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Transport

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

8 December, 1981.

Dear Alice

Thank you for telephoning through the text of a further revision of the proposed amendment to tomorrow's Supply Day Motion on People, Lorries and the Environment.

As I told you on the telephone, the Prime Minister would prefer some revision of the last few lines of the amendment. I enclose a version which incorporates these changes.

The Prime Minister would be content for this version now to be tabled.

I am sending a copy of this letter and its enclosure to Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office) and Nicholas Huxtable (Lord President's Office).

Yours ever

Mike Patten

Mrs. Alice Baker,
Department of Transport.

W. S. J.

DRAFT AMENDMENT TO THE SUPPLY DAY MOTION

People, lorries and the environment

That this House, believing that environmental and social problems arising from heavy lorries must be tackled comprehensively and vigorously and that industry should be helped to keep down transport costs, welcomes the Government's commitment to a continuing and substantial programme of by-pass construction to which further additions are steadily being made and considers that decisions should not be taken on the White Paper until there has been adequate time to consider fully all the measures proposed in the light of consultations on the draft amending regulations published for that purpose.

8 December 1981



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT
2 MARSHAM STREET LONDON SW1P 3EB

Mike Pattison Esq
Private Secretary to
the Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1

7 December 1981

Dear Mike *MA*

I attach a draft of the amendment my Secretary of State proposes to table to the Opposition Motion on "Lorries, People and the Environment" due to be taken at next Wednesday's Supply Day.

Mr Howell realises the amendment is long, but feels strongly that an amendment restating the Government's position in detail, whilst still adopting a neutral line, is necessary if the Government is to command the support of its backbenchers. This message was made to him forcefully when he met both the Transport and elements of the Environment and Industry backbench committees last Thursday evening.

The Secretary of State feels there is much to be said for tabling the amendment today so as to give colleagues time to consider the Government's attitude. With apologies therefore for the short notice I should be grateful if you could let me know today whether the Prime Minister is content with the terms of the amendment.

I am copying this to David Heyhoe in the Lord President's Office and Murdo Maclean in the Chief Whip's Office.

Yours ever
C R Edwards

C R EDWARDS
Private Secretary

DRAFT AMENDMENT

That this House, believing that the environmental and social problems arising from heavy lorries must be tackled comprehensively and vigorously and that industry should be helped to keep down transport costs, welcomes the measures already taken by the Government, including the commitment to a continuing and substantial programme of bypass and motorway construction already in hand, to which further additions are steadily being made, together with the progressive introduction of quieter, cleaner and safer vehicles; notes that local authorities already have extensive power to protect residential and other areas from heavy traffic and welcomes Government encouragement to use these powers and its intention to pursue the proposals in the Armitage Report for "lorry action areas", to strengthen the powers of road haulage operators' licensing authorities and to improve enforcement procedures; notes the intention to introduce new controls to ensure that heavier lorries would be no bigger than present big vehicles; and considers that it should not be rushed into taking a precipitate view on the White Paper 'Lorries, People and the Environment' until there has been adequate time to consider all the measures proposed fully and as a whole and in the light of consultations on the draft amending regulations published for that purpose.

Shaw, Giles (*Pudsey*)
 Shaw, Michael (*Scarborough*)
 Shelton, William (*Streatham*)
 Shepherd, Colin (*Hereford*)
 Shersby, Michael
 Silvester, Fred
 Sims, Roger
 Skeet, T. H. H.
 Smith, Dudley
 Speed, Keith
 Speller, Tony
 Spence, John
 Spicer, Jim (*West Dorset*)
 Spicer, Michael (*S Worcs*)
 Sproat, Iain
 Squire, Robin
 Stainton, Keith
 Stanbrook, Ivor
 Stanley, John
 Steen, Anthony
 Stevens, Martin
 Stewart, A. (*ERenfrewshire*)
 Stewart, Ian (*Hitchin*)
 Stokes, John
 Stradling Thomas, J.
 Tapsell, Peter
 Tebbit, Rt Hon Norman
 Temple-Morris, Peter
 Thatcher, Rt Hon Mrs M.
 Thomas, Rt Hon Peter
 Thompson, Donald
 Thorne, Neil (*Ilford South*)
 Thornton, Malcolm

