

We risk a repeat of Dr Beeching's mistakes

Andrew Adonis



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The man who closed railway lines was right to make cuts, but missed the need to invest in a modern network

This year is the 50th anniversary of the infamous Beeching axe. Yet among hate figures, Dr Richard Beeching is one of the least deserving. Looking back, even with hindsight, he was mostly right to close down thousands of miles of railway track and hundreds of stations. The problem with Beeching is not how it dealt with the past but rather its failure to modernise properly for the future. Today, even after three decades of growing passenger numbers, rail policy has still not properly learnt Beeching's modernising lesson.

By the 1950s, most branch lines and many stations and duplicating inter-urban rail routes were chronically uneconomic. Their romanticism was exceeded only by their unviability. "I remember Adlestrop," Edward Thomas's elegiac poem about a rural Gloucestershire station, conjures the "willows, willow-herb and grass" as "the steam hissed" and "a blackbird sang", but the killer line is: "No one left and no one came."

Beeching reported that the least used 50 per cent of stations contributed just 2 per cent of passenger revenues, while a third of the route mileage of 17,830 carried just 1 per cent of passengers. The postwar rise of the car was largely to blame. There had been two million cars in 1938; by 1961 this had become six million and the projection was for 13 million by 1970. By 1982 there were 17 million. Beeching's cause célèbre — the Thetford to Swaffham line in Norfolk, carrying an average of nine passengers on five trains a day — was one of many ghost railways.

Britain's railways were at their greatest extent on the eve of the First World War — when Thomas wrote *Adlestrop* — and Beeching was but the last major instalment in 60 years of closures that halved the network in size while maintaining virtually all principal inter-city connections (although not all duplicating inter-city lines). The Great Central from Marylebone to Nottingham, and the Southern main line from Exeter to Plymouth via Okehampton, were notable Beeching casualties.

The real pruners-in-chief were Ernest Marples and Barbara Castle, who ran the ministry of transport for most of the 1960s. They were happy to blame it all on Beeching, the implacable bean-counter recruited from ICI to make the railways pay. But Whitehall regarded rationalisation as essential and only a small number of Beeching's proposed closures were countermanded.

Some reprieves were inspired. The spared North London Line is now part of London Overground, the hugely popular orbital service connecting Willesden, Camden, Islington, Stratford, the City, East London and Clapham Junction. The Braintree branch from Witham in Essex is now electrified with a packed commuter service to Liverpool Street.

Other reprieves were straightforwardly political. The Central Wales line, meandering slowly from Hereford to Swansea via Llandrindod Wells, and the Highland lines north and west of Inverness to Wick, Thurso and Kyle of Lochalsh, are vastly more scenic than economic.

Ironically, the notoriety of the "Beeching axe" helped to preserve the surviving rail network almost intact. In 1971 line closures virtually stopped. Even Margaret Thatcher drew back from further unpopular cuts in spite of her dislike of nationalised British Rail, saving routes on the brink of closure such as the stunning 73-mile Settle and Carlisle line with its 22 viaducts and 14 tunnels.

This was fortunate because while passenger numbers continued to fall until 1982 many lines that might have been closed have since undergone a renaissance. In the last 30 years, as the roads have become more congested, there have been dramatic rail usage increases. Some closures were shortsighted at the time, such as the dismantling of the ten-mile Lewes- Uckfield line, a diversionary route for the Brighton main line, one of the busiest in the country.

But for the most part Beeching's mistake was not the closures but failing to protect trackbeds and rights of way for future use. A notable case is the Oxford to Cambridge line, via Bicester, Bletchley and Bedford, which was barely used when closed in 1968. Milton Keynes, however, which is directly on the line, was founded in 1967 and other towns and cities have also expanded dramatically since then on this vital economic corridor with poor road connections. The line from Oxford to Bedford is being reopened, or upgraded, yet the critical final stretch to Cambridge cannot be restored because it is built over.

