13

No Way to Run a Railroad

The Decline of the Great Northern Railway of Ireland after Partition

C. R. G. MURRAY

Introduction

The partition of Ireland fell heavily upon the Great Northern Railway of Ireland (GNR(I)). Prior to partition, it had been the most profitable of Ireland's private railway companies as a result of its dominance of the Dublin/Belfast route. It became, overnight, an international private railway company, obliged to conform to regulations imposed by both Ireland and Northern Ireland and responsible for managing new and frequently changing customs and regulatory requirements on the goods it carried. Its track crossed the border seventeen times, six of them on a single stretch at the 'serpentine Monaghan–Fermanagh boundary'.[1] The railway became increasingly associated with cross-border smuggling, and was immortalised (as the 'Southern Railway of Northern Ireland') in the 1937 Ealing comedy *Oh, Mr Porter!* The difficulties of operating the railway in these circumstances, and in the face of increased competition from roads, frequently mirrored the chaotic scenes of the fictionalised Buggleskelly station. Following a steady decline in the railway's fortunes from the 1920s onwards, the company was jointly nationalised by Ireland and Northern Ireland in 1953. This operation of the railway line by intergovernmental agreement was a leap beyond the previous tentative cooperation in a commercial venture in the context of the Erne hydro-electric scheme.[2] This chapter explores how two governments which

[1] E. Patterson, *The Great Northern Railway of Ireland* (Oakwood, 1962), 66.
[2] M. Kennedy, *Division and Consensus: The Politics of Irish Cross-Border Relations, 1925–1969* (Dublin, 2000), 135.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

ordinarily did everything they could not to engage with each other found themselves jointly operating a railway.

This rare moment of cooperation provoked intense discussions between Stormont and the UK government, with the UK Treasury using the opportunity to tutor Northern Ireland in public spending discipline. It demanded the closure of unprofitable branch lines, precipitating the shuttering of almost all railway infrastructure west of the Bann, and blocked the purchase of German locomotives in favour of more expensive alternatives manufactured in Great Britain. This intervention undermined efforts to modernise the railway, which was dissolved in 1958, its assets being split between the Ulster Transport Authority (UTA) and Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ). This unusual episode thus involves the impact of sudden establishment of borders, efforts to mitigate barriers to trade in goods, North–South cooperation, the looming influence of German industry, a crisis in public service provision in Northern Ireland and fraught relationships between London, Belfast and Dublin. As such, it foreshadows the current context of post-Brexit Northern Ireland and illustrates the challenge of mitigating the effects of partition when the main actors find themselves at loggerheads.

Partition and the Railway

Twentieth-century Irish history often particularises the experience of partition, but partition was just one part of the extensive process of 'borderisation' across Europe after the First World War.[3] After 1922, the border became a dividing line between two polities whose leaders not only avoided direct engagement with each other but actively sought to define their own governance order against the other. From 1 April 1923, barriers to trade became extensive and quickly curtailed the now cross-border economy. The Common Travel Area enabled cross-border travel, but it did little to facilitate cross-border trade.[4] Railways, however, provided an enduring link across this boundary. They sometimes punctured this narrative of border-as-barrier altogether. The 'condom train' of 1971 demonstrated the absurdities of the Irish government's ongoing

[3] P. Leary, *Unapproved Routes: Histories of the Irish Border 1922–1972* (Oxford, 2016), 11.
[4] See C. Murray and D. Wincott, 'Partition by Degrees: Routine Exceptions in Border and Immigration Practice between the UK and Ireland, 1921–1972' (2020) 47 *Journal of Legal Studies* S145, S154–S158.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

efforts to restrict access to contraception,[5] whilst the 'peace train', which began in 1989, sought to generate pressure for the removal of Articles 2 and 3 of Ireland's Constitution on the basis that they were being used to justify 'a campaign of murder' in Northern Ireland.[6] But more often they became a rare point of interrelationship which both governments had to manage.

Not that this was welcome to the new administrations in Dublin and Belfast. From the earliest days of partition, Sir James Craig was preoccupied by the potential for his counterparts in Dublin to use the Government of Ireland Act's Council of Ireland arrangements, intended to facilitate cooperation on a range of cross-border issues, to influence Northern Ireland's internal affairs.[7] This concern was acute in the context of railways because Dublin had a particular interest in the rail connections into Donegal, which all traversed Northern Ireland's territory.[8] The operation of the Council of Ireland was, however, delayed in 1922 and then dissolved following the agreement to set aside the Boundary Commission's outcomes in 1925.[9] Liam Cosgrave's administration wanted to have nothing to do with Northern Ireland or to be seen to rely on any part of the Government of Ireland Act's arrangements.[10] The GNR(I) was also excluded from the statutory amalgamation of railway companies which operated entirely within the Free State.[11]

