

Holding The Line

Richard Faulkner and Chris Austin
Ian Allan Publishing (£19.99)



When I think back I regard my years as Transport Minister as my political salad days. I had been put into the Cabinet without any of the inconvenience of working my way up and I had been given one (but only one) hard working assistant, Kenneth Clarke. Neither of us had been a Government Minister before, but we had one advantage.

In the years of opposition I had been working up a transport policy whose main elements I managed to get into the party manifesto. All we now had to do was privatise the National Freight Corporation and the British Transport ports; sweep away the regulations that prevented cheap inter-city coach services developing; reform the traffic offences laws; and introduce road safety legislation.

And then there were the railways. As Richard Faulkner and Chris Austin establish in their excellent new book *Holding the Line*, the problems of the railways had beset every government since the war. We had had review after review and above all the 'notorious' Beeching cuts of 1960s.

With the election of the Thatcher Government, the suspicion was that we would go back to the ways of Ernest Marples. The previous Labour Government were considering substituting bus services and it was seen as a racing certainty that we would do the same. So much so that *The Guardian* published a list of 41 lines that we were considering closing.

The day that report was published the authors recall that by "a happy coincidence"



Every government since the war had struggled with the problem of the railways: endless reviews included the 'notorious' Beeching cuts of the 1960s, based on the recommendations of Richard Beeching, Chairman of the British Railways Board

(some coincidence) I was answering questions. Much to the surprise of the railways watchers my response was that I saw "no case for another round of massive cuts". The lines were saved – and incidentally almost all remain open to this day.

But as the book also points out there was another option being developed on the right

“ The idea of turning rail tracks into roads struck me as political madness ”

of the party by the likes of Alfred Sherman with, I regret to say, some support from Keith Joseph. This was that we should start turning rail tracks into roads. The theory was that the railways were obsolete and everyone wanted to go by car.

Quite apart from the environmental impact of such a policy it struck me

as political madness. It would be hard fought by the Conservative Party (let alone Labour) and we would have had to fight every proposal past individual local inquiries. Much better to concentrate upon improving productivity in the railway industry which, with the considerable help of Peter Parker, we achieved.

This is a book by two railway insiders. Faulkner (now a Labour peer) was part of the formidable public relations team that British Rail fielded to put their case; Austin also has a long railway connection. They are both campaigners for making the very most of our railways which are now happily back in fashion. Anyone who wants to understand the history of the railways and the political pressures that surround them should read this carefully researched and excellently produced book. 📖

Lord Fowler was Transport Secretary 1979-1981

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