Townend, John (*Bridlington*)
 Townsend, Cyril D. (*B'heath*)
 van Straubenzee, Sir W.
 Vaughan, Dr Gerard
 Viggers, Peter
 Waddington, David
 Wakeham, John
 Waldegrave, Hon William
 Walker, Rt Hon P. (*W'cester*)
 Walker, B. (*Perth*)
 Walker-Smith, Rt Hon Sir D.
 Wall, Sir Patrick
 Waller, Gary
 Walters, Dennis
 Ward, John
 Warren, Kenneth
 Watson, John
 Wells, Bowen
 Wheeler, John
 Whitelaw, Rt Hon William
 Whitney, Raymond
 Wickenden, Keith
 Wiggin, Jerry
 Wilkinson, John
 Williams, D. (*Montgomery*)
 Winterton, Nicholas
 Wolfson, Mark
 Young, Sir George (*Acton*)
 Younger, Rt Hon George

Tellers for the Noes:
 Mr. Anthony Berry and
 Mr. Robert Boscawen.

Lorries, People and the Environment

Mr. Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.21 pm

Mr. Albert Booth (Barrow-in-Furness): I beg to move,

That this House, believing that the measures proposed in the White Paper "Lorries, People and the Environment" are inadequate to solve the problems of existing heavy lorries, is opposed to any increase in heavy lorry weights.

Few transport issues have aroused such widespread and continuing concern as the proposal to raise the legal limits for the weights of heavy lorries that run on the roads of this country. In view of the previous decision taken by the House on the issue, it is understandable that the Government should have proceeded with considerable caution in their approach to their own proposals. Having set up the Armitage committee, having published its report a year ago and having read carefully, I hope, the 58 recommendations that the committee made, the Government have taken 12 months before putting their proposals in a White Paper and laying it before the House. That is understandable. What is almost impossible to understand is why the White Paper bears only the faintest resemblance to the Armitage proposals.

In a previous debate, I was among those who criticised the Armitage proposals for not going far enough. However, the White Paper contains only the faintest shadow of the safeguards that Armitage proposed. It does not begin to approach what is required to deal with the problems of today's heavy lorries, let alone the heavier lorries that are proposed. It is therefore not surprising that most, if not all, of the major bodies that have made representations to the Government on the issue have expressed their considerable opposition.

The Association of County Councils has expressed considerable disappointment. That puts things mildly. The Association of District Councils has said that the White Paper opens the floodgates to a storm of protest. That reflects the situation more fairly. The Association of Metropolitan Associations has expressed its total rejection of the Government's heavy lorry proposals in the White Paper. Most environmentalist bodies concerned with Armitage are totally dismayed at the proposals in the White Paper. Even the road haulage industry must be embarrassed at the lack of a package that embraces the heavyweight lorry proposal in a defensible way.

I wish to endear myself to hon. Members by giving two assurances. First, I do not intend to speak on each of the 58 recommendations of the Armitage committee. Secondly, I realise that many hon. Members wish to express views. I shall therefore restrict my remarks to a few of the issues. This is not to say that I consider them the only issues or the most important issues. I hope that will be understood.

I wish to deal first with the Government's proposition that heavier lorries will mean fewer lorries. On that, the Government rest a number of their assertions in favour of what they propose. The Government's proposition flies in the face of experience in this country and of the statistical evidence taken by Armitage. In fact, statistical evidence and experience show that each time there has been an increase in the maximum permitted weight of lorries, there

Question accordingly negated.

Question. That the proposed words be there added, put forthwith pursuant to Standing Order No. 32 (*Questions on amendments*), and agreed to.