This is not to say that the GNR(I) was left to its own devices. Even as it recovered from attacks on railway infrastructure and rolling stock during the War of Independence and Civil War, its stations and practices needed to be adapted to handle customs checks from 1 April 1923 onwards. Goods trains were subject to complex arrangements, with dutiable goods having to be grouped together in separate wagons wherever possible[12]

[5] E. Cloatre and M. Enright, 'On the Perimeter of the Lawful: Enduring Illegality in the Irish Family Planning Movement, 1972–1985' (2017) 44 *Journal of Legal Studies* 471, 476.
[6] D. Norris, 'History Takes a New Track' (1989) 279 *Fortnight* 14, 14.
[7] Government of Ireland Act 1920 (UK), s.10(2).
[8] See Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) CAB/9/F/11/1, Letter from Sir James Craig to Directors, GNR(I) (2 February 1923), p. 1.
[9] Irish Free State Constitution Act 1922 (UK), s. 3(2) and Ireland (Confirmation of Agreement) Act 1925 (UK), s. 5.
[10] See C. Murray, 'The Partition of Ireland and the 1922 Constitution' in L. Cahillane and D. Coffey (eds.), *The Centenary of the 1922 Constitution* (London, 2024).
[11] Railways Act 1924 (Ireland). See H. Casserley, *Outline of Irish Railway History* (Newton Abbot, 1974), 147.
[12] The National Archives, UK (TNA) CUST 49/647, GNR(I): Special Circular to Staff (22 March 1923), p. 2.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

and some sealed wagons having to be excluded from customs processes if they were beginning and ending their journey in one jurisdiction but being trans-shipped through the other.[13] Passengers, however, were subject to unpredictable delays and schedules had to be adapted to accommodate customs checks on baggage at the first stop after trains crossed the border.[14] Apportionment of assets and profits for taxation purposes was also a work in progress in the inter-war decades. It took years for the railway to agree the necessary concessions with customs officials to exclude activity as banal as the sale of on-train refreshments from duty requirements,[15] and when it came to apportionment of company profits for taxation purposes, all that the Free State government could say was that ultimately this was 'really a case of expecting the Commissioner to be reasonable in his demands on the railway company'.[16] All of this dislocation took its toll. In the same month the customs border came into effect, the GNR(I) instituted the first closure of a cross-border line; people and livestock were no longer travelling cross-border to the cattle fairs which had been so important to the operation of the Castleblayney–Armagh line. These challenges deepened in the 1930s, as the Ireland–UK trade war involved regular changes in tariffs, which then gave way to wartime rationing, with both generating incentives for smuggling.[17]

The Post-War Challenges

The profitability of railways in the war years gave way to a sudden crisis for the three major railway companies operating in Northern Ireland. The tragedy of the Ballymacarrett crash in January 1945 undermined the financial stability of the Belfast & Co. Down Railway. The Unionist government planning for the UTA had involved the ambition of rolling

[13] Composite reporting forms to cover all the different classes of wagon and truck on a goods train would not be agreed between the customs authorities in Dublin and Belfast until 1950; TNA, CUST 49/3386, Customs and Excise, Belfast, to Traffic Manager, GNR (I) (24 October 1950), p. 1.

[14] TNA, CUST 49/647, Notes of Interview between the GNR(I) Goods Manager and W. Young (Customs and Excise, Belfast) (6 March 1923), para. 10.

[15] TNA, CUST 49/979, W. Bailie (Traffic Manager, GNR(I)) to J. Large (Customs and Excise, Belfast) (19 December 1927), p. 1.

[16] Dáil Debates, Ernest Blythe (Minister for Finance), vol. 40, no. 20, Speech 147 (3 December 1931). Railways (Valuation for Rating) Act 1931 (Ireland), section 6(c).

[17] See B. Evans, *Ireland during the Second World War: Farewell to Plato's Cave* (Manchester, 2014), 98–99.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

