

The Cultural Politics of Transport 'Modernization': Lessons from South East Dorset and South West Hampshire, 1955–75*

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This essay aims to inform today's cultural politics of sustainable urban mobility. Recognizing that radical political and social change is driven as much, if not more, by emotions than dry, 'rational' debate, activists like George Monbiot emphasize the importance of popular storytelling "that learns from the past, places us in the present and guides the future." Successful stories—those resonating with a critical number of citizens—provide an alternative to the dominant, half-remembered assumptions and narratives that maintain current ways of life and stymie our imaginations when it comes to the future.¹ For example, while mainstream transport planners acknowledge the need to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, not much changes. This is because popular opinion, as well as political and policy paradigms, are imbued with norms—for instance about the value and meaning of travel time—that rule out the radical measures which would make a real difference.² People literally cannot conceive of more sustainable ways of living and moving. Hence a cultural politics of sustainable urban mobilities involves developing stories that will engage, convince, and inspire enough of us—as scholars, policy-analysts, decision-makers and, above all citizens—to dream of, and work towards a future that otherwise seems impossible.

Some in the vanguard of transport and mobility studies recognize the importance of storytelling. Jon Shaw and Iain Docherty sketch a more sustainable future for UK transport by following the fictional Smith family on a trip.³ Similarly, transition analysts and activists use storylines to indicate qualitative pathways towards less carbon-intensive patterns of mobility.⁴ Although such efforts, along with transport studies, acknowledge the past's bearing on the present and future, historians are rarely part of the team.⁵ This is a missed opportunity. So as well as fellow historians, this paper is addressed to sympathetic academics and actors in the policy complex—decision-makers (including politicians) and policy-analysts in government, their agencies, business corporations, and pressure (or advocacy) groups—who can be persuaded that history plays a more important role in "thinking change" and then tell stories that inspire popular support for radical reform.⁶

This essay focuses on the first task: exemplifying the kind of historical insights (or usable past) needed for compelling stories. More particularly, it is an exercise in hindsight, an analysis of how debates from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s still affect transport and land-use policy in a fast developing peri-urban region of southern England. I review how today's policy complex construes the relationship between the three dimensions—environmental, social, and economic—of 'sustainable' urban mobility. As a comprehensive critique is not feasible here, I focus on the 'strong' (environmental and social) aspects of sustainability, particularly greenhouse gas emissions as indicators of the policy complex's wider commitment to change in South East Dorset.⁷ While every region is unique, this one exemplifies a type which developed in many countries in the global north after the

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Second World War, as private motoring boomed: multi-polar, with many peripheral developments outside a historical urban core shaped by other modes.⁸ By suggesting what historical insights could offer the cultural politics of sustainable urban mobility in South East Dorset, I hope to encourage others to research similar regions in the UK and, allowing for the inevitable national differences, in other countries. This study exemplifies all three of the usable past's dimensions: as a contested process in which today's patterns of urban mobility and thinking about them developed; as a realm of path dependencies that locked in dominant ways of moving and (apparently) constrained future possibilities; and as a deposit of lost visions about the future that could be excavated to inspire fresh thinking and story-telling.

The South East Dorset conurbation

First, an outline of the modern urban region occupying the south-eastern corner of Dorset. With a population of 475 000, South East Dorset is a polycentric conurbation with a coastal built-up area surrounded by several outlying towns, separated from each other and the urban core by green spaces. The core incorporates the historic towns of Poole in the west and Christchurch in the east, with the Victorian resort of Bournemouth between. The main satellites lie a maximum of twenty five kilometres from the core, including Ringwood, which is excluded from the official 'travel-to-work' area (Map 1) because it is just in the adjacent county, Hampshire. As the UK's largest conurbation not administered as a city, local government is divided, although less so since April 2019. From 1997 until then Poole and Bournemouth had been unitary authorities, responsible for local-transport and land-use planning. Christchurch and the outlying districts (bar Ringwood) came under Dorset County Council, which dealt with local-transport planning; land use was the responsibility of the next tier down, the district councils. These divisions dated back to 1974, when Christchurch, historically part of Hampshire, had moved into Dorset, along with the then self-governing county borough of Bournemouth (ceremonially part of Hampshire); at the same time, many small councils had merged to create the district authorities.

Although historically this fragmentation hindered policy-making, the current situation is not quite as bad. The trunk road and railway networks are the responsibility of two government agencies, National Highways (formerly Highways England) and Network Rail, which take strategic guidance from the ministerial Department for Transport. In April 2019 the three coastal towns formed a single unitary authority, Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council, while the other district councils merged into a similar authority, Dorset Council, leaving just Ringwood outside the new structure. The new authorities inherited the fruits of several years' increasingly close co-operation between Dorset County Council and the Poole and Bournemouth councils. In 2011 they had jointly published a 15-year (2011–2026) strategic local transport plan, LTP3, covering the entire South East Dorset conurbation (except the small part in Hampshire); the first (and only) review

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was published in November 2014, while Implementation Plan 3, 2017–20, came out in May 2017.⁹ The third and most comprehensive iteration of a nationally mandated plan originally published in 2001, LTP3 was the first to include ambitious, detailed targets for greenhouse gas reductions.¹⁰ It was based on a very thorough review, the South East Dorset Multi-Modal Transport Study, by international consultants Atkins and published in April 2012.¹¹ Although LTP3 remains in force, the new local authorities decided that rather than preparing a new implementation plan they would start afresh with a new LTP, which has still (July 2022) to appear.



