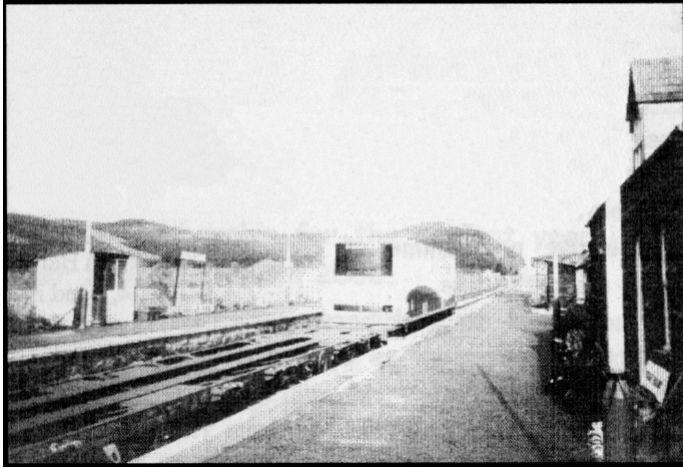


Newsletter of
THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

The campaign group for rail north of Inverness, lobbying for improved services for the local user, tourist and freight operator

Issue 13

June 1999



Safeway refrigerated container on the Far North Line at Rogart - Frank Roach

STEPS INTO THE FUTURE



ScotRail 'Special' prior to leaving Inverness on trial run to Thurso. 23/5/99

Photograph courtesy of Press & Journal

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Comment

Sadly we record the death of Harry Miller, founder chairman of FoFNL, on April 29. Harry's funeral was at Tain Free Church on May 4 when representative members were among the many friends present. An obituary appreciation appears on the next page of this newsletter

This summer FoFNL welcomes:-

- the commissioning of the Georgemas Plunger
- the saving of 2 minutes on Inverness bound trains south of Ardgay
- the extensive programme of refurbishing stations along the line

However many end to end passenger train times show little improvement as compared with three years ago. Disappointment will need to give way to approval when the findings from the 158 train trial run are made known and effected.

Rural railways are not free from threat - a reproduced letter from Frank Roach on page 10 challenges a well known writer on railways, Christian Wolmar, in his view that buses might replace trains on some routes. The writer had cited the Far North Line as being one of several which he claimed had covered only 10% of costs shortly before privatisation.

A lesser threat comes from within the enthusiast body with the continuing seemingly alluring prospect of a shorter route, with its divisive effect on communities in Sutherland - little is heard of where capital would be raised, or the lack of return on such an investment.

FoFNL will continue to press for track and line speed improvement using the existing route, for enhanced tourist useage, and for Freight on Rail. We welcome the Safeway Refrigerated Box trial run to Caithness. Given modern equipment, reliability in timekeeping, environmentally led road fuel policy and potential access to European Regional Development Funding the opportunities for long haul rail freight and its terminal handling are there to seize.

Lastly, and happily, we record the election of two of our members, John Farquhar Munro and Jamie Stone, to the Scottish Parliament.

John Melling

HENRY (HARRY) MILLER 1927 - 1999

After several months of being unwell, Harry Miller's death, on 29 April came as a shock to his family and many friends throughout the north.

Harry was born in Caithness, where after acquiring his own farm holding at Forss he went on to become a respected figure in the farming community. In 1962 he bought a farm near Tain and moved to Easter Ross. It was then that he developed his other great interest, politics and public service. He was elected to Tain Town Council in 1969 and was to go on to serve Ross and Cromarty and Highland Regional Councils, holding committee chairmanships. He was a Justice of the Peace and a member of the Cromarty Firth Port Authority. It was almost at the end of his active life that Harry became the first chairman of The Friends of the Far North Line, a position from which he retired in 1997.

There was no side to Harry; he was a warm supportive friend to many. As our chairman he exercised a calm patience and could break into an open smile.

Above all Harry was a family man whose final intention was for the good of the generations ahead. He cared too for the 'have nots' in society and strove for their betterment.

He is survived by his wife Dorothy, their three daughters and grandchildren. Our thoughts go out to them in their loss at this time. Harry will be missed by many.

Service Provision - Summer 1999 And Beyond

The 1999 Summer timetable, operational from 30 May to 25 September, retains the service pattern of recent years. Minor changes include the retiming of the evening train north to depart Inverness at 17.20 and a later start from Wick at 15.47 for the last southbound train. An extension of the Dingwall commuter train to start from further north is still awaited.