together, in one step, all public transport services operating solely within Northern Ireland's boundaries under a single public body.[18] But with the Belfast & Co. Down Railway 'heading rapidly towards bankruptcy', the government was obliged to expedite this element of its plan and roll it into the newly created UTA in October 1948.[19] The other parts of the puzzle were even more complicated. The Northern Counties Committee had already become part of British Railways when its parent company, the London, Midland and Scottish Railway, had been nationalised in January 1948. Sir Basil Brooke's government, notwithstanding its aversion to collectivisations, could not countenance that such an important element of Northern Ireland's transport policy would be directed from London, and promptly bought out British Railways for the grossly inflated figure of £2.7 million. With the UTA immediately saddled with extensive liabilities, the Transport Tribunal began the task of pruning unprofitable lines. In the same period the GNR(I) launched the 'Enterprise Express' as a non-stop service on the Belfast–Dublin route, designed to reduce mid-journey delays by ensuring that customs formalities were dealt with at either end of the line. The initial use of ageing steam locomotives, in part because the upheavals since the 1920s had deterred investment, meant that the service was beset by unreliability. The 1948 purchase of new steam engines was a backward step, with the company buying twenty new diesel railcars just two years later. These investments did not immediately restore confidence in the service, but did increase expenditure, and by 1950 the company was warning the governments in Belfast and Dublin that its losses were unsustainable.

In this period the Northern Ireland government found itself caught in a rail policy trap. Even after the nationalisation of most public transport services in 1948, Northern Ireland's law continued to be designed to regulate private providers rather than to run a nationalised railway service. This was a visible manifestation of Unionist aversion to nationalisation; as late as 1943 the records of the Cabinet sub-committee show that Brooke 'found some difficulty in understanding the force of the arguments put forward . . . in favour of fusion of the transport interests as opposed to co-ordination, as provided for in the act of 1935'.[20]

[18] The legislation imposed a duty on the UTA to provide for an integrated system of road and rail transport; Transport Act (NI) 1948, s. 5.

[19] PRONI, CAB/4/721, Position of the BCDR: Memorandum by the Minister of Finance (30 June 1947), p. 1.

[20] PRONI, DEV/10/50/C/42, 'Northern Ireland Transport' (26 August 1943), p. 1.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

Northern Ireland's Transport Act did not, for example, grant ministers powers to uplift fares equivalent to the legislation covering British Rail.[21] Even if ministers had such powers, and they had in essence eschewed the opportunity to include them in the legislation, the Northern Ireland government ordinarily baulked at the prospect of passing on increases in costs of public services to the electorate.[22] Whereas the British Transport Corporation spent the 1950s borrowing from the UK Treasury to manage its deficit, this was not an option that was open to the UTA, which was formally required, but always struggled, to operate in an economically viable manner. Industrial relations in the period were also strongly influenced by events in Great Britain. The year 1955 saw Northern Ireland rail workers undertake a prolonged strike alongside their British Rail counterparts, notwithstanding the distinct public bodies operating in Northern Ireland, and secure comparable wage rises.[23] These challenges were exacerbated by the increasingly parlous state of Northern Ireland's public finances; Northern Ireland was being pulled in policy directions it could scarcely afford. All of these concerns saw loud voices, including Sir Anthony Babington (a former Attorney General, appellate judge and now Chairman of the Transport Tribunal), argue for the prioritisation of road over rail in the 1950s.[24] This invidious policy picture aligns with Patrick Buckland's conclusion, with regard to Northern Ireland's welfare policy, that the major beneficiary of devolution in the middle part of the twentieth century was London, 'being relieved of direct responsibility for Northern Ireland's social problems'.[25]

The GNR(I) crisis thus saw Brooke's administration wrongfooted by a policy issue where its instincts pulled in contrary directions. Ministers were concerned that Dublin would buy out the railway and use it as an (expensive) way to embarrass the Unionist government. William McCleery, perhaps the most conciliatory of Brooke's

[21] Road and Rail Transport Act (NI) 1935 and Transport Act (NI) 1948 lacked comparable provisions to the Transport Act 1947 (UK), s. 85.

[22] See P. Greer, *Road versus Rail: Documents on the History of Public Transport in Northern Ireland 1921–1948* (Belfast, 1982), 128–129.

[23] The Transport Act (NI) 1948 did allow for the UTA to make proposals for fare increases to the transport tribunal, in an effort to shield the government from criticism, but it was reluctant to become a lightning rod for public complaint and repeatedly deferred fare increases even as the wage increases increased the UTA's operating costs.

[24] See A. Babington, *Report of the Transport Tribunal* (Belfast, 1952), Cmd. 310.