Map 1. The South East Dorset conurbation as defined by the Local Transport Plan. Source: Adapted from *Bournemouth, Poole, Dorset Local Transport Plan 3: LPT3 Implementation Plan 2017 to 2020* (Dorchester, 2017), 11. Image courtesy of Dorset County Council.

LTP3 and its supporting studies are weighty documents, and while sheer length does not guarantee a credible strategy in this “multi-centred, high car-dependant conurbation”, the local authorities were, and presumably still are, jointly committed to the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable mobility, while recognizing the political imperative for economic growth.¹² LTP3’s five goals include: “Reducing the overall level of emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from travel and transport” as well as “Promoting equal opportunities, including access to services, with the desired outcome of achieving a fairer society.”¹³ The former goal is particularly commendable given that the UK’s internationally leading, statutory commitment to slashing domestic greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (by at least 80 per cent against the 1990 level) no longer sets targets for transport.¹⁴ The comparatively dense population in the conurbation’s core makes it attractive to pursue lower-carbon initiatives. Projects since 2011 have promoted active modes (walking, cycling) and public transport (buses), along with measures to deter car usage. As part of Implementation Plan 2 (2014–17), a £18 million package, Three Towns Travel, to “improve sustainable travel facilities in and around Poole, Bournemouth and Christchurch” and “provide viable alternatives to

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car travel and lead to increased modal shifts to sustainable travel modes,” was completed in March 2015, and judged a major success.¹⁵ Implementation Plan 3 aimed to further encourage a modal shift by combining similar soft measures and infrastructural improvements.

So far, so good. But how soon will personal mobility within the conurbation become environmentally sustainable?¹⁶ We can scarcely expect a wholesale transition before LTP3 formally ends in 2026 or LTP4 is finally announced. Nevertheless, Dorset’s policy complex needs to acknowledge the continuing—indeed increasing—urgency. Unfortunately, as detailed later, powerful institutions in the region are re-envisioning the future, putting much greater emphasis on economic factors. By looking back fifty years or more, when the ‘sustainability’ of personal mobility in the area was also under debate, we can get a better sense of how cultural politics frames the policy complex’s thinking.

Contested Mobilities, Lock-ins, and Missed Opportunities

Mechanized transport will never be as sustainable in environmental or social terms as walking and cycling, but in any urban area more than a few kilometres across it will be both functionally and economically necessary. Not everyone is fit enough to move under their own power, and for these people, mechanized transport is essential. Thus the issue, both now and in the past, is how to mix mechanized modes—buses, trams, trains, cars, and motorcycles—and provide acceptable trade-offs (and synergies) between the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. What is ‘acceptable’ is fundamentally a matter of political judgment and the balance between personal and mass transport. Despite the rapid rise in urban motoring in the global north after 1945, public transport remained important, particularly in Europe, where urban morphology had long been shaped by mass transit. But what kind of public transport has been, and might continue to be significant? Railways have played an important part in shaping urban regions since the mid-nineteenth century. Although railways have never been regarded as easily sustainable, since the Second World War many countries including the USA argue that under some circumstances, urban and suburban railways can be more sustainable, particularly in environmental and social terms, than alternative modes. Their capacity to bypass roads congested with cars and trapped buses is a particularly attractive feature.¹⁷

I explore how these trends played out in the UK through debates at two geo-political levels, the national and the regional, and how people moved into, out of, and around the conglomeration rapidly developing in South East Dorset from the mid-1950s and, when the county border lay between Poole and Bournemouth, South West Hampshire. This story reflects the general post-war enthusiasm for automobility, leading to major road schemes in and around the conurbation and high car-dependency in the 1960s and 1970s. Dorset’s present-day politicians and policy analysts are well aware of these facts. They also know there used to be several railway lines in the region, whereas now there is only one, the London mainline

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through the urban core. Until 1964-66, three secondary routes served the towns and villages to the north of what even then was the continuously built-up coastal zone (Map 2). While today's South East Dorset conurbation is typical in that most public transport is by bus, there is little doubt that had these railways survived, they would be well used to access both the urban core and destinations beyond, in a free-flowing, low-carbon way.¹⁸ But it is highly unlikely they will ever reopen. This is a classic example of historical path-dependency and lock-in: once the secondary lines had closed, the physical integrity of their track beds destroyed, and major highways built instead, it became impossible to even imagine they could be reinstated. Some in Dorset's policy complex do not need fresh lessons in this basic lock-in: they know from hard-won experience that over the long-term, seemingly once-sound policies and decisions can turn out badly.¹⁹



Map 2. Railways in South East Dorset and South West Hampshire, ca 1960. Source: Adapted from Southern Railway system map, ca 1947.