The commissioning of the Georgemas plunger has brought some, but not enough, improvement in end to end timings. Time savings of 3 minutes between Inverness and Thurso and of 5 minutes between Inverness and Wick running via Thurso had been anticipated. As compared with Summer 1998 this has been achieved northbound to Thurso, but not on to Wick via Thurso where the overall average saving remains 3 minutes rather than the 5 predicted by Railtrack. On Sundays the average northbound end to end saving is a mere 30 seconds.

Southbound, comparing the summer service for the same two years, the average weekday time saving from Wick via Thurso to Inverness is only 1½ minutes, and from Thurso to Inverness is 2 minutes. However for Wick passengers the summer only direct train saves 6 minutes on the previous year. Overall this is a disappointing implementation of the benefit from the Plunger which Caithness had been led to expect.

When a comparison is made between today and the summer of 1996 the northbound position is even less satisfactory. Then the first northbound service was one minute quicker from Inverness to both Thurso and Wick than it is today. Indeed a comparison of average time saved for the three northbound trains to each destination shows only 40 seconds. This could equally well be ascribed to the lifting of the severe speed restrictions on the Mid Fearn farm crossings on the Ross - Sutherland border.

More encouraging is a comparison of timings for southbound summer services as between 1996 and 1999. This shows an average saving of 6 minutes from Wick and 3 from Thurso as between those years. Part of the southbound improvement can be ascribed to the removal of two minutes wasteful recovery time south of Ardgay. However this welcome change detracts from the time saving which could be ascribed to the Plunger at Georgemas. One is bound to question whether despite long term planning for the work at Georgemas, ScotRail

have yet fully implemented the consequent savings in journey time.

In any event much remains to be accomplished. What has befallen the multi agency study of three years ago which identified level crossings and speed on entry to passing loops as areas for improvement? FOFNL looks to a Thurso - Inverness timing of 3 hours 30 minutes, even with the present traction equipment, and a Sunday evening train in each direction.

The recent Sunday trial with a 158 unit over the length of the line raises both opportunities and concerns. The capacity of these sets to run at 90 mph and accelerate more quickly from a stand offers potential time saving. Although the line is currently restricted to 75 mph the straighter layout in Easter Ross and between Georgemas and Wick should enable faster running. Together with faster acceleration away from stations can we expect a Thurso - Inverness timing of 3 hours 20 minutes, or even 3 hours 15 minutes, with commensurate reductions for Wick? The outcome of this trial conducted by the rail industry is awaited with interest.

Nevertheless the replacement of the existing 156 units with the faster 158s does raise concerns. Their overall interior profile by width is less - luggage space is inadequate for residents and visitors alike - cycle space is still less - the existing seating configuration is too tight - the seat backs obstruct outward vision. Clearly nothing can be done about the overall vehicle profile. This makes action on the other deficiencies the more important. ScotRail intend re-seating the vehicles changing the tilt of the seat backs so improving outlook. Action needs to be taken to provide for the carriage of four cycles. Equally important, as travellers between Inverness and Central Scotland know to their cost, is the need for adequate leg room. Adjusting the leg space at a few selected seats will not meet the needs of an increasingly taller population. One purpose of the longer distance train should be to attract custom from other modes. The more open leg space in the outwardly similar coaches of the 157 units between London Waterloo and Exeter, or in the reconfigured seating in Wales and West 158s should be replicated here in the Highlands.

Whilst seat occupancy is always important, the long distance rural railway needs first to stimulate people to value the travel experience.

John Melling

Letter to the Editor

231 Mackintosh Road

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15.3.99

Your correspondent, Andrew McCracken is being unrealistic seeing the solution to being unable to travel between Wick and Glasgow or Edinburgh and back the same day, as the provision of faster trains. The only solution is to restore the overnight train service. There used to be a train from Inverness to Glasgow at 00.10 and a similar train from Glasgow to Inverness at 23.45. Both trains had connections to and from Edinburgh by changing at Stirling. They were discontinued about 5 years ago in the run-up to privatisation. The rush to cut train services at that time also saw the end of overnight trains Edinburgh - Plymouth, Edinburgh - Manchester Airport and Stranraer - London. It also saw the removal of seating accommodation on all Anglo-Scottish night trains, and the end of all night trains on Saturday nights. All these changes should be reversed.

Yours sincerely,

David Gallant

Facing Points

We live in challenging times! It will be interesting to see how the Scottish Parliament succeeds in putting devolved government into a sound working framework. There are numerous adjustments to be made some of them delicate. We must give it time.