[25] P. Buckland, *The Factory of Grievances: Devolved Government in Northern Ireland, 1921–39* (Dublin, 1979), 175.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

ministers, was thus dispatched to Dublin to try to feel out the coalition government's position. In August 1950 the GNR(I) crisis thus precipitated the first ministerial meeting between Dublin and Belfast in a quarter of a century.[26] But even when these concerns were allayed, with McCleery building up a rapport with his Dublin counterparts, the costs associated with the railway made financially conservative Unionist politicians blanch.[27] The financial pressures generated by the inadequacies of the Government of Ireland Act's terms, moreover, had recently seen it make extraordinary pleadings to the UK Treasury to enable Northern Ireland to match the nationalisation of healthcare provision.[28] When McCleery first mooted the possibility of line closures west of the Bann in 1950 in response to the parlous state of the GNR(I), he faced an intense backlash from both Nationalists and Unionists in the Northern Ireland Parliament. Abandoning these lines invited considerable embarrassment, but the prospect of nationalising the GNR(I) could not be easily reconciled with Stormont's straitened circumstances. For its part, the Irish government was concerned that it would get stuck with the costs of subsidising loss-making railway lines as Belfast's public transport policy shifted from rail to road. Its favoured solution of an All-Ireland Transport Board, however, offended Unionist sensibilities.[29]

Against this complex policy backdrop, talks between Dublin and Belfast over the railway dragged on for months. Even as the collapse of the railway appeared imminent in January 1951, the shareholders added a further complicating factor, rejecting an emergency offer by the two governments to purchase the railway company for £3.9 million, and holding out for a valuation of over twice that amount.[30] The governments' initial purchase price offer, an average of the GNR(I)'s stock exchange value over the previous three years, substantially overvalued a company in decline. The Shareholders' Protection Association lobbied representatives in the Dáil and Stormont throughout 1951, only

[26] Kennedy, n. 2 above, 124–125.
[27] See, for comparable pressures regarding social security, Buckland, n. 25 above, 159.
[28] See G. Walker, *A History of the Ulster Unionist Party: Protest, Pragmatism and Pessimism* (Manchester, 2004), 148–150.
[29] Kennedy, n. 2 above, 127–128.
[30] The UTA prepared a detailed timeline of the two governments' negotiations with shareholders in 1951, from which this summary is drawn; PRONI, UTA/23/CD/30, 'Notes on the G.N.R.(I.) Position' (1952), pp. 1–4.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

accepting an improved offer of £4.5 million that November.[31] Following the shareholder agreement,[32] corresponding legislation was introduced in the Dáil and Stormont to give effect to the new arrangements, but would not be enacted until 1953, with the two governments subsidising over £2 million in losses in the interim whilst the complex negotiations on the management of the jointly nationalised entity proceeded.[33] Although the Great Northern Railway Board (GNRB) was established to manage the railway, with the two governments each appointing five members to the Board, which was tasked with the priority of balancing the railway's revenues and outgoings,[34] there was a persistent gloom around the legislative debates. As Seán Lemass informed the Dáil, 'one of the most difficult problems which arose during the negotiations' was not over how to run cross-border services, but was instead 'to devise a procedure for the termination of such common services'.[35] Both ministers had to sign off on any termination of cross-border services, and if they did not, the matter was put to a Tribunal.[36] Even as the agreement was signed to aplomb in Belfast in August 1953, McCleery sounded a cautionary note: 'It is well to realize that the difficulties which overtook the company will not disappear overnight with the passing from the old to the new.'[37] For Micheal Kennedy, the closer cooperation became to becoming a reality, the more the project assumed the appearance of 'a long-term liquidation plan', with tracts of the corresponding Great Northern Railway Acts providing the arrangements for winding down aspects of the GNR(I)'s operations.[38] But if both governments were taking some notice of the pressure that the GNR(I) was under, and preparing for the worst, this cannot be read as

[31] Dáil Debates, Seán Lemass (Minister for Industry and Commerce), vol. 138, no. 1, Speech 76 (15 April 1953). Great Northern Railway Act 1953 (Ireland), s. 46.

[32] Shareholders continued to loudly complain that they had been the subject of 'blackmail' and that 'the Roman Catholic South and Protestant North had combined to commit a wicked act' as the preparation of the complex legislative arrangements delayed payments; 'Delay in payment of G.N.R. acquisition price', *Belfast Newsletter* (28 February 1953).

[33] Unionist detractors in Stormont, such as Frederick Lloyd Dodd, raised objections that there was no relief on duty as the railway moved materials for its own maintenance between the jurisdictions, meaning that 'there was little possibility of the railway being maintained at a properly equipped and highly efficient level'; 'Move to withdraw G.N.R. Bill at Stormont', *Northern Whig* (14 May 1953).

[34] Great Northern Railway Act 1953 (Ireland), s. 7.

[35] Dáil Debates, Seán Lemass (Minister for Industry and Commerce), vol. 138, no. 1, Speech 78 (15 April 1953).

[36] Great Northern Railway Act 1953 (Ireland), s. 24.

[37] 'McCleery and Lemass Sign Agreement', *Northern Whig* (11 August 1953), p. 1.

