

THE MARCH MEETING

15th MARCH 1999

DOVER'S TRANSPORT PROBLEMS: A Talk by Gwyn Prosser

Reported by Jack Woolford

Introducing the speaker, Chairman Jeremy Cope said that although Gwyn Prosser was a Welshman he had lived and worked in Dover since 1979, on cross-Channel ferries and representing the Merchant Navy Officers Union, as well as sitting on Kent County and Dover District Councils.

Mr Prosser began by saying he had been a member of the Dover Society longer than he had been MP for Dover, the busiest ferry port in the world, with its 21million passengers per year, freight trade and other cargoes. As well as feeding the economy and providing jobs, Dover's flourishing trade brought responsibilities, problems and challenges including bootlegging and the crimes of drug smugglers, live animal exports and live animal export protesters. Protesting British farmers blockaded Dover and French seafarers and lorry drivers blockaded Calais (and other ports), all involving congestion and controversy. The National Front attacked asylum seekers and there were also issues of shipping safety and marine pollution. There was the setback of the increasing impact of the Channel Tunnel on ferry and port jobs, the loss of duty-free shopping and the possible loss of assisted area status. The loss of the Kent Coalfield, of freight-forwarding and customs, employment from the 1992 Single Market, and the repercussions of two recessions were still felt.

The July 1998 White paper on the Future of Transport necessarily envisaged radical solutions of integration and sustainability against the ideology of privatisation, unbridled competition and deregulation which had produced declining rail services and increased

congestion and pollution. £1.8 billion had been committed to bus and train system improvement, including local traffic management. A Strategic Railway Authority was being set up and there would be extra funds for roads and for improved walking and cycling facilities. A Commission for Integrated Transport was now establishing 150 Local Authority Integration Committees, with £150m extra funding for the next three years for rural bus partnerships. Provisional local transport plans were already being set up involving a large number of complementary measures. In addition, Dover was now an area for possible inclusion in a grant of £2.85m.

Mr Prosser said that his maiden speech in the House of Commons had been on Dover's dependence on transport for employment and the adverse circumstance of public subsidy, including a 4-lane motorway and the whole British rail network directly connected to the Channel Tunnel, leaving only a poor quality carriageway to the busiest ferry port in the world.

Since then, he thought, things had moved on, but not far enough. The extension of the M20/A20 from Folkestone to Dover and the decision to designate it the main transport corridor to E. Kent eased, but did not remove, the need to complete the dualling of the A2 from Lydden to Dover. Piecemeal A2 improvements, the new link to Sandwich and Thanet, and the prospective realignment of Whitfield roundabout and dualling of the link road to Old Park Barracks, would be improvements. The Government had frozen all road projects and many schemes had been abandoned, but the A2 project survived and awaited

6 decision by Serplan. Mr Prosser said he continued to press ministers, stressing economic regeneration, environmental considerations and safety. Even when a significant switch of freight from road to rail took place, the need for a second high quality road link to the port was clear. Mr Prosser is still campaigning for an extension of duty-free shopping but he did not support the disruptive tactics of the French campaigners and deplored the need to use the M20 as a glorified lorry park. This was, however, an improvement on the 1970s situation when all the lorries came through the town. Another barrier to economic growth had long been the railway bridge over Coombe Valley Road but it was now second only to the Sandwich Corridor in the County Council's priorities.

Mention of Dover's rail links normally provoked laughter and horror stories abounded. Four E. Kent MPs had recently raised the issue of Connex SE with Transport Minister Glenda Jackson, one of them inviting her, if she were a masochist, to experience the state of rails and unreliable timekeeping between London and Dover. She replied that she had wide interests, but masochism wasn't one of them! The rule observed for councils in E. Kent seeking to interest developers in projects was to send a car if they proposed to come by rail. Her response included the statements:

".... Connex South Eastern..... is required by its franchise agreement to replace all its existing Mark I slam-door rolling stock. I understand that it is its intention that the brand-new 375 class rolling stock will be deployed on the route to Dover, via Sevenoaks-Ashford by the end of 1999. Railtrack, in partnership with Connex South Eastern is also in the process of carrying out major improvements to Dover Priory Station.. I shall write to my honourable friend about the proposed sale of rail lands.

The Government are keen to encourage an increase in the use of rail freight, thus delivering important environmental benefits by taking lorries off our roads. Rail freight

grants are available to help meet the extra costs associated with moving freight by rail."

The Channel Tunnel Rail Link project had had a chequered history, with twists, turns and false starts. John Prescott had negotiated a rescue package last year: a decreased concession period and reduced public support, in the form of a loan, to the taxpayer's benefit. Mr Prosser had supported Dover Harbour Board and others in E. Kent's protest against public subsidy to the Channel Tunnel because the Shuttle was in direct competition with surface trains. The Rail Link was quite different. It would free up freight capacity and would offer better passenger and freight services, and would benefit the general economy of E. Kent. Eurostar passengers would not, in any case, travel by ferry and classic ferry foot passengers had ceased to make any significant contribution to ferry incomes. The High Speed Rail Link was not seen as a threat to the Port of Dover.

Our concern, he thought, should be the massive impending doubling of freight traffic over the next ten years and avoiding a second Channel Tunnel (which Dover needed like a hole in the head) as already envisaged in the first Channel Tunnel Act. Some local activists have consequently agitated for an extension of the HSRL from Folkestone to Dover, but this was totally unrealisable, bearing in mind the desperate earlier years of controversy about the location of the international passenger station between Folkestone and London. What was realisable was to bring the freight connections to Dover for train ferries, especially by containers and piggy-back services. High level discussions between the Harbour Board, Railtrack and Parliament were already occurring.

Mr. Prosser himself chaired the House of Commons Committee on ports. He said that upgrading the line for freight across the Warren and through existing tunnels to the Western Docks was feasible though it was a project for which we would have to fight.