However, the bigger charge against Beeching and his political masters is the failure to modernise the core inter-city network properly. Beeching radically modernised freight transit, introducing fast Freightliner container trains and "merry go round" coal trains to power stations. But apart from the long overdue completion of electrification of the West Coast Main Line to Glasgow, and the introduction of the Inter-City 125 train in 1976, little was done for a generation to improve inter-city connections. Then just as rail traffic started to pick up seriously in the 1980s, rail privatisation set network modernisation back another decade. As most commuters will know as they study the latest fare increases, privatisation has added to the costs both of travelling and of running the network.

The failure to plan and build high-speed rail links between England's conurbations was especially acute. Japan's bullet trains between Tokyo and Osaka began the year after Beeching in 1964. The Italians (between Rome and Florence) and the French (between Paris and Lyon) followed suit in 1977 and 1981 respectively, transforming links between big economic centres. By contrast, plans for HS2 between London and Birmingham, our first inter-city high-speed rail link, have still to depart from the drawing board, and the only 68 miles of high-speed track in the entire country are from St Pancras across Kent to the channel tunnel, linking into the French network.

"The real choice", wrote Beeching, "is between an excessive and increasingly uneconomic system with a corresponding tendency for the railways as a whole to fall into disrepute and decay, or the selective development and intensive utilisation of a more limited trunk route system."

This was broadly correct, allowing also for the vital role of city commuter lines. But alas, Britain has yet to make the choice. We had the cuts without the investment. That is why Beeching's 50th anniversary will have few celebrants.

Andrew Adonis, Transport Secretary 2009-10, published the plan for HS2

56 comments

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Bernard George

3 days ago

Why are redundant train lines not converted into roads? Some may be too narrow, but would not even a one-way road be useful in many places?

There is probably a good answer to this, but I have no idea what it is.

1  Recommend Reply



Robert Cannon

3 days ago

Andrew Adonis makes some good points in this article. However I'd rather the investment went into selected reopenings such as the Uckfield - Lewes line which he mentions rather than HS2.

1  Recommend Reply

Morag Underwood

3 days ago

Railways are Victorian technology. Rather than follow blindly into high speed rail why are we not developing new forms of cleaner transport which do not require vast infrastructure which further destroys our beautiful countryside. We should be creating transport corridors offering convenient forms of transport. Let's apply some creative engineering here for a change and regain our status as inventors.

1  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Mr D J Noble

3 days ago

The railways have been badly treated by governments ever since they were first taken over in 1914. Underfunded, with restrictions on fares and cargo rates that were never applied to road transport. When they were being built in the 19th century by private enterprise, competition lead to duplicated routes that could never be profitable except for the lawyers and politicians who argued over granting approval..

Since privatisation the whole system has become impossibly complex with dozens of different firms all demanding a profit from the subsidies being piled in on an unprecedented scale. Track, coaches, signalling, engines, freight trucks are all owned by different companies and let out to others. Engines are no longer made in Britain and railway engineering works have been closed. Contractors who have little real knowledge of railways are brought in to maintain the tracks with disastrous results. The whole thing is a grossly over expensive way of passing taxpayers money to private (often foreign) shareholders.

Whatever the faults of the grossly underfunded British Railways, they were, in fact, far more efficient than the present system. Just compare the subsidies.

[Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Bernard George

3 days ago

@Mr D J Noble Far from being 'underfunded' and 'badly treated', the railways have absorbed vast taxpayer subsidies over the last century.

There is no earthly reason why one form of transport (rail) should be subsidised, and others (notably road) are expected to be cash cows. If people are not willing to pay the cost of travelling by rail, then the railways should close.

1  [Recommend](#) [Reply](#)

Ken Broadbent

3 days ago

It is said that Dr Beeching was in the pay of the car lobby's when he produced his report to scale down the bloated rail network.

I wonder at the motivation of this otherwise intelligent politician in lobbying for new train routes that ABSOLUTELY NOBODY WANTS, apart from the people who would get rich building it.