But the fuller story is more complex and nuanced, and the historical *process* of framing the terms in which debates considered the (lack of a) future for these lines, holds lessons about today's struggle for sustainability. First, and most obviously, we note that opponents of the dominant discourse of urban automobility couched their arguments in ways prefiguring many of today's concerns. While activists in the 1960s lost these battles, with hindsight we can see that they 'won' the war on the long-term environmental and social unsustainability of urban automobility, and the desirability to keep open the possibility of passenger trains as a more socially inclusive, and certainly lower-carbon, congestion-busting mode.

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Timescales were critical here: short-term politics *and* popular opinion defeated vague ideas about what might only be achieved over decades. This missed opportunity should give today's policy complex pause for thought: do present-day debates also risk prematurely dismissing the arguments of subaltern groups, repeating the mistake of precluding long-term flexibility? Secondly, and more subtly, by understanding the cultural politics of a key concept, 'modernization' in terms of which the political and policy battles of the 1960s were fought, we become sensitized to the ways certain actors in South East Dorset are diluting LTP3's commitment to the strong dimensions of sustainable urban mobility.

'Modernization', the Beeching Report, and the Buchanan Report

The headline story of how the South East Dorset conurbation became so car-dependent stems from two studies facilitated by the 1957–64 Conservative government: the nationalized British Railway Board's *The Reshaping of British Railways* (the Beeching Report, published in March 1963), and the Ministry of Transport working group's *Traffic in Towns: A Study of the Long Term Problems of Traffic in Urban Areas* (the Buchanan Report, November 1963).²⁰ Named after their principal authors, both reports were delivered to the controversial but influential Minister of Transport from 1959 to 1964, Ernest Marples.²¹ Their contents, or more accurately the different values they expressed, framed debates about the future of personal mobility: the likely findings had been favourably trailed in the press and in political circles for months before publication. Moreover, although published eight months after Beeching, the Buchanan report was secretly revealed to Marples by July 1963, just as the first railway closure proposals were posted—including those in South East Dorset/South West Hampshire.²²

Beeching's proposals for widespread railway closures (the 'Beeching Axe'), still attract public notoriety in the UK, while only experts know about the Buchanan report. In international terms, Beeching's analysis resonated with the kind of thinking that had led to numerous withdrawals of passenger trains in the United States before the Second World War, but it was chiefly the product of debates within British Railways and central government in the 1950s. Despite international interest, most European governments did not start similar large-scale rationalization programmes for several decades.²³ By contrast, the Buchanan report constituted a British response to the emerging transnational critique of mass urban motorization voiced by North American authors such as Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs, and would become influential in European countries such as Sweden, Italy, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany.²⁴

Despite very different policy framing and presentation—Buchanan's attractive, jargon-free, and richly illustrated layout contrasted favourably with Beeching's rather dour, heavy text—both reports emphasized 'modernization'. The concept had quickly become central to British political and policy discourse after 1945 as the country struggled to rebuild its economy: modernization was the (only) way forward. Its usefulness for framing debates about urban mobilities, thus

garnering support among elite, expert and popular audiences, lay in the fact that it was a portmanteau, a term whose meaning could be reconfigured (or even emptied) to suit different, even contradictory policies. While economic growth mainly informed these debates, notions of social equity and environmental sustainability were also present.

The Beeching Report was as much a product as Buchanan's of the very rapidly growing levels of car ownership and usage in late 1950s' Britain, both a key symbol and measure of social, economic and even cultural modernization. To (be seen to) drive was to be part of the modern way of living, to be someone in a modernizing society. This was in line with other European capitalist countries, but for fifteen years after the Second World War, Britain's economic difficulties had hampered ambitious plans, approved in 1946, for inter-urban motorway construction on the scale found in Germany. Urban road building lagged even further behind other European (let alone North American) cities. From 1947, UK local authorities were obliged to prepare development plans (with a 20-year horizon) that included proposals for highways; all-purpose ring roads to keep through traffic out of city centres, and radial 'spokes' to ease flows between central and outer districts—ideas common elsewhere in Europe. However, very little construction took place, which, combined with car ownership levels far in excess of immediate post-war predictions, led to intolerable urban-traffic congestion in the late 1950s.²⁵

Beeching focused on the railways' lack of economic 'sustainability'. Buchanan's concern with urban congestion certainly addressed cities' economic viability but also, and more radically, the mounting social and environmental costs of automobility.²⁶ By 1960, the railways' financial losses were seen as unaffordable in senior government circles (the Cabinet) and the national bureaucracy or civil service (Whitehall). Beeching sought to return the railways to profit by identifying passenger services—such as inter-urban expresses—that would pay despite growing automobility, while closing the rest, notably rural stopping trains and even many suburban commuter lines (the "Axe"). This initial programme would only take a few years, though the report's wider analysis looked forward about two decades, a typical timespan for planners then.²⁷ In contrast, Buchanan tried to reconcile growing public, policy and political concerns about increasing urban congestion, expecting that the demand for cars and roads to drive them on would increase relentlessly. The timescale here was exceptional, four or even five decades.²⁸

If Buchanan's concern for social and environmental sustainability was not entirely novel in the international context, his analysis of an urban district's 'environmental capacity' to absorb motor traffic certainly was. In historian Simon Gunn's view, the report demonstrated for the first time in the UK (and elsewhere), that modernist urban renewal and environmental awareness need not be mutually exclusive.²⁹ While hailing mass-scale ownership of cars as socially desirable and politically inevitable, Buchanan warned that unregulated motoring would wreck the social and physical fabric of towns and cities that had never been designed for cars. The challenge was to fit growing numbers of vehicles into old spaces while enhancing urban life. Several new insights underpinned the proposed solutions.

