British Ports Policies Since 1945

A Comment

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I offer the following comments on the excellent paper "British Ports Policies Since 1945" by Richard Goss (Journal of Transport Economics and Policy, 32, pp.51-71), since much of it referred to the work of the National Ports Council (NPC), of which I was Secretary throughout its existence.

In concentrating on the development of policies, Goss has over-condensed the changes to the membership of the NPC. Lord Rochdale, who openly opposed nationalisation, was replaced as Chairman by Sir Arthur Kirby in 1967. Although Sir Arthur had been Chairman of the then British Transport Docks Board, he turned out to be more independent than Mrs Castle had anticipated, making it clear that he was opposed to further wholesale nationalisation, while dutifully offering advice. Several port authority chairmen were brought on to the Council at the same time. They were removed in 1971 when Mr Philip Chappell, a merchant banker, was appointed as Chairman by the Conservative Minister John Peyton.

It is not strictly true that the NPC never developed any comparable efficiency indicators. Goss ignores an NPC study of 1977 of general cargo handling in several British and Continental ports, showing that the former were less efficient. The British Ports Association tried to suppress this, but it was summarised in The Dock and Harbour Authority. Also, the Council published comparisons of the rates of container handling at British, Far Eastern, and Continental ports in the final issue (no.16) of its Research Bulletin, although without naming the ports — and with similar results.

The NPC never opposed competition between ports. Indeed, at a time when competition was far from being fashionable, the Council encouraged it at new locations. The highly successful container facilities at Felixstowe and the Continental ferry terminal at Portsmouth provide good examples. However, to deter ports from making speculative investments, the Council insisted that ports obtain from users terms of contractual commitment for new berths, especially those involving container and ro-ro services — not the other way round, as Goss appears to suggest.

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Indeed, because such contractual arrangement became increasingly common, there may have been more of a relationship between incremental revenues and costs than he recognises. In any case, the large-scale reform of charging structures, which he suggests should have preceded the introduction of formal investment appraisals, would have involved either persuading most port authorities to change many of their practices, or persuading the Minister to enforce it by a massive exercise of the powers contained in S.32 of the Harbours Act of 1964 (never used, and subsequently repealed). Neither was a realistic prospect.

While Goss describes both the successes and the failures of the NPC, he understates the institutional constraints under which it laboured: real power always lay with the relevant Minister and officials. Under Mrs Castle, another layer was established under Mr Christopher Foster (as he then was) in the Economics Unit, whose influence was felt with Bristol’s initial Portbury scheme. Goss also omits to mention the Council’s efforts in promoting the concept of Maritime Industrial Development Areas. A good summary verdict on why the NPC never produced a comprehensive “national ports plan” is contained in the footnote on p.62 of Goss’s paper. The Council’s final views on the subject were set out in the last (1981) Annual Report.

Finally, in its last year the Council did commission a kind of history from Dr G. K. Wilson, of the University of Essex. The full text was not published, but was deposited at the Public Record Office. An abbreviated version was published in the Journal of the Royal Institute of Public Administration in 1983.