3  Recommend Reply

Jim Kean

3 days ago

I believe that trains are irrelevant to mass transport. Flying is the solution that requires little infrastructure. Planes are just buses. In fact they are safer than buses. We have the knowledge and experience to use them as such. A misperception of risk and "safety" is our issue.

4  Recommend Reply

Amin Smith

3 days ago

The problem is that Beeching wasn't right, which the chairman of the committee which produced his report was so adamant about he issued his own minority report. Time has vindicated him. Beeching was in thrall to the motor industry, didn't think properly about rural transport, made cuts to the links which have resulted in bottlenecks on the modern network, and didn't stop to ask what would happen if the population continued to increase.

5  Recommend Reply

on a high street near you

3 days ago

The writer is right, we have suffered chronic under investment in many of our infrastructure areas, along with a short term view that focuses on political rather than national benefits.

We need brave choices and re-investment that isn't all funded by the current users, in the same way that the railways were first built.

1  Recommend Reply



Nick Reay

3 days ago

HS2 is the wrong solution for the UK and should be scrapped immediately

Tokyo - Osaka: 345 miles

Paris - Lyon: 245 miles

Rome- Florence: 196 miles

All through relatively low density rural areas

London - Birmingham: 121 miles

Through crowded southern England - the fourth highest population density in the world

High speed rail is not economic for this short distance - it will only save about 15 minutes on the present journey - with an eye watering starting cost of £34bn (likely to be nearer £50bn by the end) - and any saving in time will be offset by the 15 minute walk to make a connection in Birmingham

It will also mean the wanton destruction of 170,000 homes and huge swathes of countryside

We should use what little money we have to upgrade our freight infrastructure - ports, road and rail - that will help us to re-industrialise - as well as upgrading our over-stretched aviation hubs

Spending money on this vanity project will only allow politicians and placemen to travel on it at the taxpayers expense - patting each other on the back at how they've made the UK 'open for business' - when in fact they are doing exactly the opposite

14  Recommend Reply



John Harmer

3 days ago

Having seen his cv may I ask what Andrew Adonis knows about railways?

11  Recommend Reply

Jim Kean

3 days ago

@John Harmer

May I ask what you know?

1  Recommend Reply



John Harmer

3 days ago

@Jim Kean @John Harmer

He is good at Blah blah but nothing else

2  Recommend Reply

Jim Kean

3 days ago

Dear John,

We are all imperfect thinkers. At least you have paid Adonis the compliment of thinking about his thinking.

Recommend Reply



John Harmer

3 days ago

It is a bit rich to blame someone who is long dead. The railways are merely another example of appalling management of which we British are very good. What happened to our car industry, steel, electronics, aviation, electrical etc etc.

Now the Dutch, the Hong Kong Chinese and others are running our railways. Unless the regulator gets in the way, highly probable sadly, all will be well

And keep the politicians well away.

9  Recommend Reply

Senna

3 days ago

This piece could be a metaphor for the current UK economic strategy.

Cutting is never enough you also have the develop and invest.

As for the railways- few of us can afford to use them now. Four friends went up to York -to the Railway Museum- a week ago. They wanted to go by Train. But on finding the fare they drove (a four litre Jaguar) -far cheaper. Ridiculous, off peak, holiday time but still cheaper to drive a big car.

Not much joined up government here.

5  Recommend Reply

Mark Freeman

3 days ago

@Senna At the stage we are, cutting means surviving.

2  Recommend Reply

Bernard George

3 days ago

@Senna Even a heavily subsidised railway is more expensive to use than a highly taxed private motor car. What moral do you draw from this? Surely not that we need more rail subsidies?

1  Recommend Reply

Paul Collins

3 days ago

When the common man can travel on the railways as cheaply as taking the car they will start building them again until then they are commuter tools used and hated by the masses for the overcrowding and overpriced service.

I know of no one down here in the West Country who could use the train to travel to work without a bus or car journey at either end all the useful tracks are now cycle routes and better for it time to convert the remaining branch lines that see little passenger numbers .no one can afford the prices that are extorted from commuters in London down here the bus is the only cheap transport left.

