

# REDEVELOPMENT, MODERNISATION AND THE LAND

By A. J. CARTER



A VITAL PART of the redevelopment of the North is the improvement of transport and communications. Good transport and communications are indispensable to any region which is to attract and retain population, and the responsibility for providing them rests squarely with the government, which in one form or another has jurisdiction over roads, railways, and canals. With all three, government initiative has in the past been inadequate, and this neglect, which has contributed to the plight of the depressed areas, makes modernisation at once more necessary and more difficult. There should be no special treatment for depressed regions, but they would benefit most from the greater attention which government should pay in the future to transport and communications in the country as a whole.

There are signs that the Government is awakening to the need for change, at least in roads and railways. (What the British Waterways Board is doing, if it is doing anything, remains mysterious). Road construction in 1963-4 will have been more than the total during the three years from 1956 to 1959, and by 1968-9 the present rate will itself almost have doubled. New motorways and other more humble roads can certainly contribute much to the reinvigoration of depressed areas, but they are expensive. According to an estimate in *Building Industry News* (John Spencer, "Land Scandal May Lead Us To Big Reforms," 25 July 1963), about 40 per cent of the cost of a road is that of acquiring land. This is a charge which even a small land-value tax would reduce, and a charge with which the community would not be burdened at all if the private ownership of land were effectively extinguished by the taxation of land values in full.

Railways can play as prominent a part as roads in reviving the regions of Britain, and one must seriously question whether the closure of lines should be anything like so extensive as envisaged in the Beeching Report. The third of the railway system to be closed carries only 0.8 per cent of the passenger traffic and 1.5 per cent of the freight, so it is clear enough that any rationalisation of the railways must entail a good deal of surgery, but is closure necessary in all cases? Has enough thought been given to the use of one-man rail buses, or to other ways of reducing staff, or to handing over certain lines to private enterprise, or to the support that local authorities might give? Above all, cannot the profitable third of the railways be made profitable enough to offset the

losses in the so-called "middle third" and in at least part of the third now scheduled for closure?

The Government's unpopular decision to make the railways financially self-supporting is to be applauded. The truth is not, as many people have concluded, that Dr. Beeching has done a good job within bad terms of reference, but that a logical and proper aim has been made to look cruel because not enough thought has been given to the best methods of realising it. The railways must indeed be made to pay their way (are we to assume that they never did so in the hundred years of their existence prior to nationalisation in 1948?) but the test of viability should be applied to the whole, not merely to each part. The Post Office makes a profit, but it would be absurd to insist that the service to every tiny village should be considered in isolation and, if unprofitable, stopped.

With government policy as it is, there is a ludicrous inconsistency—which Mr. Harold Wilson has not failed to point out—in the fact that while one Minister tries to induce industry to go to certain areas another will be closing the railways that feed those areas. (One may quote in passing that the same problem has been experienced in connection with slum clearance: small towns are naturally unwilling to act as overspill areas unless they have a guarantee of employment for the new population. Birmingham for example has several times found firms which were willing to move but which were unable to obtain licences from the Board of Trade, thus obliging the other local authorities to cancel the arrangements.)

To the remedies so far suggested for unemployment and imbalance of population—land-value taxation, which is the principal measure to be adopted, mobility of labour, mobility of industry, and improved transport and communications—there is one other to be added, and that is a new concern for what used to be superciliously referred to as "the provinces." The appointment of a Minister whose duties include regional development was perhaps a promising sign, and the choice of Mr. Edward Heath for the post was presumably an indication of the importance which the Prime Minister attaches to it. Whether it is right to lump regional development with industry and trade rather than incorporate it with the responsibilities either of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government or of the Treasury is open to doubt, but what the Minister does is more important than who he is. As *The Times* put it,

in a leading article called "The New Cabinet" (21 October 1963): "A question mark hangs over this Ministry. But in Mr. Heath's hands it could pave the way for a new policy."

One of the fruits of such a new policy—a policy of increased emphasis on regions and localities—would be the decentralisation of power, now so alarmingly concentrated in Whitehall.

"In so many things we and everyone else are dependent on London. The ownership of most land is in London hands; the building and finance corporations and, of course, everything connected with the Ministries." So lamented the Manchester don whom Susan Cooper quoted in her article "The Octopus of London" in *The Sunday Times* Weekly Review of 29 September 1963. (Note the remark about land: to what extent are local attitudes conditioned by absentee landlordism and London attitudes by "provincialism"?)

The movement of government offices out of London is a valuable step, but decentralisation implies far more than this. It implies the reversal of the whole trend by which local government is being deprived of strength. One of the responses to the rate increases last year was the proposal that the cost of education be transferred to the Exchequer, but to implement this proposal would shift responsibility away from local government instead of enhancing it. Of the Police Bill, *The Guardian* wrote (16 November 1963): "The most significant of its many reforms is the further strengthening of central power." If the financing of railways were under local control, not only would the railways be run much more efficiently (the watchdog being on the spot) but the local inhabitants would have the deciding voice in whether or not to run a service. There is no reason why British Railways should not receive revenue from local authorities (a railway increases the value of land and so generates a fund with which to pay for itself), nor for that matter is there any reason why local authorities should not make grants to the central government rather than the other way about.

A delegation of authority to Scotland and Wales is essential to the diffusion of power. This would, however, be an integral part of a much wider and more exciting experiment—the creation of regional government. There is here a grand opportunity for advance (following a pattern already established in some of the nationalised industries), but it is accompanied by the serious danger that the regional governing bodies, set up to relieve the central government of much of its work, would merely increase bureaucracy. This would happen not only if the regions exercised powers *additional* to those now wielded by the central government, but also if real power were withheld from them and their councils made mere ciphers. There must be no enlargement of the powers of government as a whole—the aim is solely to re-allocate those powers. A reform of the machinery of government would facilitate the simplification of business at present and be no enemy to that overall reduction in government

activity which must come about when the people themselves, freed at last from poverty, would be able to re-assume some of the responsibilities which they are now obliged to delegate.

It is, however, not only in the sphere of government that changes could be made. Local sound broadcasting and television could be introduced, and more time given to regional programmes. There should be a similar cultural dispersion. Do all the paintings in the "national" gallery have to be kept in London? Do visits from royalty and other heads of state have to be spent almost exclusively in London? Does even parliament have to sit in London all the time?

There is need enough for government action in the depressed areas. There is electricity to be supplied in Scotland; waste heaps to be swept away and polluted rivers to be cleaned in the North; new roads and perhaps another university to be built in the South-West. There is scope, too, for new ideas by public bodies, such as the plan put forward in Yorkshire to use prison work parties to clear derelict sites in national parks. Yet the main part of the massive redevelopment which is the essence of making the now depressed areas attractive will be done by a variety of private concerns, acting under the spur of land-value taxation but acting freely. High unemployment, like other economic ills, can be cured without resort to the increased State control which many people reluctantly feel to be the only solution. The modernisation of Britain will proceed apace of its own momentum, given favourable social conditions.

The free enterprise of individual men is collectively like a mighty river. The two banks of the river are the equal rights of all men to the use of land and the right of every man to the produce of his own labour. As long as the two banks are firm, the river flows quickly onwards, but if the banks are broken down, the river floods and the force of the water is lost. The task today is not to stem the current; it is to repair the banks.

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