MR. SPEAKER forthwith declared the main *Question*, as amended, to be agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the progress achieved by Her Majesty's Government in the search for a satisfactory revised Common Fisheries Policy, particularly in relation to conservation and marketing; confirms that such a policy must maintain the need to secure an exclusive 12 mile limit, preference outside 12 miles to protect particularly dependent fishing communities, adequate quotas for the United Kingdom, effective conservation measures and a Community-wide system of enforcement as well as improvements in the marketing arrangements hitherto in force; and urges Her Majesty's Government vigorously to continue, in consultation with the fishing industry, the search for a solution on the outstanding issues.

[Mr. Albert Booth]

has been a big increase in the number of heavy lorries on our roads. I wish to take only three of the most recent and, I think, apposite increases to demonstrate what I say.

In 1955, when the 24-ton lorry was permitted for the first time on our roads, the number of lorries over eight tons unladen weight was 5,000. In 1960 the figure was 11,000. When the 32-ton articulated lorry—the lorry that has given rise to considerable concern—was first allowed on our roads, the number, by the same definition, increased from 24,000 in 1965 to 55,000 in 1970.

The most recent increase of any significance followed the introduction of the 30-ton fixed four-axle lorry in 1972. The number of heavy lorries, by the same definition, was 96,000 in 1975, and that number had increased to 121,000 by 1979. There is no evidence that the increase in the maximum permitted weight will do other than encourage, for understandable reason, those in the road haulage business to go for more freight business. They are able, by virtue of the increased lorry weights, to compete more effectively with the railways, helped by the motorway programme carried out during the period to which I have referred. With each increase in lorry weights, the amount of freight carried by rail, expressed on a tonne mileage basis, has declined both in percentage and absolute terms, whereas the amount carried by lorries on our roads has increased.

In 1953, more freight in ton mileage terms was carried on the railways than was carried by lorries on the roads. By 1979, lorries were carrying five times as much freight in ton mileage terms as the railways. On the evidence available and in the light of experience it is almost impossible to believe that an increase in the permitted weight of lorries, as proposed in the White Paper will mean fewer lorries on the roads. The indications are that there will be more. This affects what the Government—

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Howell): The right hon. Gentleman is dealing with a very important point. I think he said—I hope I do not misrepresent him—that the Armitage report did not support the view that there would be fewer lorries if they were allowed to carry a full load. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman is correct. Paragraph 360 of the report reads:

“Heavier lorries should reduce the total amount of lorry traffic on the roads. If heavier lorries were allowed, the reduction in lorry traffic compared to what the traffic would otherwise be, might be about 450 million—500 million miles by 1990”

Paragraph 361 reads:

“It has been suggested in evidence that allowing heavier lorries might increase lorry traffic, through the attraction of business from competing modes, principally the railways. This is not likely to be very significant.”

All the scientific evidence refutes what the right hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Booth: I agree that this is an important issue. What Armitage said in those chapters contradicts the statistical evidence.

Mr. Howell: The right hon. Gentleman said that Armitage contradicted the proposition that there would be fewer lorries if they were allowed to carry the full load. That is not so. He should withdraw what he said.

Mr. Booth: I shall not withdraw what I said, because the statistical evidence taken by Armitage bears out what

I said. I do not want to waste the time of the House. I shall discuss that matter with the right hon. Gentleman later. However, I assure him that I have checked the figures carefully. If he wants to check them, he should turn to table 4 on page 6. That table shows the actual tonnage by road, rail, coastal shipping, and so on. Table 5 on page 7 shows that 22.8 thousand million-ton miles were carried by rail in 1953 as opposed to 19.7 thousand million-ton miles by road. That bears out my contention. The right hon. Gentleman will see in the same table that in 1979 road was carrying 64 thousand million-ton miles, and rail was carrying only 12.2 thousand million-ton miles. That is exactly what I said—that five times as much freight was carried by road as by rail.

The statistical evidence taken by Armitage bears out exactly what I said. Armitage's assumption about road damage, particularly in a free market as opposed to the Community where there is strict quantity control licensing on heavy lorries, is little more than an assumption and does not relate to the statistical evidence.

Mr. Gary Waller (Brighouse and Spensborough): I do not want to get bogged down in an argument about statistics with the right hon. Gentleman, but he is being selective. Between 1949 and 1979, the number of lorries in Great Britain increased by only 74 per cent., whereas road vehicles generally increased by 500 per cent. Can he explain that other than that there was a trend towards heavier lorries, which reduced the number on the roads?