5  Recommend Reply

IleDeFrance

3 days ago

Forgive me Mr Adonis, but I failed to mention your responsibility in saddling us with off-balance sheet financed PFI for all Blair's "Skools'n'ospitals". And it

requires some lack of shame to write in this newspaper, the printing of which was prevented by your Labour voting union members for almost a whole year in 1979! The reason for it? They refused to accept any modernisation and make The Times profitable and economic. Sounds familiar does it not ?

10  Recommend Reply

IleDeFrance

3 days ago

I love trains but the fact remains that most rail travel nowadays is uneconomic. It continues to need large subsidies, mainly from those who never use it. That in contrast with road transport which pays many times over the cost of it with user-levies.

Adonis is a Blairite socialist. They are good at grandiose uneconomic projects, financed by enforced confiscation of others' money, or eventually paid for by all through moneyprinting and inflation. His ex-bosses are good examples as they left with a 30% overspending with Liam Byrne's " There's no money left" one of the few truthful moments.

He is grossly unfair to private involvement and privatisation. The latter's design was undermined by Claire Short's daily threats of re-nationalisation. But within limits, it certainly led to more use of it, contrary to many socialists' predictions. The unions kept too much power, as London's underground again demonstrated. Last WE's Times magazine story about how Adonis's union comrades destroyed the car industry is another example.

Let's remember that the railways were a Private invention, privately developed , financed and run succesfully and profitably for over about a 100 years. It all ended when Adonis's friends nationalised it, that is grabbed it and turned it into a tax-swallowing perennially loss-making unionised monopoly. He should be deeply ashamed of his party's role here.

13  Recommend Reply

Peter Burgess

3 days ago

@IleDeFrance you really can't understand politics if you think Blair was a socialist. I suppose you'll be accusing Murdoch who supported Blair In 3 elections a socialist. Perhaps his best friend Bush was another socialist.

There are many nasty names we can call Blair but socialist certainly isn't one of them.

Have you any idea of the rotten state of our public transport system today? Fares and subsidies have gone up dramatically since privatisation, that's why a rethink is needed.

6  Recommend Reply

judy ludlow

3 days ago

@IleDeFrance oh it never takes long for some anti-Labourite, whatever

the article, to raise his head. In the words of a previous comment - give it a rest!

2  Recommend Reply

Will Harris

3 days ago

@judy ludlow I rather agree with Ile I'm afraid Judy.

2  Recommend Reply

Senna

3 days ago

@IleDeFrance

Hardly. When the railways were nationalised they were not profitable.

And they only break even now with huge state subsidy.

We are using tax payers money to enrich the Board Members of railways. While poor folk - the very people who don't drive- cannot afford to use them.

7  Recommend Reply

M Sheridan

3 days ago

@IleDeFrance

I'm certain that ToBI was no socialist. I doubt GoBr was one also. Just a Scottish Politician wanting to be PM. He could have been elected in Scotland as a Conservative could he.

Do you think Danny Alexander is a LibDem? Really?

Recommend Reply

Nigel Toye

3 days ago

The biggest mistake is the huge increases in fares year on year. The denationalisation of the rail network has been an unmitigated disaster, summed up in the government fiasco over the West Coast franchise debacle.

8  Recommend Reply

Alan Thorpe

3 days ago

@Nigel Toye But the nationalisation in the first place was a disaster. The one common problem since the nationalisation has been poor working practices under the control of the unions.

15  Recommend Reply



Andrew Thomas

3 days ago

@Alan Thorpe Give it a rest.

4  Recommend Reply

Alan Thorpe

3 days ago

@Andrew Thomas Have you got anything constructive to say?

3  Recommend Reply

Nigel Toye

3 days ago

@Alan Thorpe Rail is one area where you cannot have competition. There has to be a coordinated rail network and you cannot get that while you pretend that services compete. They are not on the same routes. They need infrastructure and operations to link together and at the moment that is not happening. The infrastructure had to be brought back under central control anyway when it was being so badly handled by the private sector.