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First, motor traffic *within* towns flowed in ways much more complex than assumed as people moved between their homes, shops, workplaces and social facilities; new roads were needed to maintain this door-to-door convenience. But the social and environmental costs of even existing motor traffic were too high: traffic caused congestion, death and injury through ‘accidents’, noise, poor air quality, as well as multiple visual intrusions such as parked vehicles, cluttered streets, the aesthetic degradation of architectural and historic vistas, and so on. Buchanan’s understanding of ‘environment’ therefore expressed not only an urban district’s aesthetic value, but also its “environmental capacity” defined by the permitted volume of motor traffic, without precluding the “civilised urban life” appropriate to each district’s industrial, commercial, or residential character.³⁰

The report’s novelty lay in suggesting that whole towns be rebuilt over forty years to ensure each district had appropriate traffic flows. Buchanan’s conservationist thrust was therefore necessarily coupled with a modernist insistence on radically rebuilding urban spaces with highways designed to deal with the anticipated levels of traffic. Towns would adopt a cellular structure in which a network of free-flowing “distributor highways” serviced the different zones, including residential and amenity “environmental areas” where motor traffic was heavily restricted or even banned outright.³¹ Modern conurbations would be oases of civilized living surrounded by (and in Buchanan’s view, nurtured by) free-flowing motor traffic—in what historian Barbara Schmucki calls “the automobile-friendly city.”³²

Yet Buchanan acknowledged that public transport had to continue as an adjunct to automobility: the number of public-transport vehicles “depends largely upon the extent to which the public does or does not switch its travelling habits to private cars.”³³ The report also argued that making public transport cheaper could minimize car-usage “for the main movements... in larger cities.”³⁴ Railways were dismissed as largely irrelevant because “[e]vents have passed far beyond the point at which it would have been possible to revert” to them. However, in drawing lessons from Europe and the United States, Buchanan did acknowledge the potential of both light- and heavy-rail (including undergrounds) for commuting.³⁵

Finally, Buchanan recommended that urban redevelopment should accord with the “much needed integration” of transport and land-use planning, supported by comprehensive studies.³⁶ Other influential figures went further. The steering group appointed by Marples to oversee Buchanan’s work (the Crowther committee) argued that the appropriate geographical scale for this kind of planning was the region, not just the particular city or town. In an international context this was scarcely a new idea: the planning of New York as a metropolitan region dates back to at least the 1920s. In Britain, like elsewhere in Europe (Stockholm being a good example), similar practices only developed after the Second World War; however, by the early 1960s, regional planning was regarded as a panacea across much of the continent.³⁷

Despite growing political enthusiasm at this time, regional planning in the UK was still weak, largely reactive and fragmented, with limited strategic powers

divided between central and local government. Nationally, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, and the Board of Trade oversaw different elements; by mid-1963, new government-appointed Regional Study Groups were starting to co-ordinate work—notably in the south-east region designated for 'London overspill' (shifting people out of London). Otherwise, responsibility for transport and land-use planning remained divided between the principal local authorities: the county councils and the equivalent county-borough councils. Their strategic powers over land use, expressed in County Development Plans, had to be approved by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. Nevertheless as 'highway authorities' these councils controlled road building and improvements (Ministry of Transport grants were available for some of the cost) apart from the national trunk-road and motorway network, the Ministry of Transport's responsibility. The Crowther committee caustically noted that this arrangement resulted in "co-ordination of the negative kind that provides opportunity for representations to be made... it is not the sort... from which new initiatives can be born."³⁸ It therefore recommended establishing powerful Regional Development Agencies to plan and enact "urban modernisation" programmes.³⁹

The immediate reaction to the Buchanan Report was largely positive, with broad agreement in the general and specialist press, in professional circles, and even among motoring pressure groups over the analysis, diagnosis and proposals. The chief opposition came from transport economists, who argued (correctly, it turned out) that Buchanan had overestimated the likely growth of car usage in cities, and favoured measures such as road-pricing that would act as a deterrent by imposing a direct cost on drivers. In the short-term, Marples secured the Ministry of Housing and Local Government's support for Buchanan's main proposals, along with a large increase in the roads budget and the formation of a cross-ministerial Urban Planning Group to advise local authorities; from January 1964, the Ministry of Transport progressively required these highway authorities to justify new urban-road schemes by carrying out land-use/transport surveys. Things did not change much when Labour came to power in October that year. In 1965, the new government set up more regional study groups, to cover all of England, and gave them wider responsibilities. However, they never had the extensive planning and executive powers envisaged by Crowther.⁴⁰

The Beeching Report was very different in tone, substance and intent. Here 'modernization' functioned to garner public support (or at least acquiescence) for a closure programme already decided in principle if not in detail. The debate about secondary railways in the late 1950s and early 1960s was conducted at two geo-political levels: in secret, within the Cabinet and Whitehall, where closure in pursuit of short-term financial savings was the default; and more openly in the regions, where objections from user groups and local government admitted the possibility of minor concessions. To understand 'modernization' in this way, as key to the cultural politics of railway policy, is not to say that the Beeching Axe was without merit; but it does show how powerful, elite groups shaped and rhetorically deployed popular values and attitudes to deflect scrutiny of their semi-covert policies. In contrast, as

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detailed shortly, while protesters argued for the modernization of South East Dorset/South West Hampshire's secondary railways in ways that resonate with today's concern for strong sustainability, in the face of the values and judgments informing the Buchanan Report, they were far too weak to win the popular debate, let alone make any impression on the policies of shadowy national elites.