Mr. Booth: The hon. Member for Brighouse and Spensborough (Mr. Waller) is being selective. If he is talking about the total number of vehicles, including cars, over the past decade, there has been a greater increase in the number of lorries of three axles or more than in the number of cars. If he is talking about heavy lorries, I must point out that that my definition was 8 tons unladen weight. If he is talking of lower weights, he will find that, even at the lowest weights taken by Armitage, an enormous increase in the number of the heaviest lorries is needed before there is any fall-off in the number of smaller lorries.

I am not being selective. Experience in this country has shown that the railways have lost freight in absolute and percentage terms to roads as we have increased lorry weights and built motorways. That is not being selective; that is reality. That is the experience of this country.

Mrs. Elaine Kellett-Bowman (Lancaster): Would the right hon. Gentleman read table 32, which deals with the estimated number of heavier lorries?

Mr. Booth: I have read the estimated number. I have also read—the hon. Lady does not appear to have done so—the actual number of lorries in Armitage and the actual number of goods vehicles. Table 1 on page 5 shows that the number of lorries of over 8 tons unladen weight has risen consistently from 1946 to 1979. The number of lorries “not over 1½ tons” has also risen consistently during that period. It is only the small category of lorries of unladen weight between 1½ tons and 3 tons that has shown any sign of decline, and that only during the past five years. The hon. Lady should listen to what I say if she wishes to take part in the argument. The actual numbers, as opposed to the estimates support my contention.

That is important, although not conclusive, to the Government's argument about road damage. The

Government claim that road damage would be reduced by the introduction of heavier lorries. Again, that statement needs to be questioned against evidence and experience. To be fair, the Government say that, although some of the lorries that they are proposing are more damaging, the fact that the number would come down pro rata to the increase in their permitted payload would more than offset the increased damage caused by those lorries.

Mr. Peter Fry (Wellingborough): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that in the evidence given to the Select Committee on Transport, Sir Henry Chilver, the vice-chancellor of the Cranfield Institute of Technology, said "if we move into the heavier lorries, we would indeed, if we transferred goods to the heavier lorries, do less damage"? Does the right hon. Gentleman accept the opinion of one of the leading experts on this subject in the country?

Mr. Booth: That is a highly selective quotation, if the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Fry) will allow me to say so. The overwhelming bulk of qualified technical opinion is that the damage that an individual lorry does tends to rise with the sum of the fourth power of its axle weights. Whether the bigger lorry does more or less damage depends on the axle weights and how many there are.

Armitage said that 90 per cent. of the damage to our roads was done by the heavy lorry. If the statistical evidence supports the idea that there will be more larger lorries on the roads, there will be even more damage.

Let us suppose that the Government are right and that the number of lorries drops in strict proportion to their increase in payload. If the operators of the 32.5-ton gross weight lorry, which will be allowed under the Government's proposals to run at 40 tons, say "We do not need so many lorries now. We shall scrap a number pro rata, and run the remaining number on our roads at 40 tons", they will still do 15 per cent. more damage, according to the calculation in the Armitage report. The reason includes the fact that the Government are proposing that most of the new lorries will be allowed to have two or more axles at heavier weights. The right hon. Gentleman shakes his head. He cannot have read the Armitage report if he does not accept that the 34-ton lorry that he proposes has a higher damage and standard axle number than the existing 32.5-ton lorry.

The Government are proposing that every axle weight on a 32.5-ton lorry should be allowed to be more heavily loaded. That is bound to do more damage. It is proposed that the 38-tonners should have higher steering and drive axle weights than the 32.5-tonners.

The right hon. Gentleman proposes a 40-ton vehicle. According to the Armitage test, the lorry proposed by the right hon. Gentleman does the least damage to our roads. Again according to the Armitage test, it would do less damage than some existing lorries. However, it would still do more damage than the 44-ton lorry. That lorry will be allowed to run with a higher steering axle weight and higher semi-trailer axle weight than the existing 32.5-ton lorry. The White Paper, in paragraph 25, states: "people wrongly believe that there are plans afoot to make lorries even bigger."

