this was the nanny state at its worst. Such matters as reducing the risk of maiming and killing pedestrians were a matter for personal conscience and the skill of the British driver – not for State intervention.

In re-launching the Bill, Barbara Castle made a concession on random breath testing but replaced fines for drink driving with twelve month disqualification. She also took on the task of defending and implementing the Bill with gusto. Such a high profile issue was perfect for her gift for public relations. She was spinning at a time when the word was only applied to something that went on in a Blackburn cotton mill. Her press people were always consulted during the policy debates in her office: at the end of the political argument, she would turn to them and ask how the idea would play in the media. For example, when she was sent a death threat by an enraged motorist she made sure the press got pictures of her going for a stroll to the pub with her husband and the newly assigned Detective in tow.

The subsequent 1967 Road Safety Act saved lives. On the first Christmas following the introduction of the Breathalyser, deaths fell from 158 in 1966 to 98 in 1967. At the end of the first five months, 800 people were alive who would have died if it hadn't been for the breathalyser.

Whilst the battle for the Road Safety Bill was being joined Barbara Castle was also working with her advisors (and sometimes even her Permanent Secretary!) on the grand designs for an all encompassing new integrated transport policy. A policy that would accommodate the reality of growing demand for car ownership and use (whilst improving road safety), rescue and revive public transport, pave the way for traffic restraint and integrated transport networks in urban areas, as well as tidy up a host of other transport miscellany (from the canal network to historic transport relics).

It was to be an intelligent and pragmatic policy – which combined market measures of taxation and subsidy with administrative measures such as licensing and new institutions. Despite Barbara Castle's left wing reputation this was not a nationalising Bill. Above all it was to be a Bill that would deliver the fabled integrated transport policy – that in the Sixties, as now, remains the elusive goal of so many Transport Ministers.

‘I refused to be a King Canute trying to force people onto railways which could not take them where they wanted to go. If the private car had brought the boon of mobility to millions of people, which it clearly had, then that boon should be available to everyone. We must collectively face the consequences and deal with them through new arrangements which reflected the new facts.’

STABILISING THE RAILWAYS

The railways desperately needed a fresh start. The slashing back 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 ultimately result from it.

Massive debts were still weighing the railways down – and Barbara Castle was unimpressed by the quality of railway management. One battle which she lost early on was to appoint the dashing, socialist industrialist, Peter Parker. In 1976 he would get the job – and is considered by many to be one of the best Chairmen that BR ever had. However, in 1967 the pay that Parker wanted for the job proved to be too much in the political atmosphere that followed the devaluation of the Pound.

She may have lost that battle but she did put a limit on the contraction of the railway network to a baseline 11,000 miles, with a further 3,500 miles given the possibility of a reprieve. That at least gave some future for the railway network as a national network – rather than the niche ‘Amtrack’ style network that could have resulted if Beeching’s phoney economics had been followed through. However, it did mean that the formidable rail closures machine rolled on through Barbara Castle’s reign at transport with 750 miles closed in 1966 and 300 miles closed in 1967. Some of the highest rates of rail closures the country has ever seen. At the same time she did pluck some individual routes from the carnage. Those she saved included York to Harrogate, Manchester to Buxton and Oxenholme to Windermere.

She also made a significant shift in the way the railways were financed. She wrote off more than a billion pounds of BR’s debt and in the future instead of considering the railway finances as one consolidated item, national and sub-national Government would be able to pay to subsidise unprofitable parts of the railway that they considered brought wider social and economic benefits. This format for paying for the railways has continued in one form or another to this day – not least of which by the PTEs who were able to intervene to save and develop those parts of their urban rail networks that survived the Sixties.

