Reviving Britain’s Railways
Written by Elizabeth Anderson
About the Bow Group

Founded in 1951, the Bow Group is the oldest conservative think tank in the UK and exists to publish the research of its members, stimulate policy debate through an events programme and to provide an intellectual home to conservatives.

Although firmly housed in the Conservative family, the Bow Group does not take a corporate view and it represents all strands of conservative opinion. The Rt Hon Lord Howe of Aberavon Kt CH QC PC is a former Chairman and current Senior Patron.
From Bolton to Bury, or Stratford-upon-Avon to Bedford, the country is criss-crossed by miles of idle railway track just waiting to be brought back into use. At a time when our trains are packed to capacity, and often delayed due to congestion, and with funding being targeted to only the most major projects, is it not worth considering investment in smaller, high-impact schemes which could transform transport for people across the country?
Introduction

Anyone who travels by train on a regular basis, especially for their daily commute, will have experienced the overcrowding and poor service that characterises some of our most used rail networks. There were 1.5 billion journeys made in Britain in 2012/13 – a figure that is rising every year.

With so many users using the rail network largely to commute to work, investment is key. Yet a project inherited from the Labour government has dominated rail policy. That project is High Speed 2, a project previously looked at thoroughly by the Bow Group, and costing — depending on whom you listen to — anything up to £80bn. Then the next stage will be High Speed 3, for the North.

These are massive sums. The main focus of High Speed 2 is to take cities, which are already linked, and make those links faster. This ignores the fact that fleets of trains which travel at far faster speeds are being developed all the time, therefore the net saving in minutes will be lower than currently anticipated. It does nothing whatsoever to create new links, and it doesn’t tackle some of the greatest congestion in the UK, which is around London and the South East.

But potentially, there is an alternative investment proposition. Instead of building new lines to already well-connected cities, where new, fast-travelling rolling stock is imminent, concentrate on reviving old rail lines closed down in the Early 20th Century.
Lack of Connections

Dr Richard Beeching’s infamous report, Reshaping Britain’s Railways, published in 1963, led to 30% of rail track being closed. The future focus of travel, Dr Beeching believed, was on road travel rather than rail. A few decades after the new train tracks had been cut across the country as part of a rail revolution, those newly linked towns and cities were once again isolated, with funding instead focused on the major motorways. Over fifty years on, most of those lines that were abandoned have remained so, with the only method of transportation available for many communities being by car or infrequent bus services.

A 2012 report by the Campaign for Better Transport set out the case for reopening railways, including a range of economic benefits it would bring to those areas which remain off the rail network. Interestingly, their report highlights that the rail network is at its busiest now since the 1920’s, but with a network that is smaller than it was 95 years ago.

Lack of public transport infrastructure can lead to a range of issues – being able to move people around is key. With unemployment still high, the ability for enabling people to travel for work is vital. Pressure on school places means that children and young people need to be able to access educational facilities, and families need to be able to access healthcare. We live in a global society – but one where residents in many town and cities across Britain have many miles to travel to reach their nearest train station. For households with no car, that can be a challenge.

A successful example of filling a gap is the Waverley Line, formerly from Edinburgh to Carlisle. The line provided much needed public transport through Scottish Border Country. Having been closed by Beeching, for decades the only way to access the
many towns and villages existing between the East or West Coast routes was a long, slow journey on a single decker bus – not the most practical solution to access education or healthcare, let alone employment. Not to slight that bus service, it was a lifeline for those living on or near its route, but the rackety journey in the depths of winter was hardly a relaxing experience.

September 2015 will see the partial re-opening of that line, from Tweedbank to Edinburgh, in a £294m scheme from the Scottish Government that will transform the opportunities for communities along that route, and towns and villages across the area which can access the newly reopened stations. An integrated approach to transport has ensured that the first train from Tweedbank reaches Edinburgh in time for the first East Coast train to London.

600,000 journeys per year are expected to take place. And in the best tradition of the railways, 4,000 new homes (complete with a new school) will be created at Shawfair – a new community growing up around a new station. The economic certainty that comes from a new rail link is great, and can provide much needed economic development – leading to homes and jobs.

Most importantly, reopening railways does not cost a huge sum. £294m for a new line transforming access for isolated rural communities could be considered much better value than £80bn for High Speed 2. Nor does it involve cutting through greenbelt land, as the tracks are already there.

Back in 2009, the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) undertook research to ascertain whether reopening of lines could be feasible. They found that the answer was yes. Their report, Connecting Communities, found 14 highly possible potential schemes with a positive benefit to cost ratio, which between them would
link more than 750,000 additional people across Britain to the rail network. They also found many additional schemes, which had potential, but did not provide that first-time linkage to the network – such schemes included routes that would open new East-West corridors across the country, and relieve pressure on freight transport around the Capital.

Despite having the support of the rail operators, ATOC were not able to drive this forward. With an election looming close, the recommendations were not picked up on by the Labour government of the time, and the report was quickly forgotten.

Alleviating Congestion and Creating New Capacity

Of course, sometimes, you don’t just need new links, you need additional capacity on existing rail links. But this can also be achieved through the use of existing lines.

