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CABINET

MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC STRATEGY

HEAVIER LORRIES: THE ARMITAGE REPORT

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Transport

1. An efficient and competitive freight transport industry is vital to the whole economy. Whilst rail will continue to have an important role to play within the national transport system, there can be no turning back from our massive reliance on road transport, and in particular on the big lorries that now account for over half the freight movement. But the general public dislike of "juggernauts" is real and entirely understandable. I believe we should tackle the economic and environmental issues simultaneously with a set of measures which I can say will achieve within a practicable time-scale a more efficient and competitive road haulage industry operating fewer and progressively quieter and cleaner lorries, running on roads which will skirt round an increasing number of towns and villages. I want to make a start on this right away because delay will do nothing to help either the economic or the environmental problems that are with us here and now. This will require a package of measures the elements of which are set out below.

Lorry Weights

2. The Sub-Committee on Economic Affairs has considered my predecessor's proposals for increasing maximum lorry weights from 32.5 tonnes to 40 tonnes, along with a number of other measures, in response to the recommendations of the Armitage Report on Lorries, People and the Environment. They recognised the strength of the economic case for such increases which, by allowing industry to use lorries more productively, would bring total savings estimated at around £150m a year. It would be one of the few measures the Government could take to help industry significantly without incurring any further public expenditure.

3. What makes the expensive heavier lorries economically worthwhile, and why industry is pressing so strongly for them, is that with each vehicle carrying a greater load fewer of them would be needed. The TGWU has seized on this point because it would mean fewer drivers. Research by the Transport and Road Research Laboratory has indicated that with an upper limit of 40 tonnes there would be a reduction of 11% in the number of heavy articulated vehicles. This would be an important public gain which I would want to emphasise in any announcement. I would also stress that new controls on lorry size would ensure that the heavier vehicles would be no bigger than big lorries are at present. And - as my predecessor recommended to colleagues in B(EA) - I would make it clear - if colleagues agree - that we are rejecting the 34 tonne vehicle on 4 axles recommended by Armitage, and requiring all vehicles above our present 32.5 tonne limit to have a fifth axle, to secure a substantial reduction in road damage. There would be further technical safeguards to protect bridges and underground services, and to ensure that the heavier lorries would be no worse than existing vehicles in respect of noise, vibration, pollution or road safety.

4. All this would show the Government's determination to take environmental considerations into account in its decisions on weights.

Roads

5. There is no doubt that the provision of new roads to take lorries out of our towns and villages is seen by any of our supporters as the key requirement for dealing with lorries. I agree. As Armitage recognised, my existing trunk road programme is entirely in line with this objective and includes many schemes taking traffic out of historic towns and villages. The real issue is the pace of the programme. In present economic circumstances we cannot do all we would wish, but we have done and are doing a great deal for which we can take credit. Even within existing resources my predecessor had already found it possible to add four schemes on which I hope we can make a start in 1982, including one major by-pass to which Sir Arthur Armitage drew specific attention. In selecting schemes to go forward great weight is already attached to the environmental benefits they bring. Looking further ahead, I propose to promote several highly desirable by-passes now in the Reserve List to the main programme (which will not in practice increase the demand on resources), and to add three or four other small ones. Taken together with the real progress currently being made on our existing programme, this gives us a good story to tell.

Noise and Pollution

6. There has been some improvement in lorry noise and pollution which will be reinforced by regulations coming into force in 1983. But Armitage recommended a much tougher programme of reductions in this key area. It would mean progressively reducing the perceived noise from new heavy lorries coming onto the road to less than half the 1981 level, so that by 1990 they would be no noisier than most 1981 new model cars. I believe that we should commit ourselves to a reduction of this order in the European discussions which are about to begin. Consultations with the UK industry have indicated that it is an achievable target, given the necessary effort and R & D backing. But in acting firmly to show our determination to reduce lorry noise at source, we must also ensure that our industry will be at least as well placed as their competitors in meeting this major technical challenge.

