

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Railways Society  
**Band:** 3 (1991-1993)  
**Heft:** 11

**Artikel:** The SBB at a turning point  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855257>

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# The SBB at a Turning Point

by A.E.Hauser-Gubser

**The commission** *Groupe de Réflexion* entrusted by Mr.Ogi, Swiss Minister for Traffic and Energy, to search for solutions to bring back Swiss Federal Railways onto a prosperous course proposes mainly:

- a) A fresh orientation of traffic policy.
- b) A revised definition of the tasks and the necessary reforms.
- c) An enterprise reform.
- d) Last, but not least, a financial reform.

The reason for the financial losses which have been covered so far by the confederation are located in the regional passenger and certain branches of the freight business.

Although the group recognises the lack of true costings; ie, a correct allocation of the generated traffic costs to those responsible, no suggestions are made as to how this situation could be improved. The group continues to recommend a concentration on lines and services which are profitable and the abandonment of regional lines and a part of the goods traffic. This suggests therefore, an enterprise which limits the passenger services to the main and a few profitable regional lines, such as Luzern-Bern, and to the transport of bulk goods.

According to the group, regional SBB or private lines should be merged to serve a given region, for example the Mittel-Thurgau and the Bodensee-Toggenburg Railway with the SBB Weidenfelden - St.Gallen, Will - Wattwil and Schaffhausen - Rorschach, plus the network of postal and private bus lines. Such a group would be the property of the Cantons, Communities and private enterprises. Activities such as the maintenance of rolling stock and infrastructure should be delegated to specialised private firms. Reforming the SBB includes a transparent rendering of accounts, absolute freedom of decision in the market and ownership of the infrastructure by the Confederation. It is recommended that a holding company, with subsidiaries, should be formed in which other railway companies, Cantons, Communities, private enterprises and organisations may take part.

The proposals have been met with disapproval and amazement, despite the forecast of savings of more than Sfr 2 billions annually.

Many well known experts agree that such a "reform" is the wrong way to solve the financial dilemma of the SBB. In their opinion the serious consequences will be:

- a) The abandonment of regional railway lines in favour of bus lines and road transport.
- b) A substantial reduction or the complete abandonment of the sequential timetable, in particular by Regional Companies. This will result in an increase of private car use with all its inconveniences; higher environmental damage, traffic jams and the resultant clamour for even more roads and highways.
- c) A substantial decrease of SBB passenger and goods business, because passengers will not be willing to wait at junctions and, once goods have been loaded onto a lorry, they will travel on it to their destination.

In short, the quality of the Swiss railway and transport system will not only drop, but it is doubtful whether the SBB's financial situation will be restored again.

*[Editorial note: As British readers will know, these proposals echo the Beeching cuts, which produced exactly the results set out in the previous paragraph, with the exception of the abandonment of a sequenced timetable, since BR didn't have one to abandon. It is not therefore so much a matter of opinion, but rather a demonstrable fact.]*

The core of the problem is the fact that energy in all its forms is too cheap in Switzerland. This is especially so for petrol or diesel fuel. Despite a price increase of 20 rappen per litre accepted by the Swiss voter on 7 March 1993, they still have the lowest prices on the Continent; this in a country with one of the world's highest net income per capita. No road user in Switzerland directly carries the full traffic costs he incurs. A considerable part of these costs are paid for by taxpayers in the shape of subsidies, many appearing under such headings as subsidies to financially weak

Cantons for avalanche protection, afforestation etc and through higher taxes in Communities and Cantons to support departments for intensive care of road accident victims, rehabilitation centres and so forth. It is by no means fanciful to consider the subsidies paid to railways at least in part as that which should be born by the road and air traffic.

Contrary to what is maintained by the Road Lobby, these unpaid costs can be determined with considerable accuracy. For the Zürich conurbation these "external costs" (maintenance of roads, loss of land and its products, economic losses caused by accidents, air pollution, the cost of protection against traffic noise, special road police, traffic jams, etc) amounted to more than one billion Swiss Francs in 1992. For Switzerland as a whole, *these costs amount to 25 billion Swiss Francs per year!*

On the other hand, the railway is 19 times less polluting than cars and lorries, occupies 9 times less ground space, produces 6 times less noise, 25 times less accidents and consumes 10 times less energy for the same amount of passenger kilometers.

What is to be done? It is quite clear that energy prices must be raised, but in the opinion of many citizen, it would be wrong to do this solely to feed the cash boxes of the Confederation. A steering effect is in fact required. This can be done by the "ecology bonus". First, the external costs have to be determined for each form of transport. Gradually, the energy prices will be raised accordingly. The receipts would be paid back in the form of a bonus to those having used the means of transport causing the lowest external costs, such as users of railways, tramways, buses and lake boats. Of course the car user has to get his share of the bonus, but only if he is using his car for less than 10000 km per year. The average in Switzerland is, at present 15000 km. An exception to this rule would be cars in public service, police, doctors, ambulances etc.