Is the 'new railway' regime beginning to get its act together? In a recent issue of 'RAIL' magazine there were signs that it is. Sir Alastair Morton, chairman-designate of the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), is clear about its role; it will not run trains, manage infrastructure projects or be responsible for rail safety. "The SRA's mission is to make privatisation work as a public service.... to plan, negotiate and facilitate - not to command and control."

David Bertram, Central Rail Users' Consultative Committee chairman, contributed an encouraging article, from which I quote:

"We must bear in mind that passengers are not only the last to benefit from improvements made and planned, but they're also the first to suffer when things go wrong. Until passengers can be assured that not only will their train run but also that it will run on time, they will not have the confidence to rely on the railway. And successful business is always rooted in confidence... Passengers are not interested in whose fault it is when things go wrong - the so-called 'blame culture'. They simply want what they have paid for. The SRA should start from a single basic premise: the passenger (though sometimes misinformed) is ALWAYS right!..... Perhaps the most important task for the SRA - certainly from the perspective of attracting and keeping more passengers - is to take the lead in promoting Integrated Transport."

Railtrack's 1999 Network Management Statement, while an improvement on last year's, also contains too many conditional words - 'under consideration', 'being evaluated' and 'within a partnership' spring to mind; they want risks carried by external investment. With luck, given time, Sir Alastair Norton will bring them up to speed.

Some of you will have seen the new external livery being applied to Class 158 units. You may think me past my sell-by date, but frankly I consider the change utterly deplorable. The design overrides the simple engineering lines of the stock and the colours are harsh and discordant; for all the expense involved it looks garish, vulgar and superficial. An insult to any self-respecting Highland setting. This looks like an especially bad case of change for the sake of change.

National Express have kept the ScotRail brand-name. Why change the livery? Whatever is wrong with the familiar, pleasantly restrained and dignified 158 livery to which we have become accustomed?

Still, at Georgemas they're clearly getting the Full Treatment. My understanding of the new technology admittedly leaves a great deal to be desired, but it seems Railtrack have spent £200,000 on the long-awaited plunger there. Reportedly saving 5 minutes. Half an hour a day. What on earth is it made of - pure platinum? How deep does it plunge? The regenerated roof glazing at Inverness is a great improvement: lets in more daylight and actually keeps out the rain at last. A pity they couldn't run to miraculously house-training the gulls, who have already revelled in undermining its pristine ambience.

Your Secretary

Progress Report

As part of his job as Rail Development Consultant, Frank Roach is required to compile monthly Progress Reports. These are submitted to Highland Rail Developments and the contents of the last two are summarised below.

Passenger

- Beaulieu Station Reopening Objective 1 application has been submitted; a decision is awaited. The planning process for the access road is ongoing.
- Discussions with ScotRail marketing underway about a window gazer for Kyle and North lines. Now in production.
- A reply was sent to RAIL magazine and Christian Wolmar, ("BUSTITUTION") following the latter's suggestion that the Far North line was 'slow and drab', and a suitable candidate for bustitution.
- Continuing work with Graham Steele of Motorail.
- Poets will again feature on North trains during the Highland Festival in May.
- Lobbying for Tain Commuter train.
- BritRail/InterRail apportionment (bustitution)

Freight

- Invergordon Port Authority siding. A further meeting with the Scottish Office has proved fruitful. If the go ahead is given soon, a train per week of grain for the distillery can be won. The Planning Committee arc due to decide on the scheme next week.
- Ledmore marble logistics.
- All timber producers and harvesters are to be circulated with information on lineside loading, as this scheme now has Objective 1 funding. They are to submit proposed loading sites.
- Fearn residents have voiced their concerns about the dust storms caused by lime traffic. Meetings have taken place with EWS and HC Protective Services.
- Logistical help has been provided for Thurso timber traffic.
- A trial run took place to Georgemas with a Safeway refrigerated wagon.

Heritage

- Far North 125 anniversary plans are underway. A photographic and memorabilia display has been proposed for Thurso. It is hoped that a ScotRail unit naming and a Class 66 visit will take place. The virtual exhibition on the National Archive for Scotland is under discussion.
- Brora developments.

Infrastructure

- The Crossrail Link road report has been produced.
- Journey time reductions contained in Railtrack's NMS point the way ahead for small scale but effective incremental improvements at a time when the Dornoch Bridge has resurfaced in the press. It is also pleasing to see a change in the speed restriction at Shevock crossing.
- Involvement in Wick - Thurso regeneration.
- Ardgay land sale enquiry.