7. What I propose is a collaborative programme of research and development involving vehicle and engine manufacturers. It would take in not simply noise, but also ways of making heavy lorries more acceptable by improving smoke emissions and general safety standards. It would look particularly at technical ways of developing quieter and cleaner vehicles, and also at the possibility of developing even better engines and vehicles towards the end of the century. There might also be one or two demonstration projects. Discussions between officials in my Department and the Departments of Industry, Energy and Environment have suggested that in principle it would be feasible to re-order existing programmes of R & D within existing overall budgets. If colleagues think that this would be a useful part of our response to Armitage I will put detailed proposals on this to the colleagues concerned very shortly.

Transfer of Freight to Rail and Waterways

8. There is general support on both sides of the House for the grants which are available to assist the railways to take freight traffic off the roads under Section 8 of the 1974 Railways Act. We can take credit for having already extended this type of grant to inland waterways in the new Transport Act. And I propose also to increase the maximum rate of grant from 50% to 60%, retaining flexibility to pay smaller grants in appropriate circumstances, without altering the character of the grant but it may become increasingly difficult, within the public expenditure constraints, to sustain our present policy that no acceptable case will be refused.

Lorries on the Road

9. Controls over the routeing of lorries can have a useful effect on the environment locally. They require careful planning to avoid merely shifting the nuisance from one place to another, and I agree with Armitage's view that local authorities have in general exercised their extensive powers, which they have had for many years, responsibly. As the scope for diverting lorry traffic is often limited, Armitage proposed that some of the worst affected places could be designated as "lorry action areas" in which special steps might be taken (eg the provision of double glazing) to alleviate the effects of lorries. Cost must be a major obstacle to anything like this. But it is well worth exploring and I propose with the Secretary of State for the Environment to invite the co-operation of the local authorities and the Civic Trust in studying it further (perhaps leading to a pilot project).

Operators' Licensing

10. A measure to strengthen the licensing authorities' powers regarding the environmental suitability of the place from which vehicles are operated would be welcomed. I have not been able to fit this into either of the two Bills I am planning for next session, but it would be a suitable subject for a Private Members Bill and I am pursuing this possibility.

Taxation of Lorries

11. We have already taken steps in the new Transport Act to enable the Chancellor to ensure that each category of heavy lorry pays in taxation the full track costs attributed to it. These changes will put competition with railways on a fairer basis.

Other measures

12. In a comprehensive statement on Armitage I would also need to respond to other recommendations on a great variety of subjects, including the development of techniques for measuring the environmental impact of lorries on people and buildings; the methods for assessing road track costs; encouragement of local authorities to use planning powers and controls over lorry parking more effectively - particularly in inner urban areas; enforcement techniques; roadside enforcement checks to deal severely with excessive smoke and overloading; the development of standards to control vibration; and lorry speed limits.

Looking The Next Steps

14. The decision between the conflicting industrial and environmental views on lorry weights is a difficult matter of political judgement. I believe it will be necessary to reach a decision in time for an announcement very soon after the recess if we are to keep the political initiative in our hands. Otherwise the Opposition could well table another critical motion in the House. There will also be resumed discussion in Brussels of the European Commission's proposals which have now been modified to agree with the European Parliament's recommended 40 tonne maximum limit. And I am under increasing pressure from industry for an early decision to end the uncertainty which is inhibiting new investment and to show that the Government means business when it talks about wanting to help industry.

15. The Select Committee on Transport recommended that the Government should make a full statement of their intentions in respect of the Armitage recommendations as a whole and that more than the usual time should be made available to the House to debate any amending regulations to increase maximum lorry weights. The Government has accepted those recommendations and my predecessor told the House it is our intention to publish a statement setting out our response to the Report as a whole. I suggest that a short White Paper would be appropriate for this purpose. Simultaneously I would publish draft amending regulations on weights and dimensions and invite comments from organisations concerned, as required under the Road Traffic Act. This would pave the way for the promised Bill debate in February or March.

RECOMMENDATION

15. I invite my colleagues to agree that I should now proceed with the preparation of a comprehensive statement, in the form of a White Paper, accepting the case for increasing maximum lorry weights up to 40 tonnes on 5 axles, as recommended by Armitage, and as part of a package of measures outlined above with the broad objectives I have indicated.

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