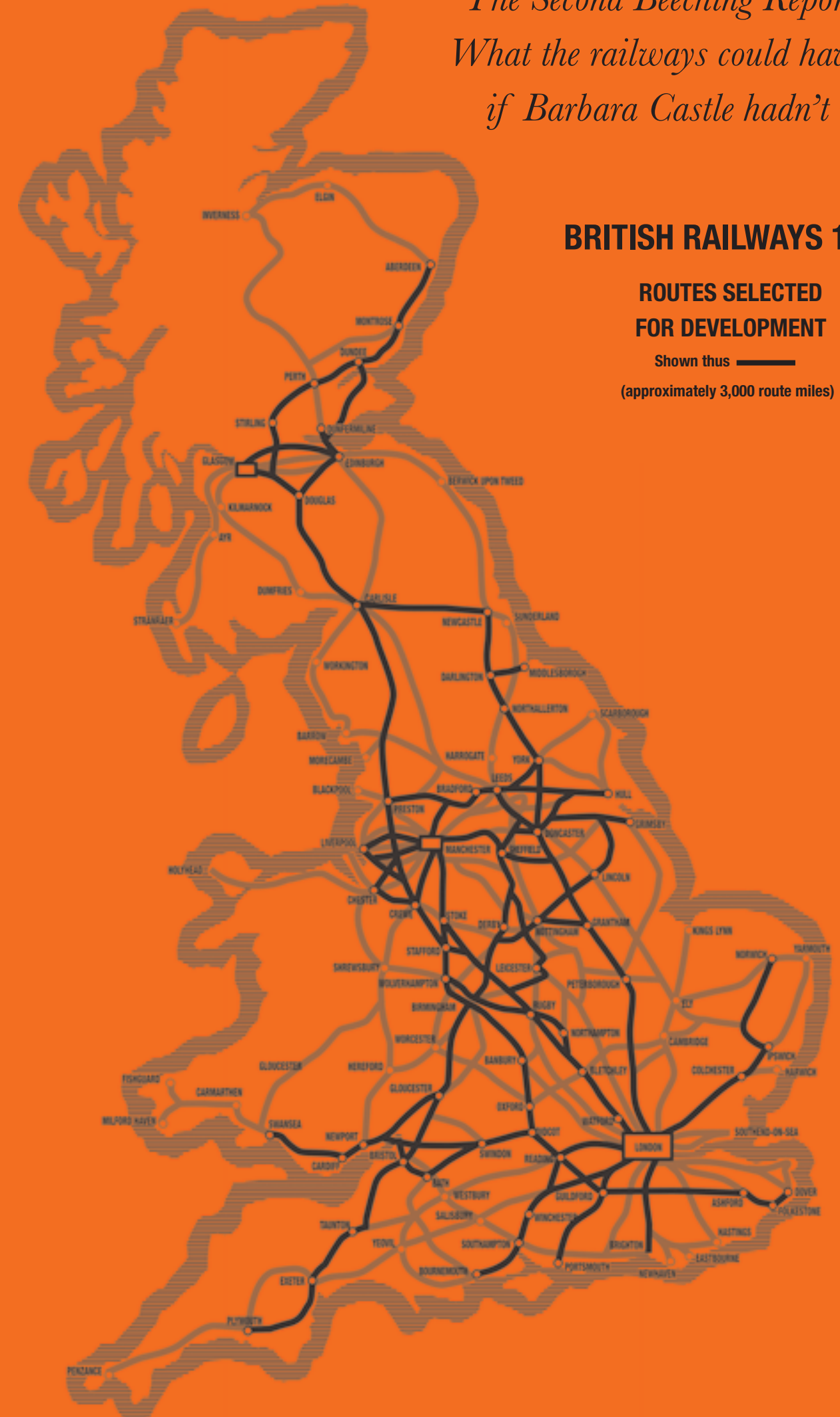
Freight had always been the lifeblood of the railways – and there were some modernisation success stories. This included container trains (marketed then, as now, as ‘Freightliner’). However, at the same time the railways struggled to make its vast freight empire pay and road haulage was eating deeper into its core markets. Barbara Castle’s answer was to make lorries cover more of the costs they imposed on the road network and ratchet up safety standards in road haulage (including tachographs and limits on drivers 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 Freightliner operation with the State, and British Rail’s, remaining road freight services to create a competitive and integrated whole.