Charles Loft demonstrates the critical importance of 'modernization' in framing, shaping, and popularizing government railway policy from the mid-1950s and through the 1960s, surviving the switch from Conservative to Labour government. While initially supportive of large-scale railway investment through the 1955 Modernisation Plan, senior Conservative politicians and the Treasury had decided by 1958–59 that the system's finances were unsustainable: spiralling capital costs were paralleled by rapidly mounting operating losses. By 1960 government policy had switched decisively in favour of road investment, and a semi-covert policy review within Whitehall was moving towards a decision to withdraw many passenger services and concentrate limited funds on improving the rest.⁴¹

The railways' shrinking, more specialized future was widely and publicly extolled as 'modernization'. For example in 1960, the prime minister argued, "the industry must be of a size and pattern suited to modern conditions and prospects... the railway system must be remodelled to meet current needs, and the modernisation plan must be adapted to this new shape."⁴² Such rhetoric allowed the remodelling of the railways to be presented as an opportunity for positive change, rather than a highly problematic exercise to make them profitable, which moreover threatened the Conservatives' growing commitment to regional planning. The Beeching Report adopted this sloganizing—the quote above was included in the report's foreword— although its dry, technocratic presentation demanded a good deal of work by ministers, Whitehall and the British Railways Board to carry political and public opinion once it was published in March 1963. While the report's analysis and detailed proposals quickly ran into controversy, this initial public launch went very well, so much so that it served as a template for Buchanan.⁴³

Thus as far as secondary services were concerned, the political reality was that as early as 1959–60, railway modernization no longer required a strong case for particular withdrawals but rather for individual reprieves.⁴⁴ This logic was not made public, although plenty of activists and commentators assumed that something similar was at work. Moreover, central government made it much more difficult to mount effective campaigns against individual proposals. The public and any interested body could object through the Transport Users' Consultative Committees, regional consumer bodies which had vetoed some closures and delayed others in the 1950s; but these powers were removed in 1962. The Minister of Transport now unequivocally decided whether to withdraw a passenger service, acting on advice from senior ministerial officials. They in turn relied heavily on the recommendations of the appropriate Transport Users' Consultative Committee, limited to considering the ill-defined notion of 'hardship' to users, and the measures—normally additional bus services—that might alleviate this. However, central government recognized that factors such as regional development or urban congestion might be sufficient

to refuse closure. Local authorities and other official as well as voluntary bodies could therefore make representations directly to the Minister of Transport. So too could other Whitehall departments, such as regional planning, defence, and agriculture. Matters were discussed by a secret cross-departmental Whitehall committee, chaired by a senior Ministry of Transport official, which then made a recommendation to the minister.⁴⁵ However, this arrangement was open to the same kind of criticism levelled at regional planning by the Crowther committee: it was reactive and often worked without a clear view of the wider, long-term issues.

All of this applied to any closure proposal. But urban (including suburban) railways were a slightly different case. Despite Buchanan's dismissive attitude, other influential voices in Whitehall were more positive about the railways' potential to alleviate traffic congestion (and by implication its associated social and environmental costs), and successfully lobbied Beeching to exclude from his report some loss-making suburban services in major conurbations such as Glasgow and Manchester. Many others went into the closure process and were often bitterly and sometimes successfully opposed.⁴⁶

'Modernization', Sustainability, and South East Dorset's Railways

How did this national politics of 'modernization' play out in South East Dorset/South West Hampshire? To what extent did political, policy and public discourse reflect issues we should now regard as being about sustainability? What follows is not a comprehensive account: it focuses on British Railways' proposals, announced in June and July 1963, to close the three secondary passenger services running north of the coastal belt.

British Railways' timing was deeply unfortunate in terms of Dorset County Council's bold proposals, dating from its County Development Plan of 1955, to greatly expand South East Dorset's population over the next twenty years.⁴⁷ By May 1963 the potential increase was even larger, as the Ministry of Housing and Local Government was debating whether some of London's 'overspill' should be settled in districts through which the threatened railways ran. How were people to move around? As late as 1963, Dorset County Council was still only planning fairly modest highway schemes to address predicted congestion over the next two decades in and around Poole, Dorset's part of the urban core.⁴⁸ But neighbouring authorities had other ideas; in particular, the County Borough of Bournemouth was already well advanced with major highway plans anticipating Buchanan's prescriptions.⁴⁹