In addition, in paragraph 30, it states:

"It is essential to ensure that heavier lorries can be no bigger than the biggest lorries we have at present."

Why does the Secretary of State contradict himself? In the same paragraph as he says that it is essential that lorries should not be any bigger, he states:

"The Government also proposes to increase the legal limit on articulated vehicle length to 15.5 metres".

Therefore, there is no doubt that an increase in vehicle dimensions is being proposed for articulated vehicles.

There are two other proposals in the White Paper that will also result in bigger vehicles on the roads. First, I refer to the increase in specialised vehicles. At present, they are built to limits appropriate to the loads that they carry. A petrol tanker is a good example. Today, the petrol tank is built to carry a payload that brings the vehicle's total weight to 32.5 tons. However, if the Government's proposals are carried, petrol tankers will have tanks that are big enough to carry a payload that will bring the total gross lorry weight to 40 tons—if it is a two-drive axle lorry—or to 38 tons, if it is a single drive axle lorry. Therefore, there will be bigger lorries.

I am even more concerned that the proposed increase in weight will act as an incentive towards using many more trailer combinations on our roads. Those combinations are undoubtedly longer. We do not see many on British roads, but they are on the roads in Germany and other countries and they are considerably bigger than our biggest articulated wagons. They are longer by an amount that is greater than my height and I am not the shortest Member of Parliament. Therefore, the lorries will be far too big for many of our roads, which are unsuitable even for existing lorries and were never designed to take 40-ton lorries.

The White Paper claims that we should accept heavier lorries because the Government have a trunk road programme that gives high priority to bypasses. Of course, bypasses relieve some of the most serious effects of heavy lorries. If that claim were borne out, several people might be influenced. The Government's evidence to the Armitage committee was that 400 additional bypasses were required. That was a conservative estimate in both senses of the word. The County Surveyors Society said that 600 or more additional bypasses were justified on economic grounds alone.

The truth is that only 21 bypasses are under construction. The White Paper brings forward a further 11 bypasses for construction. That will leave 31 of the bypasses in the suspended list. I hope that the Secretary of State will bear in mind that that includes the Dalton bypass on the A590 in my constituency. Indeed, that is a classic example of a road that is unsuitable for 40-ton lorries. The programme will leave 32 of the bypasses in the 1984 onward reserve list and 37 that will not start before 1984. The road haulage industry regards that as part of an inadequate road programme. The British Road Federation contends that road construction is now half what it was 10 years ago. Traffic, particularly heavy lorry traffic, has increased during that period.

I was interested to note the question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport (Mr. Hughes), which was answered on 30 November in col. 46 of *Hansard*. It gave the Government's estimate of the amount of new road to be opened next year. The question reveals that the Government's estimate is that only 39 miles of new motorway and trunk road will be opened next year. In 1978, 87 miles were opened. In fairness to the Government and their predecessors, I should add that 264 miles were opened in 1971.

The Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. Kenneth Clarke): Of course, 1971 was some time ago. The right hon. Gentleman complains about the low

[Mr. Kenneth Clarke]

mileage figures for next year. Will he look, in the same answer, at the number of miles to be opened in 1983? The right hon. Gentleman will find that a dramatic increase is expected, over and above any of the mileages achieved under the last years of the Labour Government.

Mr. Booth: I could point to dramatic increases in mileage under the Labour Government. I cited 1982, because presumably that is the year that the Government have in mind for the introduction of heavier lorries. They intend to introduce such lorries although they are cutting expenditure on trunk road construction. Within a total transport expenditure cut of £220 million, at 1979 survey prices—I cite the Government's estimates for expenditure—they are cutting trunk road construction.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for having given way yet again. I shall not intervene again in his speech. However, he knows that we are reducing expenditure only because we are getting a better bargain for the taxpayer, because contract prices are lower than forecast. Will the right hon. Gentleman concede that we are delivering the trunk road programme in full? As he has got the answer in front of him, will he give the mileage for 1983 and compare it with the mileages under the last years of the Labour Government? In 1983 there will be a dramatic increase in the mileage of new roads to be opened. That undermines the point that the right hon. Gentleman was trying to make by saying that we are failing to deliver the bypasses.