Pictures from top:

- End of steam
- Railway modernisation
- New rail policy

*The Second Beeching Report of 1965.
What the railways could have looked like
if Barbara Castle hadn't intervened*



BRITISH RAILWAYS 1984

ROUTES SELECTED FOR DEVELOPMENT

Shown thus 
(approximately 3,000 route miles)

THE BIRTH OF THE PTAS AND PTES

NEW START FOR THE BUSES

Like the railways, bus services too were in decline with the remaining private companies struggling to hold onto their markets. Rising fares and service reductions led the West Midlands Traffic Commissioner to describe local bus services as 'reaching the point of no return'. Under the Bill (and other related legislation and policies) more of the national bus network came under the umbrella of the National Bus Company. Meanwhile fuel subsidy grants were increased and a 25% grant was brought in for fleet replacement. Postbuses were also brought in, licensing for mini-buses was relaxed and a rural bus grant introduced.

URBAN TRANSPORT

Most Britons live in urban areas, and it was the largest conurbations where the challenges of mass motorisation were being felt most sharply. The bulldozers moved in on many urban centres to reshape them around the car – though fortunately there weren't the resources to complete this dumb and grim objective. In this climate Barbara Castle identified the largest urban areas as where the need and the opportunity to provide comprehensive, integrated public transport networks was most acute.

In London the GLC took over London Transport. Elsewhere new Passenger Transport Executives would be created to act as locally accountable transport planning bodies with far reaching powers to plan and provide integrated public transport networks for the major conurbations. They would be charged with producing a master plan for transport in their areas, they would run local bus services and they would be

able to co-operate with British Rail on commuter fares and services. The Act also gave the PTA/PTEs wide-ranging general powers to: *'Secure the provision of such public transport services as the PTA for the area considers it appropriate for the Executive to secure for meeting any public transport requirements within the area which in the Authority's view would not be met apart from any action taken by the Executive for that purpose.'*

At the same time the bias towards road building was removed with the capital grant regime altered so that public transport, as well as roads projects, could benefit from 75% capital grants.

SAVING THE CANALS

In 1967 the Treasury was planning to save money by shutting down publicly-owned canals. Barbara Castle managed to extricate the canal network from their fate by minimising closures on the 1,400 mile network, whilst offering the rest of the network the prospect of a new start by reclassifying it into commercial and leisure categories.

The Bill, she told the Commons, offered: *'new hope for those who love and use our canals, whether for cruising, angling or just walking on the towpath, or who want to see stretches of canal in some of our unlovely built up areas, developed as centres of beauty or fun.'*

ROAD SAFETY

The momentum created by the 1967 road safety legislation was maintained with accident analysis and road safety units established across the country, the requirements to fit seat belts were extended, a driving instructor register was established and the 70 mph speed limit was confirmed.

THE BATTLE FOR THE BILL

Not surprising, given the scope of Barbara Castle's ambitions, the Bill was a leviathan – the largest single piece of non-financial legislation since the war. The final Act (with all its parts and schedules) ran to 2,377 pages.

Among transport professionals it was generally well received. The journal of Transport Economics and Policy described it as: 'the first since the war to try to grapple with the overall market situation and to use all means of policy'. The Town and Country Planning Association gave a standing ovation to her speech to their 1966 conference.

The official opposition was less enthusiastic. They were angered by the length of the legislation – they thought it should have been broken down into separate Bills. They also saw the Bill as the thin end of the wedge on state control and intervention. Enoch Powell went as far as to describe the Bill in the Commons as 'evil'. The Bill also faced opposition on the other end of the political spectrum with the TGWU unimpressed by the 'spy in the cab' Tachographs and the rail unions unhappy about Freightliner moving out of British Rail.

The Opposition mounted a major campaign against the Bill in Parliament (with a young Michael Heseltine given the job of destroying the part of the legislation dealing with PTEs). Meanwhile the road haulage industry led the fight outside Parliament.

It was a war of attrition and endurance involving 2,500 amendments and a record 45 committee sittings – some of them all night. But Barbara Castle refused to give way to the Whips' suggestions of deals to be done to get the legislation through. The polls showed that her profile and boldness on transport had made her the most popular Minister in the Wilson Government. Her handling of the transport brief had made the most controversial minister in the Government the most popular. Unfortunately for Transport - her success as a troubleshooter in the role also meant that she was moved on to Employment before the Bill was completed.

