

'Overland transport: the key to the Europe of tomorrow', from Le Monde (16 May 1953)

Caption: On 10 May 1953, Maurice Lemaire, a French delegate to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe and former Head of the French State Railways (SNCF), gives his point of view on the organisation of overland transport in Europe in the French daily newspaper Le Monde.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. BEUVE-MERY, Hubert. 16.05.1953, n° 2 583; 10e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Des transports terrestres dépend l'Europe de demain", auteur:Lemaire, Maurice , p. 2.

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Overland transport: the key to the Europe of tomorrow

by Maurice Lemaire, MP for the Vosges

A Conference on Internal European Transport was held recently in Paris. Every European country took part except the Soviet Union and its satellites.

The Conference took as the starting point for its debates the recommendation adopted by the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg during its ordinary session in September 1952, which sought the creation of a European Transport Council.

Mr Maurice Lemaire, former Director General of the SNCF, MP for the Vosges and a member of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, was appointed by the Council of Europe to present the Strasbourg Assembly's proposals to the Conference. We felt it would be interesting for our readers to learn his views on the major issue of overland transport in Europe.

Transport is a key problem that a progressive economy must take into account at all times. This is even truer in the light of free trade in capital goods for the developing countries and a general improvement in the standard of living.

In Europe, for example, the integration of any sector whatsoever cannot be conceived without proper transport arrangements. European defence itself calls for a coherent and effective system, and yet the confusion that reigns in this area is a particularly heavy burden for many States. It is, nevertheless, clear that transport could become the springboard which will bring about the Europe of tomorrow.

Transport cannot easily be compared to other branches of the economy. Industry, for example, is essentially a matter of creative effort, while transport is more a matter of adapting to a European scale rather than creating.

That shows us the urgent need for the rational coordination of transport itself, and furthermore – as a logical consequence thereof – the obligation to coordinate major future investment in transport.

What coordination of transport entails

Coordination is required between the various modes of transport and within each mode.

A tariff coordination policy is especially vital, but it must be founded on reality. The railway monopoly, connected to the principle of public service, has in fact led to an equalisation of tariffs with no regard for the costs and profit margins that vary according to routes and traffic, or for the differences in cost-effectiveness that vary according to the type of goods transported. We must, therefore, gradually adapt the tariff structure to costs. At European level, the operation involves establishing common accounting systems, as well as common techniques. Admittedly, this will require painstaking efforts and lengthy stages, but it is the only way to achieve a competitive system between the various modes of transport.

Cost prices must be lowered and, to that end, both within each country and at international level, it is becoming a matter of urgency to introduce various means of simplification and cooperation in the form of standardised locomotives and equipment, use of common facilities, loans and exchange of resources, in addition to determining and using the routes that are best planned and best adapted.

Agreements similar to the one already in place for the pooling of some rolling stock should not only be encouraged, they should also be taken further: it is not simply a matter of trade between countries; we need to create a major common market for equipment, which is the only way of lowering construction and repair costs and using fewer raw materials.

Rail, road and inland waterway

This overall plan poses the problem of the three-way link between rail, road and inland waterway. The development of river routes and the deepening of inland waterways, removing the abnormal disparities in certain countries like France, should be seen in a European context. But the most acute problem remains the road-rail link.

Here it would be wise to refute the rather widespread idea that we should draw inspiration from the American model. America is a new continent, with a relatively low population density compared to Europe. The intensive economic development of that country has allowed automobile transport to expand considerably and fit within the rail network without the two systems getting in each other's way, as they do in Europe.

The situation is not the same in Europe, where the history and density of centres of population at the advent of the railway led to an extremely dense rail network being superimposed on an existing road network that was already extremely dense.

What is more, the link between the two systems is different because of the disparity in the average shipping routes and in the average volume and weight of each shipment, which are much greater in America than in Europe. These are the reasons behind the battle between road and rail that has been going on for almost thirty years now in Europe. This struggle will persist, to the great detriment of the general economy, for as long as we continue to resort to simple stopgap measures.

The facts of the problem are nevertheless clear: the railway offers by far the best rates for mass transport. Road transport gives above all flexibility for small- and medium-tonnage shipments; it offers unbeatable rates for short- and medium-distance transport. The consequence is that good value and speed, both essential qualities of transport in general, can only be guaranteed if the techniques of the two systems – road and rail – are harmonised and combined.

What are the obstacles facing such harmonisation? In truth, there is only one, and it is perhaps because the diagnosis has never found that no decisive progress has been made in terms of the necessary cooperation.

This fundamental obstacle is the cost of transshipment between road and rail. In most cases, transshipment represents a value of 50 to 100 kilometres in rail transport. If two transshipments are required for door-to-door service, while average European routes generally involve no more than 250 kilometres, it would often be advantageous, solely from a cost perspective, to transport goods from origin to destination without transshipment once they have been initially loaded onto lorries.

That being the case, the remedy becomes apparent. Transshipments need to be organised. True, some headway has already been made in this direction. Rail networks are using crates and freight containers more and more, and that brings us a little closer to our goal. We now need to move on to the decisive stage and ask road and rail technicians to study their goods transport equipment in order to adapt it accordingly. By means of suitable handling methods, it will be possible to perform all railway wagon to lorry, or lorry to railway wagon, transshipments for each category of goods within a few minutes and in a price range that does not exceed in value the cost of a few kilometres of rail transport.

This will be the way, in a few decades' time, of utilising the vast current and latent resources which are our road and rail networks.

Seen from this angle, we have cause to believe that the adjustment of rail tariffs to reflect cost prices, not only by type of goods, but also on the basis of actual profitability of transport routes, will quickly lead to healthy competition. Lorries will naturally no longer be used for many types of goods on routes that run parallel to the rail trunk lines. Rail transport, for its part, will give way to road transport on cross-country routes. Finally, each one of the major groups of technicians, operators and labour connected with rail or road transport will receive its share of normal business.

We can thus see the makings of a simultaneous improvement in the rail and road networks. This does not mean that the adjusted trunk routes will be parallel. On the contrary, rail trunk lines will have modern equipment, while great emphasis will be placed on planning and equipping cross-country trunk roads. It is at the interface between the rail and road trunk routes where hybrid road-rail stations will prevail, where alternating unloading bays and tracks will be served by the most modern transshipment and handling machinery.