

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Transport



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT  
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The Rt Hon John Nott MP  
Secretary of State for Trade  
Department of Trade  
1 Victoria Street  
LONDON  
SW1

R

7 June 1979

12/6

John

I have been giving thought to the present arrangements for consumer representation in the nationalised surface transport industries.

At present we have a Central Transport Consultative Committee (CTCC), chaired by Mr Frank Higgins, and 11 Area Transport Users Consultative Committees (TUCCs) which are empowered under the Transport Acts 1962 and 1968 to consider the services provided by the British Railways Board, the National Freight Corporation and the British Transport Docks Board (but not fares and charges). The TUCCs have an additional function, to consider the hardship which might be caused by any closure of a passenger rail service or station that the Railways Board propose, and to report to me so that I can consider their comments before reaching a final decision.

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These arrangements are not very effective. The reports produced by the CTCC are generally superficial. The Committee is inclined usually to accept and support the excuse that shortcomings in services result solely from restrictions on investment. Under the present Chairman the CTCC is becoming part of the "rail lobby". The TUCCs seem to me to fulfil no very useful function. They do deal with complaints about BR's services (about 1,500 last year), but they are not well-known and most dissatisfied customers complain, rightly enough in my view, direct to BR. I am told that last year BR had 55,000 letters from members of the public.

I understand that these arrangements will cost about £300,000 in the present financial year for the CTCC and the TUCCs - as matters stand, on your Department's Votes. There are also the hidden administrative costs to your Department and to mine of dealing with these bodies - in making appointments, briefing on reports etc; and also substantial costs to the Railways Board. Furthermore, since the committees are now appointed by you in consultation with me and report to both of us, there is clearly quite a lot of duplication of effort between our two Departments. I am sure you will agree that these arrangements must be capable of improvement.

It seems to me that it would be sensible for responsibility for the CTCC and the TUCCs to revert to this Department. Their functions are specially relevant to Government transport policy, because of the large subsidy to the passenger railway

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and the special controls on closures. I hope you will be prepared to agree to this change, which would restore the position changed by the last Government, and eliminate the present duplication of work between our two Departments.

I see a need for the consumer view to be more effectively represented in the making of rail policy. For this, the CTCC would need to be strengthened - through the appointment of an effective and able Chairman and members and a secretariat of higher calibre. I doubt whether it is sensible to draw the secretariat, as at present, from British Rail by secondment. To concentrate its efforts on the subject area inside railways that really matters, I would like to limit the remit of the CTCC to passenger services.

On the other hand it is difficult to see a genuine role for the TUCCs. They have never managed to make any real impression and I do not think that their abolition would be noticed by the travelling public, though possibly some consumer interests would make a fuss. To get rid of them would advance our general policy of abolishing quangos.

The present role of the TUCCs in railway passenger closures seems to me anachronistic, when at the same time county councils are developing their new responsibilities for local public transport with extensive arrangements for public consultation. If we were to abolish the TUCCs I would want to consider taking advice from local authorities concerned on the implications of any rail closure proposal.

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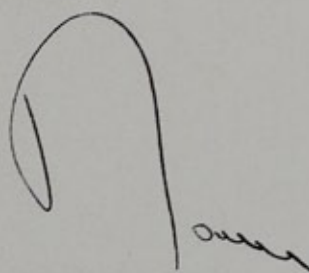


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The legislation needed will not be uncontroversial, but could be handled in the context of our transport policies. Our colleagues will want to think further about these wider changes, and I would bring proposals to them in due course after I have had an opportunity to talk to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales about their special interests. Meanwhile I should be glad to know whether as the first step you would be prepared to join me in recommending that responsibility for these bodies should revert to my Department.

I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, the Chief Secretary, the Lord President, the Secretaries of State for the Environment, Energy, Industry, Scotland and Wales and Sir John Hunt.

You see.



A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Norman Fowler', is written over a horizontal line.

NORMAN FOWLER

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CONFIDENTIAL

17 JUN 1979

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*[Handwritten signature]*

NORMAN FOWLER

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