The consequences are evident: enterprises and private individuals would chose the cheapest means of transport. This would undoubtedly be the railway, even if it would need to raise its fares and charges to obtain benefits. The Confederation's budget could be relieved

of the burden of hidden or open subsidies. There would be a welcome side effect on the environment. The arguments of opponents that such a bonus could not be made to work are invalid, since every owner of a car or truck already has to present his vehicle for an annual check on waste gas emissions. The mileage could be checked at the same time. The argument that the ecology bonus could do considerable harm to the economy is ridiculous, since each enterprise has the free choice of the form of transport it uses and furthermore it can plan urgent transport in such a way that it can still receive the bonus.

We must also be aware of the need to invest properly in railways should we accept the "ecology bonus" with its substantial increase in rail transport. For some time, investment in both road and rail could be based on repayable loans at low interest rates, funded by the energy tax. There are three points to be considered:

- a) The introduction of Computer Integrated Railway Operation, This means a 30-40% increase of line capacity, because by controlling the train by means of data feed through a loop between the rails not only allows higher speeds to be achieved, but the blocks can be shorter as well. Braking can be applied over several blocks.
- b) The introduction of tilting body technology on curved regional lines to obtain a higher average speed, making the railway still more attractive.
- c) A very refined marketing policy meeting the needs of the public as far as possible so as to reduce the desire to travel by car. This policy not only includes the provision of very comfortable trains, but also timetables geared to provide attractive services, coupled with a thorough tariff reform in favour of those who make most use of the railway.

Fortunately, the *Groupe de Réflexion* has only made proposals. It is quite certain that the Cantons will refuse to carry the financial consequences, but there are other points which are not so clear. If NEAT is to be built, then the feeder lines have also to be built or modernises. It is reasonable to expect that the

*Continmued on page 25*



Lyss and Yverdon - Fribourg.

The accompanying map shows where the axe will fall.

Saving will also be effected by further reductions in "on train" staff and by increasing the number of unstaffed stations and halts as well as reducing the length of trains. More line closures to passengers cannot be discounted.

A report in *Railway Gazette International* says that the *Groupe de Reflexion* final report, published in June also has led to discussion of the possibility of handing regional lines to private operators or locally funded operators but an arrangement whereby local authorities specify the services and fund them is more likely.

Now where have we heard all this before?

I am indebted to Richard Pinner who brought the newspaper report to my attention. Any errors in interpretation and translation are however, mine.

A.J.Pike

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commission, in all its "wisdom" will agree to open these feeder lines to normal traffic. Finally, we still have in Switzerland the right to decide by referendum whether we want to abandon a substantial part of our railway system or not. Nevertheless the Swiss Federal Railways are truly at a turning point in their history, should this "reform" be carried out.

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## Questionnaire Results

The summary of the 1993 renewal response.

**The final tally** of the annual questionnaire when 412 renewals had been received produced no great surprises. For the third year running, John Jesson's Signalling articles topped the poll by a handsome margin, with Giles Della Gana's Railway History feature just edging ahead of that perennial favourite, the Notepad. The Editor's personal favourite, our President's *The Doctor and the Inspection Car* came fourth, not very far behind with Gary Olson's *Furka Oberalp* fifth. John Jesson also featured in sixth place with his article on the Gotthard Trams then, ignoring the diffuse voting for assorted news items and travelogues and returning to specifics, Alan Pike's *Pilatusbahn* series came seventh.

Placings for the contents are:

Prototype articles	365 (462)
Prototype news items	342 (425)
Manufacturer's information	334 (274)
Travelogue	267 (323)
Modelling	219 (292)
Non-railway Transport	162 (138)
Advertising	111 (165)

This shows very little change from last year. (Figures for 1992 survey in brackets). The general feeling was that members want much of the same, with a little more emphasis on the BLS.

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## Eisenbahn Amateur 1994

**At the 1993 Conference** of the SVEA, to which our Society is affiliated, it was reluctantly agreed that the base price of *Eisenbahn Amateur* to clubs would have to rise by some 15%. The cover price has already been raised to SFr. 9. The Committee has been able to minimise the increase, but it must be remembered that the calculations have to take into account potential fluctuations in currency (usually against the Pound Sterling) and increasing postal charges from Switzerland to the members. However, it is considered that purchase of the magazine through the SRS scheme gives very good value for money.

**An application form is enclosed with this copy of Swiss Express. Please send it in well before the due date as no late applications can be entertained. Remember, you cannot join the scheme part way through the year.**

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## The Great Renumbering

Two private railway traction units were observed carrying computerised numbers in June 1993. Sudostbahn Am4/4 61 was seen on 16 June outshopped in orange livery as Am 846 641 and BLS tractor No.87 was seen on 14 June carrying its new number 235 087.