Railway Cuttings

ScotRail Press Release - 31 March 1999

£7m upgrade for ScotRail 'Hotels'

ScotRail's 'hotels on wheels' the sixteen carriage Caledonian Sleeper trains which cross the border to and from London six nights a week - are set for a £7 million upgrade which will include new airline style seating, custom built disabled toilets, new livery and complete interior renewal.

Britain's longest domestic passenger trains convey 800 beds at up to 80 mph on Sunday to Friday nights linking London with Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Inverness, and Fort William. The creation of comfortable 'Club Car' seating will offer a cheap, high speed alternative to car or bus for a host of travellers wishing to journey through the night.

"This new upgrade completes another of our Franchise commitments and will enable us to welcome aboard disabled passengers and those looking for inexpensive overnight rail travel," says ScotRail Managing Director Alastair McPherson "We've already improved on-board quality with better breakfasts and dinner menus and Sleeper fares are currently up to 44% cheaper than they were before privatisation."

Eleven Mark 2 carriages supplied by Forward Trust Rail will be converted to 'Club Cars', each containing 31 reclining seats, two toilets, conductor accommodation, and space for luggage and cycles. Work will be undertaken at Railcare's Wolverton plant and the new vehicles should enter service in late autumn. The livery, logo and furnishings currently adorning existing sleeper vehicles will be superseded with new decor, beds and carpets in a striking ScotRail colour scheme of silver and purple. Contract is being handled by the Derby based consultancy W.S. Atkins and work will be carried out at Inverness by Rail Projects Ltd, Derby.

ScotRail Press Release - 20 May 1999

New trains for Far North

A ScotRail 'Special' running between Inverness, Kyle, Wick and Thurso on Sunday 23 May will pave the way for the introduction of 90 mph, air conditioned rolling stock on the routes next year. The run could also herald journey time reductions on the Far North line plus through services to and from Edinburgh and Glasgow as part of ScotRail's planned redeployment of modern rolling stock following the arrival of nearly £200 million worth of new trains currently on order. Sunday's run, which will not carry passengers, will be the first ever end-to-end trip north of Inverness for a Class 158 ScotRail Express of the type now operating between Inverness/Edinburgh and Glasgow. The train will be staffed by engineers from ScotRail and Railtrack who'll be checking that the rolling stock complies with all aspects of the route's safety requirements before the 158s enter public service in Caithness, Sutherland and Ross-shire in the summer of next year. Top speed on the Far North line is 75 mph but ScotRail hope to exploit the trains superior acceleration to bring journey times between Inverness and Thurso comfortably below 3 hours 30 minutes with less than four hours for the end to end trip to Wick.

125th Anniversary

The following events celebrated the 125th Anniversary of the opening of the line from Inverness to Wick and Thurso:

- Renaming of Dunrobin station to Dunrobin Castle and switching on of heritage lighting, 28th July.
- Naming of a 158 train set in Thurso Station, 28th July.
- Display of models in Helmsdale Timespan Centre.
- Photographic display in foyer of Thurso Station.

Bustitution

No, your editor hasn't dreamt up a new word. Bustitution was a word used by Christian Wolmar in an article he wrote for Rail magazine. It was a controversial article and we reproduce Frank Roach's response:

I am disappointed that Christian Wolmar is reiterating the arguments that belong to the 1960s. I mistakenly believed that the principle of chopping rural routes had been discredited on the accounting methods employed and the effect on the major routes they fed, and that replacement buses proved to be unreliable and unpopular. Three years ago a report commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise found that the Highland rail network was worth £50m in tourism spend alone.

As a resident on the Far North Line I strongly refute his claim that it is drab and slow. The 154 mile journey from Inverness to Thurso, the busier of the Caithness termini, takes 3 hours 40 mins - an average speed of 42 mph. I feel this compares favourably with routes such as Edinburgh - Brighton (9 hours 40 mins. 49.7 mph). The bus journey to Thurso takes 3 hours 30 minutes. Christian Wolmar may dislike Class 156 travel, but as we are unlikely to have tilting DMUs or loco hauled stock up here they are perfectly adequate, and carry bikes, parcels (some communities here still get their newspapers by rail) and pushchairs. The trains have catering trolleys all year round, and accessible toilets. They are reliable, too, as a check on ScotRail's performance figures will prove. A few weeks ago the A9 trunk road was closed for two days, blocked with 12' snowdrifts; the railway ran to time.