Mr. Booth: I have not got the answer in front of me, but I read it carefully before attending the debate. I chose 1982, because that programme was entirely within the Government's control. If I had chosen the programmes for 1981, 1980 or 1979, some of the roads opened would have been begun under the Labour Government. Equally, if I had chosen 1975, some of the roads would have been started under a Labour Government. I chose a year that seemed appropriate. I listened with great interest to the Under-Secretary of State when he said that there had been a cut in expenditure because we were getting better value for money. That is a nice change in defensive argument. Not long ago we were told that the Department of Transport's budget was being cut because the Government—reasonably, from their point of view—expected the Department to make some contributions to public expenditure savings. If such cuts have been made to achieve better value for money, it makes a delightful change of tune.

Generally, the White Paper pays little regard to Armitage's serious proposals about how to deal with the problems of heavy lorries. It offers a reduction in lorry noise that will be barely detectable to the human ear and that is to be introduced by means of regulations that will come into force in 1983. It offers further reduction which might be brought about in the future by collaborative research and development. It does virtually nothing more to deal with the problems of ground vibration, fumes and safety standards, on which it is particularly non-committal.

The White Paper appears to deny the evidence of water and gas boards and local authorities that heavy goods vehicles are damaging to our cities' underground services. That is particularly noteworthy as Manchester has just

produced direct evidence that when heavy vehicles were re-routed underground services suffered enormous damage on the new routes.

The White Paper dismisses as insignificant the effect of heavy lorries on bridges, in spite of the fact that the Institution of Highway Engineers says that we shall probably have to spend another £100 million on improvements to cope with the proposals.

One of the clearest signs that the Government are backing away from the serious issues that heavy lorries raise is their failure to make any proposals for more effective control of operators and more effective enforcement of lorry weights. Illegal running and overloading are serious problems. With the introduction of heavier lorries, even the displacement of a metre either way can make a significant difference to axle loading and damage to the roads. The Government have no proposals for the adequate staffing of enforcement bodies. They do not propose a programme of dynamic weigh bridges which will be needed to check the heavier lorries.

If the Government seriously believe that little can be done to reduce the harmful effects of heavier lorries, the White Paper is at least honest. Any Armitage recommendations that the Government do not ignore are confined to further research and investigation. The recommendations that they accept can be delivered in only a few cases because the resources are not to be made available. The Government are vague about what should be studied and what should be discussed.

In only one area is the White Paper hard and fast and crystal clear in its recommendations—where it proposes the increase in heavy lorry weights. It is so clear about that that the Government have already published for consultation their draft regulations to introduce the increases in weights under the construction and use regulations.

Heavy lorries are seen by most who suffer from them as vehicles which produce intolerable noise, fumes, vibration damage and congestion. Hon. Members know, from the Government's response in the White Paper, that it will be a long time before there is any improvement. We cannot do much to deal with that, but we can do something to ensure that in the meantime conditions do not become much worse. We should vote for the motion.

7.53 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr. David Howell): I beg to move, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof:

'this House, believing that environmental and social problems arising from heavy lorries must be tackled comprehensively and vigorously and that industry should be helped to keep down transport costs, welcomes the Government's commitment to a continuing and substantial programme of by-pass construction to which further additions are steadily being made, and considers that decisions should not be taken on the White Paper until there has been adequate time to consider fully all the measures proposed in the light of consultations on the draft amending Regulations published for that purpose.'

I am glad to have the opportunity of setting out in more detail the proposals in the Government's White Paper for grappling with the heavy lorry problem. I shall deal with some of the arguments expressed by the right hon. Member for Barrow-in-Furness (Mr. Booth). I find less attractive the Opposition's attempt to bounce us into decisions on a White Paper that the right hon. Gentleman has recognised involves matters of great complexity that deserve careful discussion.