How blind at you to the realities?

4  Recommend Reply

Alan Thorpe

3 days ago

@Nigel Toye We have competition in power and phones with different suppliers using the National Grid to move energy about and the shared use of BT lines. Why is it impossible to have different train companies using the same lines and providing choice? Airlines operate the same routes and use the same airports. Just because trains are on fixed lines doesn't mean we cannot have competition and choice. There just has been no will to sort out the mess created by the hurried and botched Tory privatisation. Labour did nothing to change the situation when they were in power. What is a coordinated rail network? I assume that you are thinking of ticketing. It is a mess but it can be sorted. We just haven't had a government that has given it priority.

2  Recommend Reply

Nigel Toye

3 days ago

@Alan Thorpe it is not the same as the phones. If there were 2 companies on the same line they would both want the best times for their trains. How would that be

sorted? Which would cover the less profitable times?

Would it bring fares down? No. The current system is meant to do that and has not.

You highlight the main problem but just ignore it, "the same fixed lines".

I am not favouring Labour here. They ducked renationalising rail. I am pleased you highlight how botched the Tory move was, but you do live in some sort of privatisation is best dreamland. It has to be a service not a for profit fractured nonsense. Most rail services are state supported and the better for it.

3  Recommend Reply

Sherlock

3 days ago

'a few wealthy people to travel in some style', Not when I travel on a TGV. It is packed with people from all walks of life and does not cost a fortune. The French have long term views on investment and I am sure if the Victorians had done the financial exercises that we do today, much of the UK infrastructure would not have been built.

Government is meant to ensure that infrastructure is put in place, to create a practical and logical structure of planning, taxes and employment, so that business can make money to pay for our social costs of our society.

2  Recommend Reply

Alan Thorpe

3 days ago

@Sherlock Surely, the Victorian railways were built privately and made a profit for their investors.

5  Recommend Reply

Sherlock

3 days ago

@Alan Thorpe @Sherlock The railways were privately built I believe and I am not sure about this but by the mid 1930's were not that profitable. With war they were understandably run by the government and at the end of the war were in a very run down state. This was when they needed massive investment and that was not forthcoming.

3  Recommend Reply

Rodney Willett

3 days ago

@Sherlock @Alan Thorpe The private sector has always provided when it sees the possibility of a profit

(and takes the losses if it gets its forecasts wrong) and has pulled out when all it sees are losses. This included toll roads and bridges as well as railways. In other words it is NOT the duty of government to build infrastructure but to facilitate the private sector and let them find the capital and take the risks. As it is governments prefer to either do it themselves (thus ofo king they are not very good at it) and seem happy take into the public sector all risks - one way or another - while seemingly doing all in its power to make it as hard as possible for private enterprise.

3  Recommend Reply

Senna

3 days ago

@Rodney Willett

"The private sector has always provided when it sees the possibility of a profit (and takes the losses if it gets its forecasts wrong)"

No quite so . Bankers have all been bailed out, Railways get huge state subsidy, Fuel and Water companies were sold too cheap and are a licence to print money.

Proves your point about the incompetence of Government though.

4  Recommend Reply

Sherlock

3 days ago

@Rodney Willett I did not say build or pay for. I said ' meant to ensure that infrastucture is put in place'

1  Recommend Reply

thomas nunan

3 days ago

The high Speed network in France is a massively expensive exercise in French preening that allows a few wealthy people to travel in some style, at the cost of investment in local networks for the mass of people.

HS2 is a massive and hugely expensive mistake that will not be able to compete economically with the existing services unless it is continually subsidised; as with the chunnel the passenger estimates and construction costs are pure fantasy.

Chris Miller

3 days ago

@thomas nunan The TGVs used to be very heavily subsidised, which made them a joy for tourists, but not so pleasant if you were a French taxpayer. More recently, prices have increased (a bit) giving rise to grumbling and even sit-down blockades on the tracks from those who use them as a long-distance commuter route.