[38] Kennedy, n. 2 above, 136.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

meaning that the collapse of the joint ownership scheme was an inevitability. To do so would be to neglect the (admittedly fitful) efforts to make this experiment in intergovernmental cooperation work after 1953.

The Operation of Joint Ownership, 1953–1958

The Northern Ireland government had aspirations to run public transport in a manner comparable to Great Britain, thereby demonstrating that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom. Nationalising the GNR(I) was part of this ambition. McCleery appointed the former general manager of the GNR(I), George Howden, as Chairman of the UTA to help integrate and coordinate services.[39] The most pressing problem, however, remained how to pay for the inflated cost of its acquisition. The Unionist government had some reason to expect that London might be receptive to providing financial backing for the Railway Agreement. It had already established a track record of 'evading' the strictures of the 1920 Act's finance arrangements in order to sustain public service provision.[40] In 1939, the UK Treasury had made an extraordinary subvention to Northern Ireland, writing off a large element of the imperial contribution, in part to support public transport policy.[41] The Treasury had, at the start of the 1950s, written off £1.5 million of the debt related to the purchase of the Northern Counties Committee railway, amounting to more than half of the purchase price, when Belfast's Ministry of Finance belatedly realised it had overbid for the asset.[42] These interventions gave rise to an expectation that the UK Treasury would support 'relative parity' in public service provision.[43] Throughout the GNR(I) crisis, moreover, the UK government had been broadly supportive of Belfast and Dublin adopting a cooperative approach, and after the agreement was concluded the Home Secretary

[39] When the new UTA Chairman heralded the prospects for greater coordination, Sir Anthony Babington remained sceptical that this could make a meaningful difference in light of the rise of the car; 'Tribunal Chairman says during U.T.A. hearing: "A Revolution Is Taking Place in Transport"', *Northern Whig* (22 July 1953).

[40] M. Wallace, *Northern Ireland: 50 Years of Self-Government* (New York, 1971), 157.

[41] See P. Arthur, *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland Problem* (Belfast, 2000), 25–27.

[42] TNA, T 233/1752, B. Maginess (NI Finance Minister) to R. Butler (Chancellor of the Exchequer) (11 July 1955), p. 1.

[43] P. Robson, 'Aspects of Public Expenditure in Northern Ireland' (1952) 19 *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* 38, 43.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

highlighted it in the Commons as the pre-eminent example of developments which 'show a lessening of the tension, and that is very acceptable to everyone in this House'.[44] Behind this public veneer of Home Office support, however, the Treasury seethed, and its senior officials had long awaited an opportunity to make 'these parochial die-hards . . . face up to a touch of reality'.[45] The events which unfolded have remained difficult to piece together because key archival holdings within Northern Ireland remain closed, and it is only by reviewing the records generated by the UK Treasury that an account emerges of the Unionist government's efforts to defend the new arrangements.[46]

The first year of the GNR(I)'s existence as a jointly owned public body allowed for a review of its operations by the new Board, which completed an extensive report on the challenges facing the railway in September 1954.[47] It made for unhappy reading; much of the GRN(I) network was loss-making – to the tune of £457,000 in the 1953/54 financial year – and had been subject to prolonged underinvestment. Much of the historiography of subsequent events – insofar as analysis has touched upon this largely forgotten episode at all – has combined the Northern Ireland government's immediate efforts to cut GRN(I) costs alongside the previous cuts to the UTA rail network, indicating that it had never been committed to making a success of the joint venture.[48] The Northern Ireland government's response to this bleak assessment, however, was to attempt to back the GNRB, and seek additional financial support from London. Finance Minister Brian Maginess was instructed to approach the UK's Conservative government in July 1955 on the basis that 'much of the railway system in Northern Ireland should be retained', including the two different mainlines between Belfast and Derry-Londonderry (the one running south of Lough Neagh being the GNR (I) line), 'and be equipped with new motive units using diesel traction,

[44] Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, HC Deb., vol. 512, col. 284 (3 March 1953). See also TNA, DO 35/3910 'Great Northern Railway' (1948–1952). Leading Unionist politicians recognised many within the 1950s Conservative governments as 'sympathetic'; B. Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), 22.

[45] See D. McMahon, *Republicans and Imperialists: Anglo-Irish Relations in the 1930s* (New Haven, CT, 1984), 278–279.

[46] There is little that can continue to justify the closure to the public of a record like this, seventy years after the events in question; PRONI, CAB/9/F/140/31, Great Northern Railway Company (I): Future of the Company (1952–1958).

[47] TNA, T 233/1752, GNRB, *Report on General Investigation into the Working of the G.N.R.* (15 September 1954).