Fragmented governance also made it more difficult to develop a coherent response to British Railways' proposals; several county councils were involved, for while one train service ran for about half its length through Hampshire, another ran briefly through that county and then Wiltshire, and the third, the Somerset & Dorset, ran extensively through both its eponymous counties. Nor was Whitehall's marginally more favourable attitude to (sub)urban railways any help for British Railways, as the Ministry of Transport and the relevant Transport Users' Consultative Committees, for the South West and the South East, classified all three

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services as rural, despite terminating in Bournemouth, the urban core's centre. This was reasonable since the lines ran through few densely populated areas and were not heavily used by commuters.⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, scarcely anyone denied British Railways' case that the services were financially unviable. Modernization—or the lack of it—was thus a major issue for the railways' proponents. Certainly the irregular, infrequent service of old-fashioned, steam-hauled carriages was far removed from the electric or diesel-powered suburban trains found in the big cities, or the contemporary car or bus. The key was what the future might bring— in the context of the growing conurbation. What might 'modernization' mean for mobility into, out of and around the region? Was there a viable alternative to the constrained automobility that was shortly to be made public by Buchanan, but was already being debated locally? This battle over the imagined future concerned not just what a 'modernized' train service might look like, but also geography—how extensive did the conurbation have to become to need trains, and timescales—how long would it take to grow to this point?

To take the first point: the Transport Users' Consultative Committee public hearings, local newspaper editorials, articles and letters, interventions from community and business leaders, and pamphlets from advocacy groups, provide ample evidence of a well-informed body of opinion arguing for the immediate modernization of the railways' infrastructure, trains, working practices and service patterns. 'Modernization' meant different things to different people, but ultimately amounted to experiments where revenue might grow and costs decline sufficiently to reduce financial losses to an acceptable level. Most suggestions involved trying out improvements that were already common elsewhere in the UK or abroad; for example, using diesel trains, destaffing, or closing lightly used stations, removing surplus tracks, simplifying signalling, improving timetables.⁵¹ These suggestions usually had short-term, conservative goals: that over five years, a better but cheaper-to-run train service would attract more passengers to fundamentally the same traffic flows.

This conservative modernization struggled to make headway against the sheer scale of existing losses. Almost no-one suggested that the trains could be made to turn a profit. Instead, the public battle shifted to the terrain of 'social accounting', now sometimes called cost-benefit (or benefit-cost) analysis, where the issues of strong sustainability were raised. Cost-benefit analysis was just starting to be used to justify building urban infrastructure, like London's Victoria underground line, where operating losses would be more than compensated by wider social and economic benefits. The Ministry of Transport began to recognize the potential of cost-benefit analysis for quantitatively assessing the viability of suburban rail services, although there was insufficient expertise to deliver detailed studies in the timescale demanded by Beeching's national politics.⁵² In Dorset and Hampshire, objectors cited the various advantages of (particularly new) trains over cars and buses that made them more sustainable in social and environmental terms. Dorset County Council argued in terms that today would amount to the claim

that women, the elderly and children were being discriminated against because they were far less likely than men to have access to cars, and that buses did not always provide an equivalent service to trains. Another powerful argument was that trains were safer than road transport, so that once the costs—human, social and financial—of road 'accidents' (that is, crashes) were reckoned, the railways' financial losses became far less significant. Traffic congestion in the urban core was also widely cited as a reason for keeping the trains: Dorset County Council argued that road traffic in and around Poole was already higher than average, while central-government grants for investment in new highways were inadequate.⁵³ But quite apart from the Ministry of Transport's blanket refusal to consider delaying the closure programme so that the railways could undergo a cost-benefit analysis, it is hard to believe that existing passenger numbers were high enough to tip the balance. Even the argument that urban congestion could only get worse, was not a definitive point in favour of 'sustainable' trains over 'unsustainable' cars (and buses). The same argument could be used for investing in urban highways, the course of action anticipated in Bournemouth.

Nonetheless, Dorset County Council's plans for the conurbation meant a case could be made for keeping the trains as a partial alternative to automobility. The key questions were: What did the future hold? How big would the conurbation become? How long would it take to develop? How would employment, housing, and recreation be distributed? Would new patterns of land use encourage or deter people to move around the conurbation in economically, socially and environmentally sustainable ways? In other words, would the 'modern', late-twentieth-century conurbation develop as, at best, a space of partly constrained automobility augmented by chiefly road-based public transport, or as one where trains were the backbone to a comprehensive and arguably more sustainable system of personal mobility?

Given the tenor of national debates, the latter argument was lost almost as soon as it was made, despite Dorset County Council's well-conceived appeals to the Ministry of Transport. As already noted, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government was toying with developing South East Dorset/South West Hampshire for London overspill; the numbers seemed to require railways, and by September 1963, Dorset County Council was including outlying settlements such as the market town of Wimborne and the rural village of Verwood, both with threatened railway stations, in its vision of the developing conurbation, predicting that the population would exceed 250 000 by 1981. The council argued that it was "utter folly" to close lines for which there might be "great demand" within just a decade.⁵⁴

The Ministry of Transport could not entirely ignore these arguments, particularly since the prospect of accommodating London overspill had raised the question of what, if any, railway provision was needed to mitigate road congestion, particularly from commuting.⁵⁵ But Whitehall did not take very seriously the prospect of overspill as far west as Dorset, and so the closure proposals were only discussed, in secret, by the Ministry's cross-departmental committee. For the two shorter routes, which closed in May 1964, one meeting was enough. The other line (Somerset & Dorset), which eventually closed in March 1966, proved more of a

