



# LOGISTICS AND LIFE: REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACT OF MODERN TRANSPORT ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

JOHN HIBBS



Motorways in the United Kingdom were built to provide the basis for a modern distribution system; not for the private car. Indeed, the exponential growth of car ownership was not foreseen when they were planned in the early 1950s. They have provided what the railway never could have matched, the ability of the road vehicle to 'service all sites', with none of the break of bulk required by rail transport, with its risk of damage and pilferage, and the congestion surrounding the goods terminals. And they have been justified by the shift of freight transport away from heavy goods, suitable for railways, to what railwaymen used to call 'merchandise' traffic.

## A MORE RATIONAL POLICY THAN NIHILISM

But their impact on society has yet to be fully appreciated. It is not the contemporary environmental issues that wait confrontation; without the motorway system we would all be the poorer, and the increasing congestion of the key sections — not least by private cars — threatens to bring distribution to a standstill unless a more rational policy can be arrived at than the 'nihilism' of political attitudes today.<sup>1</sup> It is indeed this word *distribution* that expresses the change that has overcome us, bringing with it both gain and loss.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

Fifty years ago, outwith the larger cities, nationwide supply of goods, carried out essentially by train, was limited by and large to coal, fish, some tinned goods and clothing and footwear. Bread came from small bakeries, supplied with flour from local mills. Meat came from local slaughterhouses, much beer came from local breweries. Shops were generally small, and locally owned and managed. Even in cities there was something similar, though the great produce markets played a greater part in the process. Other merchandise was, of course, more widely distributed, but its part in the pattern of trade was much less than it has become since then.

In the 1960s the word 'transport' began to be replaced by 'physical distribution' as more and more goods were supplied to shops and the new supermarkets on a nationwide pattern. And then increasing sophistication produced the concept of the 'supply chain', which, if it could be managed with efficiency, would reduce the cost of commodities, to the advantage of the consumer.<sup>2</sup> So physical distribution became 'logistics', and now 'supply chain management' is becoming 'Business Logistics'.

### **THE IMPACT OF THESE CHANGES ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Let it be acknowledged that we have all gained, in lower prices and far wider choice than our parents enjoyed. The weekly shopping trip by car can include a family meal or a visit to the cinema. And some retail chains are bringing back delivery to the customer's door.

But what is too often neglected is the impact of these changes on local communities; on society as it exists in a locality; on the High Streets and side streets of towns and of city suburbs. Supply chain management has driven out the small shopkeepers, and filled their premises with low-price chain stores, charity shops, and come-and-go short-lease 'poundsavers' retailing surplus goods. Foodstores are predominantly chain shops. And with this has gone the local circulation of cash and credit that was for the local community the equivalent of the circulation of blood in the body. Independent traders were often involved in local government; they were leaders in the chapels; and they had an interest in the moral health of their community. Now the shops are managed by employees, and the bank managers are no longer the guardians of the local blood supply.

### **DISTRIBUTION ACROSS FRONTIERS**

Neither is this the end of the process. The 'high-speed link' from London to the Channel Tunnel is a

marginal issue, when compared with the vital importance of the tunnel for freight. The great sea-ports have lost the ocean liners, and the ports that matter now are the ones that offer roll-on-roll-off services for trucks to and from the continent of Europe or Ireland. Or those that load and off-load the boxes that are carried by the deep-sea container ships, maybe linking with the round-the-world container lines. For Business Logistics means distribution across frontiers, and the circulation of money and credit is increasingly world-wide, as the media never fail to remind us.

### **AN EFFECT ON BEHAVIOUR THAT WAS UNFORESEEN**

Life in the 21st century is not going to go back to the simplicities of the first half of the 20th. And the breakdown of society that spreads violence and conflict with authority is not the result of physical distribution alone. But it is the otherwise beneficial development of supply chain management, on the vastly improved transport infrastructure that some people so much deplore, that has had an effect on behaviour that was not foreseen. Whatever solution we seek for the problems of society today and tomorrow, we cannot afford to neglect the importance of trade and transport.

### **NOTES**

1. See C. D. Foster, "The Dangers of Nihilism in Roads Policy", *Proceedings of the Chartered Institute of Transport*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1995.
2. By a nice irony, the final stage of the 'chain', distribution to the consumer's door, was converted to DIY (Do It Yourself), as the shopper was expected to carry the goods home in her own car.

### **COMMENT by Brian Micklethwait**

The thing I like about this piece is that it connects Professor John Hibbs' two major — seemingly unconnected — intellectual preoccupations: transport, and Christianity and Christian morality. We have published two issues of Economic Notes by Professor Hibbs (Numbers 38 and 78, about bus deregulation), and two Religious Notes (5 and 7). This piece indicates briefly how such notions relate to each other. Local communities inculcate religious commitment and moral decency. But modern transport weakens local communities, by making a world in which local communities have less to do.

I thought about asking Professor Hibbs to write a longer version of this, but it says what it says perfectly well, if only briefly, and if he wishes later to elaborate, he can.