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London Report: The struggle between highways and railways

The *Sunday Times* recently leaked a word of a secret Government study suggesting that British rail mileage be cut from 11,000 to 7,000. The Government's response has been to sic Scotland Yard onto the *Sunday Times* and the *Railway Gazette*, to find the culprit responsible for the leak. These shenanigans have, in turn, led to editorial fury, and questions in Parliament. This latest incident has also added considerable heat to the debate over the relative importance to be given highways and railways in Britain's transport system.

In Britain, freight-carrying trucks are called "lorries"; the big ones, especially semi-trailers, are called "heavy lorries." Recently they have been called a good many other things, mostly uncomplimentary. The Road Haulage Association, the British highway transport industry organization, has been for some time demanding a relaxation of British restrictions on the weight and size of heavy lorries. Such a relaxation would worsen the financial condition of the country's publicly owned railroad system by further encouraging the diversion of freight from rails to trucks. Two years ago, at the end of European Conservation Year, the newly-fledged Department of the Environment handed down a decision widely hailed as its first major stand on behalf of the environment. Despite vigorous urging from the road hauliers, the Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Walker, decreed that the weight limit of 32 tons for heavy lorries would remain in effect, as would the axle-weight limit of 10 tons.

His decision was certainly supported, if not indeed prompted, by a splendid report prepared by the Civic Trust, a national environmental organization of high standing. The Trust pointed out that the narrow streets and old buildings - some of great beauty, and most of them still fully inhabited - of Britain's villages and towns are already being shaken to pieces under the onslaught of the currently-permitted lorries, to say nothing of the traffic congestion and gradual strangulation in which the lorries were a major factor. What was needed, if anything, was a tightening of restrictions, not a loosening. The Trust, and their many allies, did not get their tightened restrictions. But neither did the road hauliers get their go-ahead: not, that is, until Britain's entry to the European Economic Community - the Common Market - became imminent.

At the last minute the lorry-opponents realized that, when Britain was a member of the EEC, the EEC limits on lorry-weights would willy-nilly apply in Britain. And these draft EEC limits - of the order of 40 tons total weight and 11 tons axle-weight - were substantially higher than those which Mr Walker had earlier refused to raise. A cry went up on all sides. Village and town-dwellers in their local amenity organizations, national conservation and environmental groups and - most particularly - the national newspapers seized the subject. Mr John Peyton, Minister of Transport in the Department of the Environment, found himself with more support than he could handle. In Parliament he underlined the Government's commitment to British weight-restrictions, but pointed out despairingly that the EEC limits were themselves the result of a decade of hard bargaining. It would ill become Britain, as a newcomer, to challenge a consensus so long in the making. The EEC limits were themselves not yet finalized; France, on behalf of the huge French lorry-manufacturers Berliet, was insisting on higher limits, and a decision was expected shortly. The most Mr Peyton could offer was the fervent plea that the original six EEC countries, as a matter of diplomatic courtesy, hold off ratification of the lorry-weight limits until after Britain had entered membership on 1 January 1973.

This has not satisfied the British public. Virtually every day one or another national newspaper returns to the fray; even the *Financial Times*, generally attuned to the sensibilities of industry and

commerce, has been doubtful about the higher limits. An ironic twist was added when Prime Minister Edward Heath, caught in a traffic jam in Whitehall, had to walk 400 yards through the rain. In his wrath he ordered a phone call to Sir Desmond Plummer, the head of the Greater London Council, at the time attending the World Cities Conference in Tokyo. The repercussions of this episode are still being felt; one of them is to be a ban on large lorries entering a central area of London. Meanwhile, the Department of the Environment talks about a countrywide system of road-routes especially for heavy lorries. But more than a few voices are now directing attention to the network already there: the railways, which the Government has been studying ways of truncating.