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problem for unrelated reasons, and the delay allowed Dorset County Council to return repeatedly over the next two years to urban expansion. But in every instance, the council's case was weakened by a lack of consistent support from local politicians and authorities; they all broadly favoured road transport or, at best, equivocated over the advantages of trains. The tone of the secret debate within Whitehall was captured by a South East Transport Users' Consultative Committee report, arguing (while accepting "they were not really qualified to judge") that despite recent population growth, it was "unlikely" that future development would be "seriously prejudiced" by withdrawing trains. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government's brief advice was similar; while confirming that population growth along the railway to the urban core's north was likely to be "large" over the next twenty years, these new settlements were not intended for London-bound commuters and so trains were not needed—cars and buses could handle travel within the conurbation. Thus Dorset County Council's arguments were summarily dismissed: Whitehall was not going to spend national taxes on relieving these secondary railways.⁵⁶

These decisions were not, of course, determined by the cultural politics of 'modernization' alone. But the power to define what modernization meant in the context of urban mobility was entangled with the power to imagine the South East Dorset/South West Hampshire conurbation's future in terms of geographical extent, developmental timescale, socio-economic patterns of land-use, and hence the ways people would travel. Sustainability was fairly prominent in these debates, both nationally and regionally, in public and in secret, but the argument for railways as a socially and environmentally sustainable, congestion-busting mode only seemed remotely plausible over the long-term – even then depending on assumptions about land-use and traffic that ran counter to the strong tide of political and public opinion in favour of (constrained) automobility. Over the forty-plus years envisaged by the Buchanan Report, Dorset County Council has proved to be largely 'right'; partly for a reason not even the council predicted, the development of long-distance commuting eastwards, even as far as London. But it proved impossible to conjure up an imaginary future convincingly enough to overcome the secretive central-government complex of politicians and senior civil servants, determined to slash British Railways' 'unsustainable' losses as quickly as possible.

Even Buchanan's radical attempt to reconcile the automobility of a 'car-owning democracy' with environmental considerations did not survive the short-term electoral and economic cycles of 1960s' British politics. But elements were selectively taken up by politicians, nationally and regionally, and urban planners, supported by a critical degree of public opinion. By European standards, the UK's former low levels of urban-road construction made a degree of catching-up inevitable: the issue was not whether, but when and how highways would be planned and built. Following Buchanan, integrated transport and land-use studies became a major factor shaping urban mobilities during the 1960s and 1970s, not least in South East Dorset and South West Hampshire.⁵⁷ Bournemouth was already planning major highways; similarly, Hampshire County Council's objections to

railway closures had probably been motivated by the hope of being bought off by bigger highway grants. Dorset County Council quickly fell into line. Once the trains had gone in 1964 and 1966, public protest quickly died down and, starting in 1965, the three authorities worked together to prepare a comprehensive land-use study for the conurbation. Published in 1967 and looking forward about twenty years, it proposed large-scale road building. It also called for a comprehensive, largely road-based public-transport network to alleviate congestion in the urban core. Elsewhere, highway construction was preferred, even when reopening sections of railway might have offered a partial alternative.⁵⁸ A later iteration, in 1976, gave greater emphasis to public transport and even protected a length of old track bed to the north for possible use as a light-rail route. By 1981, however, this protection had gone, and by 1989, critical lengths of ex-railway infrastructure had been lost to building, demolition or conversion to roads.⁵⁹ The rumble of trains would never again trouble the conurbation's residents.⁶⁰

Concluding Remarks: Lessons Learnt?

What are the lessons for today's cultural politics of sustainable urban mobility? First, that it is essential to tell compelling stories about life and travel several decades later in towns and cities that are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable, for our imagination and spirit need sustenance in the struggle to achieve systematic change, especially when powerful interests threaten to dilute the strong definition of 'sustainability'. Here history helps by showing that over the long-term, weaker voices were proved 'right' about keeping open options for more socially inclusive, lower-carbon modes of transport. Timescales matter—it is all too easy to give up on the future in the face of apparently overwhelming short-term challenges. Second, that governance matters: follow the money and look for the geo-political boundaries when assessing who is defining the terms of debate. And finally (partly to reiterate the first point), no-one concerned with policy making — mainstream and radicals alike—should ignore popular culture: change, especially systematic change, is almost impossible if it flies in the face of popular opinion.

Given South East Dorset's half-century of venerating the car, LTP3's positive vision and good intentions were probably never enough to develop with sufficient urgency ways of moving that are socially equitable and will help prevent climate breakdown. But the situation becomes worse when, as hinted earlier, new political and policy actors enter the arena, because the relationship between the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability is once again re-defined. Who are these actors, and what are their priorities?