In January 2015, information from Southern, the rail operator covering key stations for commuters from the Central South Coast into London, led to reports that the worst train service in Britain is the 07.29 from Brighton to London. In the previous year, that train service had not set off on time on even one morning. Quite a track record.

The response from the rail operator was the particularly bad congestion on that line. When it does finally set off, the train is packed – and sadly it is not just that train, but also the rush hour services in general. Commuters are crammed together as they battle to get to work in the capital. However, by coincidence, a parallel line used to run from London to Brighton – and whilst it now ends part way through Sussex, £350m would see the Wealden Line revived and the opening of Brighton Main Line 2. That would be the type of investment which would alleviate the woes of many commuters from
Brighton to London, opening up rail capacity, and providing an effective service which could be fit for the future.

The suggested overall project for the Wealden Line would even go further. As well as the Brighton Main Line 2, the campaign group behind the proposals would see a branch connection to Tunbridge Wells, and the opening of smaller lines in South London. The scheme, which has been supported by the Brighton & Hove Conservative Group Leader and local Conservative MP Simon Kirby, could transform rail travel across Sussex. It could also begin to address some of the connectivity issues which make travel a logistical challenge if trying to reach a station on a different main route, without travelling to London and back out again.

Our major towns will continue to grow, and in the South East, many people commute to London. With population growth showing no sign of slowing down, the issue of overcrowded trains on over-congested rail lines will not go away by itself. In March 2015, Southeastern released a traffic-light guide to its busiest trains, suggesting that commuters take earlier or later services. But this is not a sustainable solution to rail travel in the UK.
**Why hasn’t this taken off?**

With examples of success, a clear need in some areas, and miles of track that could be brought back into use, it’s fair to wonder why tracks aren’t reopening all over the country at speed. After all, infrastructure spending by the Coalition Government was put on hold for a short while after the 2010 General Election, but major schemes are now back on the table and moving ahead.

In part, this is because there is not a national focus on the issue. There are a few examples of reopened lines, and where these have happened, they are successful. But the focus is on upgrading existing infrastructure, not bringing tracks back into use. The Reopening Railways report from the Campaign for Better Transport, offers some explanation. Local authorities in some areas have promoted the cause, but local councils lack the funds to be able to drive such change, even when they come together as a consortium.

As well as cash sums required, the logistics of merging the flow of trains from a re-opened line into existing timetables is a large job in itself. There is no national technical resource that can assist with the massive job of such a plan, and no national benchmark to estimate the benefits and users of any reopening rail line – merely the users of existing provision.

As stated at the beginning of this report, the focus of spending on rail infrastructure on a national basis has been on High Speed rail, and Crossrail in London. These schemes have been the flagship schemes of two successive administrations, at a time of recession. But with a growing economy, it is time to take a fresh look at the rail network.
Conclusion

The slow uptake on reopening railways is not due to lack of need, or lack of potential. A means of developing a more robust rail network with capacity for future growth has, in many cases, already been laid. The tracks are there, and tunnels are there. They need to be brought back into use, with rolling stock and stations to reconnect towns and villages to the rail network, to create better connections between towns, and to put people back on the map so that they can access jobs and key facilities.

The country was in recession when the Conservative-led coalition government came into power, and cuts have been deep in public spending, through need. But with infrastructure spending back on the agenda, it is important to ensure that some of it is directed to abandoned lines. Rather than creating new tracks, there is a greater value in using existing routes – where in many cases some existing infrastructure will be of a high enough standard to bring up to scratch and continue to use. For example, the Manchester to Sheffield line, closed in 1981, sees a perfectly fit for purpose tunnel under the Woodhead Pass waiting to be used again.

Whilst the sums involved in bringing lines back into use are not insignificant, they are considerably lower than the huge spending planned for High Speed 2 – a project for which accurate figures cannot be produced due to the complexities involved.
The Bow Group recommends that:

1. A Minister at the Department for Transport is given a remit to specifically cover the reopening of railway lines.

2. Working with rail operators and community groups, a framework is put in place to allow for the evaluation of closed routes, using the experience and evaluation of ATOC.

3. The potential for privately funded schemes is explored, as a solution to provide match-funding for revived links.

4. Transport infrastructure spending is partially redirected to reopening rail lines, with a fund established for a competitive bidding process for reopened lines. Bids would be marked on the feasibility, the economic value, and the number of people benefitted in a clear way.
References


2. IEA estimates HS2 will cost £80 billion: http://www.iea.org.uk/in-the-media/media-coverage/iea-estimates-hs2-will-cost-%C2%A380-billion


6. Britain’s worst train service: Southern’s 7.29 Brighton to London train was late every day for a year, The Telegraph: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/road-and-rail-transport/11339623/Britains-worst-train-service-Southerns-7.29-Brightonto-London-train-was-late-every-day-for-a-year.html

7. This rail fiasco has a solution that’s staring us in the face: Michael Williams believes reopening disused lines could be the answer, Daily Mail: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2889581/This-rail-fiasco-solution-s-staring-face-MICHAEL-WILLIAMS-believes-reopening-disused-lines-answer.html


9. How busy is your train? http://www.southeasternrailway.co.uk/your-journey/your-journey/how-busy-is-your-train/