[48] Kennedy, n. 2 above, 141–145.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

and other rolling stock', which would require 'a very substantial sum of money'.[49] The justification for this policy was threefold. First, it would protect the employment of 4,800 railway workers. Second, the removal of rail facilities would impact upon 'Northern Ireland's prospects of future economic development'. Third, extensive closures would 'isolate' western parts of Northern Ireland 'severing their links with the capital'.[50]

Maginess' overture was expected; indeed, it had already been undermined. Just over a week before his letter arrived at the Treasury, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, and Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Douglas Harkness, had made one of his regular visits to London to liaise with his UK government counterparts. There he had informed the Third Secretary, Edmund Compton, of all the weaknesses he perceived in the GNR(I) plan, and in particular that much of the required outlay of £5 million 'will be invested South of the Border where the main workshops and facilities of the G.N.R. are'.[51] Any capital expenditure on the GNR(I) was thus dismissed as 'throwing good money after bad'.[52] These conclusions set the tone for the memorandum prepared for the Chancellor of the Exchequer the following month, which concluded that the rail system was a mess and that much of the existing capital expenditure would have to be written off: 'Strictly financial considerations would indicate that the railways ought to be closed altogether; but this does not really seem to be practical politics, and it is fairly clear that some sort of railway system will have to be kept in Northern Ireland.'[53]

The memorandum advocated the closure of almost all of the GNR(I) network other than the mainlines between Dublin and Belfast and potentially Portadown and Derry-Londonderry, on the basis that these lines 'serve sparsely populated country … and they might well be replaced quite adequately by road transport'.[54] This, however, had implications regarding the joint ownership of the GNR(I): 'The lines in question are probably of greater importance to the Government of Ireland since … they offer the only direct rail link between the Republic and Donegal; in that case let the Government of the Irish

[49] Maginess, n. 42 above, 2–3.
[50] Ibid., 3.
[51] TNA, T 233/1752, E. Compton, 'Northern Ireland Transport' (18 July 1955), p. 1.
[52] Ibid., 1.
[53] TNA, T 233/1752, Memorandum: Northern Ireland Transport (15 August 1955), para. 12.
[54] Ibid., para. 13.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

Republic exercise its right to keep them open and meet the losses incurred in running them.'[55]

Treasury officials also took a dim view of the lack of control that the Northern Ireland government was exercising over public transport fares and charges.[56] Overburdened by the pressing issue of speculation over UK exchange rate policy, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, R. A. Butler, only weighed into the discussions in mid-August. He held out the potential for some 'fresh capital' and that some of the existing losses might be 'written off', but only on the implicit basis of Treasury officials taking a lead on these decisions.[57] At the resultant meeting, the Treasury officials delayed any conclusion on dieselisation until line closures had taken effect.[58]

Through all of these back and forward discussions between Belfast and London, the GNRB waited. In the middle of July 1955, after the Northern Ireland Cabinet had agreed to back modernisation, the Ministry of Commerce had sought to immediately give the green light to diesel purchases to help stem operating losses. They were promptly rebuffed by Harkness in the Ministry of Finance, on the basis that any decision rested with London:

> It is clear that public transport in Northern Ireland is bankrupt unless there is a very substantial injection of State assistance ... [I]n these circumstances and now that we have gone to the Treasury for advice and assistance, it would be to my mind quite wrong and improper to agree to any capital expenditure on the part of the undertakings until we know the outcome of my Minister's approach to the Chancellor.[59]

Harkness, of course, was well aware of the direction that the Treasury would take. The discussions between the UK Treasury and the Northern Ireland government, however, were taking place in a closed box, with neither the Irish government nor the GNRB having any impression of the true position. A month later the Chairman of the GNRB made it clear to

[55] Ibid., para. 13.

[56] Lord Glentoran was instructed to upbraid Sir Anthony Babington for the 'embarrassment' of the transport tribunal's refusal to allow increased charges in the face of the losses that public transport in Northern Ireland was facing; PRONI, COM/64/4/74, Memorandum to the Minister of Commerce (25 July 1955), para. 4.

[57] PRONI, COM/64/4/74, R. Butler to B. Maginess (17 August 1955), p. 1.

[58] PRONI, COM/64/4/74, 'Future of Transport in Northern Ireland: Notes on a Meeting at H.M. Treasury' (1 September 1955), p. 3.

[59] PRONI, COM/64/4/74, D. Harkness (Ministry of Finance) to J. McKeown (Ministry of Commerce) (22 July 1955), p. 1.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

Lord Glentoran, in the most extraordinarily frank terms, that this was no way to run a railroad:

> Who or what is causing the delay in giving a decision on the proposals submitted by the Board? I am told that it is not the Government here [Dublin] and your officials say the bottle-neck is in the Department of Finance or alternatively in London. A member of a Cabinet is a person like any other individual, so is a Civil Servant. A person takes a day, a week, or it may be a month to consider a given proposition and comes to a conclusion. . . . Any ordinary Board of Directors would decide the issue at one meeting. . . . Is a railway needed or not?[60]

He would continue to wait.