'The Bill is stuffed with all the radical proposals for reorganising British transport that have been maturing under that neat crop of fiery hair for the past eighteen months'

TIMES EDITORIAL



Pictures from left:

- Grants for new buses
- Road safety improvements
- Canal network saved

THE LEGACIES OF THE 68 ACT – THE SUCCESSES AND THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Her Bill fell into the hands of her successor, Richard Marsh, who was much more open to compromise to finally get the legislation passed. Without Barbara Castle's drive and determination some of the more radical elements of the Bill were lost – or never implemented. That included the system of licensing for lorries that would have led to more freight being carried by rail - felled by the road haulage industry and its Unions. Also axed were powers for PTEs to provide commercial services at interchanges like cafes and newsagents. Within six months Marsh was gone and the Transport post was relegated out of the Cabinet.

However, despite the trimming, the Act still left a significant legacy. It stabilised the railways and established a way of financing them that survives until today; it provided a fresh start for the remaining canal network; and it (and the 1967 Road Safety Act) started the long process of the ratcheting up of road safety standards. The Bill also established the principle that transport in urban areas should be in the hands of locally accountable strategic transport authorities in the form of Passenger Transport Authorities and Executives.

THE PTE/As GET UNDERWAY

Following on from the legislation the first PTAs were created from October 1969. They covered the West Midlands, South East Lancashire North East Cheshire (later to become Greater Manchester PTE), Merseyside, and Tyneside (later to become Tyne and Wear PTE).

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. Tyneside went for the radical option of converting their local heavy rail network into a new integrated Tyne and Wear Metro system - which finally opened in 1980. 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-Vic 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. Meanwhile in 1973 Greater Glasgow PTE was established (later to become



Pictures from top:

- Integrated bus networks
- Rail investment schemes
- Bus rail interchanges

‘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’



Strathclyde PTE and then in 2006, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport). Strathclyde PTE invested heavily in its extensive and electrified rail network - the largest urban system outside London.

In 1974 two more PTEs were added - in South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire. Among their achievements were Sheffield Supertram and reinvigoration of the West Yorkshire rail network.

The PTEs were always meant to be conjoined with wider reform of city region governance. This also came in 1974 with the establishment of the Metropolitan Counties, which brought the planning of roads and public transport under the same authority. Public spending crises in the Seventies stymied many of the PTEs' more ambitious plans to bring their transport networks up to the standards of their European counterparts. This was followed in the Eighties by a most hostile attitude to the principle of a public sector and planning-led approach to transport. The Met Counties were abolished in 1986. Bus services were also deregulated and subsequently PTE bus operations were privatised. However the PTE/As themselves survived this period.

They also continued their work of steadily upgrading their major interchanges whilst intervening where they could in the deregulated bus market, to safeguard services and integrate ticketing and information. Having saved their local rail networks in the Seventies, the years of investment and support that have followed are now paying off – with some staggering recent levels of growth which have made them the fastest growing part of the UK rail network. The PTEs have also maintained their proud record of innovation – including being the first to reintroduce the tram to city streets, introducing yellow school bus services for school children, implementing some of the first guided bus schemes, and more recently running some of the country's largest real time information services for bus passengers (with bus times texted through to passengers' mobile phones).

Now, with the Local Transport Bill, there is the prospect of a new era for the PTEs and Integrated Transport Authorities (as the PTAs will be re-named). An era that might realise more of Barbara Castle's original hopes and ambitions for the PTEs. The Bill will give the PTEs more powers over the buses – the main form of public transport in their areas. It will also allow each city region to take a fresh look at its transport needs and propose to the Secretary of State how the powers of their PTE could be upgraded to achieve a city region's wider goals. This could include more powers over the local rail network, new boundaries, and more influence over the highways.

In devising the 1968 Transport Act (and in creating the PTEs) Barbara Castle demonstrated a clarity of analysis, a clever and pragmatic application of principle, a popular touch, as well as determination and decisiveness. With the 2008 Local Transport Bill there is now an opportunity to build upon Barbara Castle's legacy. The qualities and attributes that she showed at her time at Transport should act as a spur and an inspiration to all of us now charged with taking the PTEs and ITAs forward.



Pictures from top:

- *Tyne and Wear Metro*
- *Bus rail coordination*
- *Multi-modal information*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pictures

Lancashire Evening Telegraph/Cottontown archive (www.cottontown.org)

The Scott Hellixwell Collection

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