

WESTMINSTER

Awaiting the Tunnel

Moving the second reading of a British Railways Bill, Neil Thorne (C, Ilford South), said on 16 JULY that the object was to add to the capacity of the railway system. "The year 1993 offers unprecedented opportunities and the Channel Tunnel will be ready to open."

The Bill would connect the proposed Ashford International Station with the existing Channel Tunnel route and provide for three new freight loops in Kent. Powers were being proposed to provide for the construction of a railway connection to the proposed International Station at Ashford, providing easy access from Kent and Sussex to mainland Europe, without a journey into London. Mr Thorne added that the introduction of the Network Express for Kent Coast services and the proposed electrification of the line between Ashford and Hastings would ensure continuing improvements to the benefits that the station would provide. The building of the Channel Tunnel and the single European market would lead initially to a growth in freight equivalent to about 400,000 lorry movements a year - or up to 1,500 lorry loads each day off the already heavily congested roads of Kent.

Growth of freight traffic raised the issue of noise. The use of new electric rather than diesel locomotives would make a major contribution to noise reduction for residents living close to the line and the people of Kent would welcome the change.

Waking up late

Brian Wilson (Lab, Cunninghame North) said that people in other parts of the country might be waking up pretty late to neglecting the debate in the south east of England, while the rest of the country was in danger of losing the benefits of the Channel Tunnel.

"At this late stage, no direct route has yet been designated between the Tunnel and London - never mind further north. No station in London has yet been designated in the long term; still no approval for

King's Cross. We have no freight depots designated in Scotland for the Channel Tunnel.

"The Tunnel is potentially a wonderful project, yet on this side of the Channel we have got bogged down in local difficulties in the south east. Let us get the routes built, the lines designated, the infrastructure in place, so that when the Tunnel opens we have a realistic prospect to maximise the benefit for the whole country."

Compensation, Yes?

Sir John Stanley (C, Tonbridge & Malling) asked what was the responsibility of British Rail to those whose homes were depreciated in value due to noise from railway works. The answer appeared to be that where BR proposed to construct a new line or a piece of new line, it accepted an obligation to buy the worst affected houses and to pay compensation under the Land Compensation Act in respect of less seriously affected houses.

However, where no new line will be constructed, although major railway works of another sort may take place, BR seems unwilling to compensate.

"Consider the impact of that policy with regard to passing loops at Borough Green in my constituency and elsewhere in Kent. In respect of the section of line opposite the passing loop, no compensation will be paid, but the moment the newly constructed passing loop splits off, compensation becomes payable."

According to British Rail, train noise approximates to car and lorry noise, and it is therefore choosing to adopt the Land Compensation Act which entitles those living along large sections of the line to make a claim.

The position with regard to Channel Tunnel trains was unique. In terms of its magnitude and intensity, the development was without parallel elsewhere in the country. "I do not believe there has ever been a project with such a significant number of homes faced with destruction or large scale erosion as a result of railways works of this magnitude."

It was wrong, as a matter of principle, that people should have

the value of their main asset destroyed, or largely destroyed, as a result of the public interest in improving our communications.

Rise in noise level

Roger Sims (C, Chislehurst) said the point had not been denied that there would be a substantial increase in noise levels once the Channel Tunnel opens. What assurance was there about the effect of that increased noise? It was incumbent on BR to provide forms of environmental protection to ensure that residents close to the line would not be adversely affected and, where that is not possible, to ensure that those people are adequately compensated. BR said it had given assurances that if noise insulation regulations are made applicable to new railways, then these regulations applied also to the alteration of existing railways.

That sounded all right in principle, but there was a saving grace: if BR was required by law to pay compensation it would do so, but if it was not so required, presumably it would not pay it.

Ideally, undertakings should be written into the Bill to deal with noise protection and, where that was not possible, there should be compensation. If that was not written on the face of the Bill, said Mr Sims, he wanted cast-iron assurances about exactly what BR was proposing to do in the circumstances described.

"I have files of letters from constituents who are anxious to go away on retirement but who are unable to do so and many more from people who prefer to stay in their own homes and who knew, when they bought the properties, that there was a railway at the bottom of the garden. They expected to have trains running along it, but they did not know, they could not have visualised, the enormous increase in traffic that would be the inevitable result of the line being used by Channel Tunnel traffic."

"Neither I nor my constituents are being unreasonable. We can hardly be expected to welcome the extra traffic which the Tunnel will generate, but we accept that that is inevitable. BR must accept that it has obligations to us."

"If it is prepared to do that, in the form of firm commitments and not just pious phrases, I would not wish to impede the Bill's progress; but if those assurances are not forthcoming, I shall seek to oppose the Bill."

Peter Snape (Lab, West Bromwich East) said that those who had supported the Channel Tunnel project throughout their parliamentary careers had always

been concerned to ensure that it benefited the whole of the United Kingdom. The provision of such a chord, linking the east and west coast main lines, was an essential part of the future success of the UK's passenger railway, including of course, that in Scotland. He was a little surprised at the controversy that the Bill had engendered. He understood the views in Kent and elsewhere about the likely disruption to the lives of constituents, once the Government had announced the preferred route for the new high speed link. The rest of this Bill only sets out the need for a number of spur lines and loops, to increase the capacity of international and commuter trains on the existing busy routes to Dover. The principle of routing trains via Tonbridge and Maidstone was established in the Channel Tunnel Act 1987.

Garden of England

Some had given the impression that, regardless of the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1993, nothing - no railway - must be allowed to disturb the tranquillity of what they call the 'Garden of England'.

"I have always taken the view that this is a short-sighted attitude. If there is no new rail link and if there are no new improvements in the existing rail links, I have a feeling that the number of additional heavy goods vehicles that will result from the opening of the Tunnel will cause more disruption to the tranquillity in the 'Garden of England' than that of the spur or loop lines that are discussing."

It was the view of some MPs that there was something unique about Channel Tunnel trains using the existing rail network, so special and specific compensation should be paid to people in Kent, who would be adversely affected by the passage of those trains.

"I am accused of being such a rail buff that I am blinded to the realities of life for people who do not share my support for the railway industry. I do not have any such affection."

Extra passenger trains were regarded as a problem on the main line from the Kent coast. The Kent Coast Electrification Scheme about 30 years ago resulted in a large increase in passenger trains.

Compensation was neither considered nor paid for. The trains were electrical multiple units and running on old fashioned jointed tracks were considerably noisier than the modern units on continuous welded tracks.

In the 1960s there was a great deal more freight on the line than now. It included coal from the Kent pits and oil for ships. Soft fruit and