The good news is that political/policy debates are more transparent than fifty years ago—these paragraphs depend on documents that would have been secret in the 1960s. While the Department for Transport and the Treasury still wield considerable power over urban-transport policy and spending, they are more willing to listen to (but not necessarily act upon) dissenting arguments. The balance between central government and the regions is also no longer quite as one-sided:

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some central-government finance for regional transport infrastructure is now devolved to an organization founded in 2016, the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership.⁶¹ But the not-so-good news is that this partnership is not a conventional democratic body where members are either directly elected or represent organizations to which they have been elected by citizens. Although local-authority politicians form a majority, unelected representatives of business and other interest groups such as tertiary educational establishments also have a vote. Inevitably their priorities weigh heavily in the partnership's deliberations.⁶² Its "overarching aim is to create more jobs and drive economic growth in Dorset."⁶³ In 2014, the partnership drew up the county's Strategic Economic Plan, which in turn heavily shaped the priorities for LTP3's Implementation Plan 3 (2017–20).⁶⁴

Although 'sustainability' has lost much of its critical edge in policy and academic discourse, it arguably remains as important for persuading the public of the wisdom of policy initiatives as 'modernization' was in the 1950s and 1960s. Certainly, the strategic plan's 2016 iteration proclaims that by 2033, "Dorset will be Britain's most sustainable Core City-Region."⁶⁵ But the cultural politics of 'modernity' in the 1960s suggests we should carefully scrutinize what the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership means in terms of urban mobility. An initial reading of its plan is encouraging: there are welcome references to "sustainable transport hubs, the widespread use of sustainable transport options, ensur[ing] sustainable access and travel", and "major transport infrastructure with minimal impact on the environment."⁶⁶ But from an environmental point of view, matters take a turn for the worse. Most importantly, there does not seem to be any reference to rapidly driving down transport's *absolute* greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, LTP3's commitment (2011) to reducing the "overall level" becomes the much weaker aim of reducing per capita emissions from road transport (a performance indicator taken from LTP3). This relative decoupling is a sleight of hand: absolute emissions can increase even as the per capita measure comes down; if, for example, some people drive farther while the population increases among those, such as the young and elderly, who tend to drive less. And it ignores the likely impact on other modes; for instance, the near-certainty that improved road access to Bournemouth airport will encourage more carbon-intensive flying.⁶⁷ In short, history suggests that while the enterprise partnership emphasizes 'sustainability' because the term resonates strongly with wider political and public opinion, it is redefining the concept so that environmental (and perhaps social) considerations do not hamper the stronger imperative "to create jobs and drive economic growth." Implementation Plan 3's rubric almost admitted as much: "the focus will be on employment and the economy whilst continuing to address wider LTP goals as part of the delivery programme."⁶⁸ Economic 'sustainability' trumps all.

At least the historical problems of fragmented regional governance have largely been alleviated, although Hampshire County Council's exclusion from LTP3 (or, in all probability, LTP4) suggests that boundaries still matter: traffic flows into, out of and around the conurbation do not observe county borders. At the moment, Dorset's local authorities do not control certain regional transport services

(particularly trains), mirroring the division between national direction and regional acquiescence found in the Beeching/Buchanan era.⁶⁹ In 2018-19 several local authorities from across Dorset, Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire founded, with government support, Western Gateway, a sub-national transport body intended to identify the region's 'strategic' transport priorities. It aims "to drive innovation, facilitate the transition to a decarbonised transport system, maximise economic growth and improve industrial productivity by strengthening travel connections to local, national and international markets".⁷⁰ It is perhaps a little too early to judge how Western Gateway will reconcile the tension between the strong and economic variants of 'sustainability' embedded in these objectives. Any such analysis might find it worth looking in detail at Labour's regional planning authorities in the 1960s, not least because then, as now, the South East Dorset/South West Hampshire conurbation was divided between bodies responsible for south-west and south-east England.

But none of this will count for anything if there is no popular support for environmentally and socially sustainable forms of urban transport. Popular opposition to closing South East Dorset/South West Hampshire's railways was muted and ineffective, partly because of the wider public's enthusiasm for urban automobility. Central governments both reacted to and encouraged this; even at the regional level, Dorset County Council did not wish to see trains replace urban highways and motoring so much as offer a supplementary alternative. Individuals and voluntary organizations who steadfastly argued throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s that urban automobility would prove self-defeating, and that environmentally and socially more sustainable options should be kept open, remained a small, if growing minority. In the long-run, they were (mostly) right: but is the public today fundamentally any less enamoured of the car than in the 1960s?

So here perhaps is the chief role for historians of the usable past: to broad- (and narrow-) cast the stories of imagined futures like those in South East Dorset/South West Hampshire that now, with 50 years' hindsight, seem so desirable but which at the time were a hopelessly lost cause. We all need encouragement to dream, to conjure up futures that seem utopian but might be achievable if we keep imagining, hoping, and acting. The policy vanguard knows this, but the battle for popular opinion and political clout demands stories from the past, even, or perhaps particularly, about 'lost' causes, to help spur fresh thinking about the future. Collectively, we need to re-imagine our relationship to mobility so we can dwell in urban spaces in ways we value and enjoy, partly because they are more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable. This paper does not provide neat answers from the past about how to do this, but suggests that further research might provide a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of how history can help us be more imaginative— not only in thinking about sustainable living but also in how we use stories to help achieve it. While any transition will only be achieved by combining collective politics and personal practice, without the insights of (cultural) history, we make ourselves needlessly short-sighted.

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