The time differential between rail and bus will be further eroded this year. Railtrack are committed to journey time reductions, and have just installed a £180,000 plunger system at Georgemas to take 3 minutes off the time to Thurso, 6 minutes off the time to Wick. Wolmar has failed to acknowledge the significance of the route. The railway serves inland, by-passed communities, many of which have no other public transport provision. The bus could not replicate that rail route. The following stations are not served by the A9 trunk route taken by the Inverness-Thurso bus: Muir of Ord, Dingwall, Alness, Fearn, Ardgay, Culrain, Invershin, Lairg, Rogart, Kildonan, Kinbrace, Forsinard, Altnabreac, Scotsalder and Georgemas.

Far from being drab, may I suggest the swan-inhabited lochs beside the Kyle of Sutherland between Tain and Ardgay, the climb up to Lairg past the bubbling river Shin, the seal coast between Golspie and Helmsdale and the vast peatlands beyond Kinbrace inhabited by mighty stags are just a few locations which put most rail journeys to shame? It is a green tourism corridor. Stations are once again becoming a focus of activity: tearoom (Dingwall), bunkhouse (Rogart), museum (Dunrobin), and wildlife centre (Forsinard). Culrain for Carbisdale Castle Youth Hostel, is the biggest generator of traffic on the line.

The route is beginning to thrive. ScotRail report a 7% increase in ridership aided by competitive fares, and a local residents' railcard brings prices below the coach fare. It's not just for the tourists either. Subject to European funding, Beaulieu station could be open in January 2000, building on the success of the Dingwall Commuter service. The 1715 north from Inverness frequently loads in excess of 100 in the winter months. Muir of Ord has become the fastest growing station in the Highlands with some 65 journeys per day, demonstrating a sea change in local travelling habits. The Travelling Classroom, taking primary school children to Kyle and Helmsdale, has been widely acclaimed both for its educational value and for its role in reducing incidents of trespass and vandalism to near zero. And, horror of horrors for Mr Wolmar, coach firms such as Shearings are increasingly putting their customers onto trains and meeting them with the bus at the other end, representing sizeable business for ScotRail. We even had steam here last year, injecting £200,000 into the local economy.

And that's just the passenger railway. With freight up 50% in Scotland, the Far North Line has more than played its role. From no freight in 1995, this week (24th March 1999) will see movements of fertiliser, flagstone, aviation fuel and timber, while the much publicised pipe trains will resume with a new contract in the summer. Freight has been handled at 9 locations on the line. This all has travelled by road in the past, but the environmental benefits of rail are now widely recognised. The Highlands is set to double timber production in the next ten years; the roads simply cannot cope. Many minor roads have had 7.5 tonne weight limits imposed because the Highland Council has just £3.6 million to maintain a network that covers an area the size of Belgium. An 8 tonne axle load causes 65500 times more wear than the

average car axle.

Wolmar suggests letting the local authority take control. Through the Highland Rail Network Development Partnership, a model for pragmatism, the Highland Council has already played an active part in rail's resurgence. The Scottish Parliament which has responsibility for integrated transport strategy in Scotland will recognise the critical importance of rail services to that policy and is unlikely to vote for increased road congestion by cutting rail investment.

But perhaps the most important point of all is social inclusion. You can travel from Wick to London, Plymouth or even Aberystwyth in a day in reasonable comfort in a mode that's five times safer than a bus, and ten times safer than the private car. We celebrate the 125th anniversary in July this year. Perhaps Mr Wolmar may care to join us.

Frank Roach

Dornoch - An Alternative Perspective

The following is the text of an article contributed to the RDS(Scotland) newsletter 'Notes' by our Secretary, Keith Tyler.

We think it time to let members (of the RDS(Scotland)) know that some of those who live in the Far North Line catchment area find Ken Sutherland's unrelenting advocacy of the Dornoch Cut-Off (as if work on it might commence at once) wholly unrealistic.

In particular, the Committee of the Friends of the Far North Line, having closely reviewed this and other matters with Railtrack and ScotRail in seeking to secure an ongoing programme of improving service - which they are offering wherever a rational case can be identified - consider his repeated statements to the press unwise and counter-productive and indeed damaging to RDS's reputation in the wider field we share with them.

We fully appreciate that this stance may seem lacking in vision to some, not least quite a few of our own members, but we sincerely believe that euphoric images are no match for reality.