Another year was lost as line closures were announced and put to the respective transport tribunals for consideration without any movement on questions of investment for modernisation. Compton concluded that the £3 million paid by the Northern Ireland government for its share of the GNR(I) was a 'dead loss' and 'more loses are in prospect unless branch lines are closed down and more capital is put up (mainly in the form of diesel engines) to make the surviving main line (Dublin to Belfast) pay'.[61] These losses would, he fumed, eventually fall on the UK Treasury because of Northern Ireland's now-negative imperial contribution. The solution was intense Treasury oversight of all decisions around the GNR(I). The UK government would agree no further investment, and would certainly not sign off on the diesel engines from Germany which the GNRB had sought to purchase, without the Northern Ireland government following through with swingeing cuts. As the Second Secretary to the Treasury, Sir Herbert Brittain, confirmed: import '[d]uty must be charged on the German locomotives' if they were to operate on GNR(I) lines, even if they were formally based in Dublin.[62] This particular public procurement saga would rumble on into 1957, when even under a fresh tender process the German-manufactured engines remained cheaper and would be available more promptly than their British-manufactured competitors. The Northern Ireland government cavilled that 'if we disagree and say "buy British" (in part!) the South are likely to ask us to foot the bill' and wondered whether 'the U.K. declared intention of association . . .

[60] PRONI, COM/64/4/74, A. Reynolds (Chairman, GNRB) to Lord Glentoran (Minister of Commerce, NI) (18 August 1955), p. 1.
[61] TNA, T 233/1752, E. Compton (Third Secretary, UK Treasury) to Mr Painter (UK Treasury) (6 November 1956), p. 1.
[62] TNA, T 233/1752, Sir Herbert Brittain, Handwritten Note (4 June 1956).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

with the proposed European free market' had any impact on the Treasury's position.[63] The Treasury remained implacable in its opposition, and until the 1970s the Enterprise service would largely be left to run using a hodgepodge of diesel railcar sets, designed for commuter rather than intercity services.

Having exerted such pressure on the Northern Ireland government to cut costs, the UK Treasury were unsurprised when the North and South transport tribunals, tasked with making decisions on the future of GNR(I) lines under the 1953 Acts, split over whether branch lines west of the Bann should be closed. Sir Douglas Harkness (newly knighted) is described as having a 'wicked gleam in his eye' as he reported that the Treasury's pressure was having its desired effect in terms of the retrenchment of the GNR(I) network in 1956: 'The next stage is for the N.I. Government to proceed with the closure, it being open to the Eire Government, if they wish to prevent it, to provide the extra finance.'[64] By 1958, as a result of the cuts required by the UK government, the Dublin–Belfast GNR(I) mainline was the only remaining railway to cross the Ireland/Northern Ireland border. The Portadown–Derry/Londonderry mainline was also slated for closure, but would receive a series of short-term reprieves until the final axe fell after the Benson report of 1963.[65] The final GNRB annual report bemoaned the lack of response from the governments in Dublin and London to its efforts to 'rehabilitate and modernise' the railway, but these complaints do not reveal the role that the UK Treasury was playing behind the scenes.[66]

The Treasury's careful choreography, calibrated to shift some of the public blame for the closure of so much of the network onto Dublin, nonetheless came unstuck in June 1957 when Lord Glentoran, Belfast's Minister of Commerce, announced that the Northern Ireland government intended to terminate the railway agreement at the five-year review point stipulated in the 1953 Agreement.[67] As a result, Seán Lemass could inform the Dáil that 'even if the Government here were prepared to meet

[63] TNA, T 233/1752, J. Morrison (NI Ministry of Finance) to S. Lees (UK Treasury) (12 March 1957), p. 1.
[64] TNA, T 233/1752, E. Compton, Northern Ireland Transport (6 November 1956), p. 1.
[65] H. Benson, *Northern Ireland Railways: Report* (Belfast, 1963), Cmd 458.
[66] GNRB, Fifth (and Final) Annual Report and Accounts (1958), p. 3.
[67] See Kennedy, n. 2 above, 145.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

the heavy cost of subsidising rail transport within the Six-County area, the termination of the agreement made that course impossible'.[68] Even at this point, the files indicate that the Brookeborough government's direct dealings with Irish ministers were limited; the most prominent element of intergovernmental discussion related to realising Northern Ireland's share of the value of the GNRB's most significant fixed asset, the Dundalk engineering works.[69] On 1 October 1958, what was left of the GNRB was dissolved and, under an agreement between Dublin and Belfast, its assets were split between CIÉ and the UTA and liabilities divided between the two governments.[70] In a final indignity for efforts to modernise Northern Ireland's rail transport, the UTA was obliged to purchase some of the ageing, former-GNR(I), steam locomotives from CIÉ in 1963 to maintain its services.[71]