But the real problem with the TGV network is that (like so many things in France) it is designed around Paris. Try going from (say) Lyons to Tours by train and you will be taken (charmingly, if you're not in a hurry) back to equipment and speeds from the 1960s. It's actually quicker to go via Paris including a change and Metro journey, even though it's about 50% further.

4  Recommend Reply**Sherlock**

3 days ago

@Chris Miller @thomas nunan That is not much different than trying to go East West in the UK and I am not talking London to Bristol. LMS, LNER, SR, GWR. All these railways were based from London. I wonder on an economic basis how many people want to travel Lyons to Tours. Also the UK does not have the Massif Centrale to cope with!!! But it is a bore trying to get from the S of France to say the N. East, or to Brittany.

1  Recommend Reply**Cerise Pink**

3 days ago

@thomas nunan the example you give is of a socialist government. It fits well with Labour's predilection with spending and borrowing without a care for tomorrow.

6  Recommend Reply**EnglishRose**

3 days ago

The cupboards are bare and we all know why.

Most of our trains run reasonably well. We probably need to encourage people not to move as it's expensive and stressful. Working remotely from home is reducing the need for people to travel to work as we return to how we were - working where we are living. If we make transport even more expensive and dreadful we may well achieve a double whammy - better for people's lives (to work remotely) and save money on already over burdened hard working tax payers.

5  Recommend Reply

Mike Walling

3 days ago

A very interesting article but some key points missing. The reason for it being 50 years since Beeching. How about a mention for requesting a review of our rail network and future expansion opportunities. No comment ref Scotland either? Passenger numbers have grown substantially but the investment in rolling stock seems to be lagging considerably behind?

1  Recommend Reply

K Burdekin

3 days ago

Commuters are literally paying the price for a botched privatisation as Network Rail suck the revenue in for large bonuses.

13  Recommend Reply

Cerise Pink

3 days ago

@K Burdekin Not so.

Network Rail is a government quango and its bonus pot for this year is set to top £14m.

Less of the leftie platitudes and more substance. Make that your New Year's Resolution.

Name a government department that's effective and efficient. Start with HMRC and work from there - let's see if you can come up with substantive evidence to show how these poor dears work tirelessly answering phone calls.....dealing efficiently with calculating tax codes etc then move to the MoD.....how much is its budget overspend? The NHS.....how many millions wasted on branded drugs? How many patients die needlessly from starvation and dehydration.....

Go on.....it's all at your union funded fingertips.....all of the successes, all of the reasons why we need to pay you more, to work fewer years than those who fund your total remuneration so you can get a pension the like of which few will ever see.

18  Recommend Reply

Sherlock

3 days ago

@Cerise Pink You are making quite an assumption about K Burdekin, Union member, leftie, etc. What he did miss however which applied to not only the railways, but also to water was the enormous lack of investment whilst these companies were owned by the State. We now also have the current inability of politicians (the State) to agree as to how to produce enough electricity to keep the lights on!!!

Cerise Pink

3 days ago

@Sherlock @Cerise Pink Not living up to your name eh Sherlock? Sweet little Birdiekin is a) a civil servant and b) a fully paid up union member. When you're out of short pants on this site, you'll soon see the colour of his cloth - it's red btw!

Glad you brought up Water - one of the only utilities to be privatised and not enter a truly competitive market but the Water Bill cometh.....Southern Water, for example, is ranked 19th out of 21 Water Companies.

Some achievement! It recently had its credit rating downgraded.....it truly earns the epitaph:

Southern Water: it couldn't run a bath!

3  Recommend Reply

Alan Hawkes

3 days ago

We do not risk repeating Beeching's mistake. We have repeated Beeching's mistake; we have repeated it every year since, and not just on the railways. We certainly don't have the world's best railways, but our politicians could win gold for dithering.

17  Recommend Reply

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