Consider some salient facts:

1. The earlier Dornoch proposal, ultimately rejected by BR, is dead and buried. Neither Railtrack nor ScotRail considers a cut-off route as other than a very long term notion.
2. Undoubtedly a major reduction in end-to-end timing would notably enhance the rail option for passengers to or from Caithness, Orkney and much of Sutherland - but these are among the most sparsely inhabited areas in the Kingdom.
3. The current service of 3 trains each way 6 days a week, with a 2 train short summer Sunday service, is subsidised: any additional trains would have to meet their full costs. Even with projected growth in freight, traffic levels are far too light to justify any massive capital investment.
4. Without wholesale replacement of speed-restricted turnouts and crossings, and costly upgrading of radio signalling, little time would be saved by a limited-stop train.
5. The Dornoch Cut-Off idea is highly imaginative and, for that very reason, beguiling. It is too easily presented as just a bridge - even a tack-on one! It involves a new Dornoch bridge, another over the Fleet, negotiating an enlarged Dornoch and some 10 miles of new railway between Tain and Golspie, costing about £27m - to save some 40 minutes on 6 trains a day! (Four if Ardgay, Lairg and Rogart retain a single daily service.)

In the short and medium term this is a clear non-starter; even in the long term pretty doubtful. In our view, to persist in 'banging this drum' is damaging. It raises unwarranted public expectations.

We support it as a distinctly long term option, and are actively seeking to ensure Highland Council safeguard its route - otherwise there might be no practicable route to build anyway! - but see no early likelihood of its construction and, however disappointing to those relatively few it would greatly assist, see absolutely no point in misleading them by pretending otherwise.

Transport Policy Options For A Sustainable Scotland

Sub-titled "An Assessment of Three Scenarios : 2000-2020", this was the subject of a lively one-day conference in Falkirk on 26 March, which I attended as FoFNL delegate.

It was based on the Report by the Scottish Forum for Transport and the Environment, edited by Tom Hart and Nigel Doar and published in February, which seeks to resolve the conflict between transport policy and sustainable development. The conference, ably chaired by Tom Hart, attracted a broad spectrum from commercial concerns and local councils - I was one of the few from the voluntary sector - and stimulated eager discussion. Setting all forms of transport in the broader context of health, education, employment, quality of life, resource management and environmental care, underlining the inescapable interaction between all these factors, gives a more reliable, comprehensive perspective.

This needs to be far more widely accepted. In turn such an outlook could give rise to wiser proposals among business interests, local authorities, the partnerships they are beginning to establish, and indeed the new Scottish Parliament, who will undoubtedly be lobbied accordingly.

There is likely to be some resistance to the need for such lateral cross-ministry vision, politicians and civil servants preferring tidily separate boxes, but the constructive need is inescapable!

The three Scenarios examined can be briefly summarised as follows, with particular reference to our neck of the woods:

1. Modified Business as Usual. Letting road traffic continue to grow at will must cause increasing congestion and a decline in living standards: the study foresees the railway service cut short at Tain. (With maybe limited freight movement north?)
2. Accelerated Modal Shift. Progressively introducing measures to encourage the diversion of major bulk goods from road to rail, including lower road speed limits and provision of integrated public transport, would reduce traffic growth and pollution: the railway would remain open to Georgemas and Thurso, with a bus connection to Wick.
3. Reducing the Need for Movement. Incremental development of projected planning strategies over two decades would encourage a wider degree of localised commerce and workplaces, with enhanced integrated public transport and shared car use to reach it, to reduce long distance daily commuting and stabilise road traffic levels - given which, excessive local car-dependency could yield to walking and cycling as anyway healthier; under this scenario, with rail freight maximised and passenger services increased, construction of the Dornoch cut-off link becomes viable, bearing in mind a need to provide for developments at Lairg.

This very bald summary - the report runs to 110 pages - cannot do justice to the well argued options offered in it. The inescapable conclusion is that Scenario 1 is a recipe for accelerating decline. So it is matter of which of the other two is found to attract the wider support: full consultation and public participation will be essential in either case. Now is the time to make a start.

Personal comment

In fairness, I lay my personal cards on the table. To my mind the need to reverse environmental degradation and tackle the complex problems of climate change is far and away the prime item on any realistic agenda. If we continue, ostrich-like, to pillage our planet we are wilfully destroying the only life support system we have. Sadly, environmental concerns seem to cut little ice with any of the major political parties. After a modicum of lip-service, little is achieved; it is far easier to scuttle off and become immersed in the relative irrelevancies of other matters. Clearly little or no interest then in what sort of depleted existence we are leaving to our grandchildren. Which does somehow seem rather surprising.

Keith Tyler