The Aftermath

It has become an easy answer to attribute the general failings of devolution in the aftermath of the Second World War in the main to the sectarianism of successive Unionist governments. This thesis was neatly summarised by Patrick Buckland: 'the power of the government was used in the interests of Unionists and Protestants, with scant regard for the interests of the region as a whole'.[72] John Whyte, however, was notably sympathetic to the Northern Ireland government when it came to transport policy:

> Railways in Northern Ireland were losing money, and, as in Britain and the Republic, the government was obliged to close lines in order to limit losses. Far from being condemned in the west for closing one line, it should have received credit for at least keeping open the other line to Derry, through Ballymena and Coleraine, for the Benson report had recommended the closure of both.[73]

[68] Dáil Debates, Seán Lemass (Minister for Industry and Commerce), vol. 169, no. 4, Speech 310 (24 June 1958).
[69] PRONI, Lord Glentoran, 'Memorandum: Great Northern Railway – Dundalk Works' (10 September 1957), pp. 1–2.
[70] Great Northern Railway Act 1958 (Ireland), s. 3.
[71] J. Rowledge, *Irish Steam Locomotive Register* (Batley, 1993), 56.
[72] P. Buckland, *A History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 1981), 72.
[73] J. Whyte, 'How Much Discrimination Was There under the Unionist Regime, 1921–68?' in T. Gallagher and J. O'Connell (eds.), *Contemporary Irish Studies* (Manchester, 1983), 1, 25–30.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

When the line it chose to preserve went through Unionist heartlands and maintained the connectivity and employment benefits for these areas, it is easy to see why sympathy for the Unionist government's predicament was in short supply. What the archival holdings illustrate, however, is the efforts of the Unionist government to keep large parts of the GNR(I) network in place. These were doomed by the UK Treasury's determination to make an example of railway cuts to force them, in the words of (the soon to be knighted) Edmund Compton, to 'pursue the path of financial rectitude'.[74] The financial settlement for devolution had undermined Northern Ireland's governance since the 1920s, and the scarcity of public resources only served to bring sectarianism in their allocation into sharp relief. These financial challenges also precipitated the decline in relations between the Conservative Party and Northern Ireland's Unionists, with the ennobled Lord Brookeborough even threatening Harold Macmillan with more equivocal support from Unionist MPs at Westminster in 1960 in order to secure more funding.[75]

The dysfunctional cooperation through the GNRB had lasted a mere five years. Even had the two governments been more minded to cooperate effectively, they would still have found themselves caught between a profound financial squeeze and the UK government's heavy-handed imposition of a shift towards a more road-centred transport policy. Notwithstanding the setback of 1958, Seán Lemass, who had effectively fronted the Irish government's efforts during the joint ownership of the GNR(I), would become synonymous with the high-profile efforts to reset relations between Ireland and Northern Ireland in the 1960s. He built on the GNR(I) experience with the olive branch of selective reductions in tariffs for products from Northern Ireland after he became taoiseach.[76] Even these initiatives were viewed with suspicion by Brookeborough's Cabinet, as being intended to 'differentiate Northern Ireland goods from those made in Great Britain', which they refused to encourage 'for political and constitutional reasons'.[77] It was not until Brookeborough was replaced as Prime Minister of Northern

[74] TNA, T 233/1752, E. Compton, Handwritten Note: Northern Ireland Transport (6 November 1956).
[75] See J. Smith, '"Ever Reliable Friends?": The Conservative Party and Ulster Unionism in the Twentieth Century' (2006) 121 *English Historical Review* 70, 97.
[76] See M. Kennedy, 'Towards Co-Operation; Seán Lemass and North–South Economic Relations: 1956–65' (1997) 24 *Irish Economic and Social History* 42, 42.
[77] PRONI, CAB/4/1161, Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet (1 June 1961), p. 4.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

Ireland by Terence O'Neill that the Stormont administration became more receptive to these overtures. Lemass' January 1965 meeting with O'Neill rapidly acquired the reputation of having inadvertently stoked intercommunal tensions within Northern Ireland which spiralled into the conflict.[78] Although such accounts set rather too much store on the Lemass–O'Neill dialogue as a catalyst for the conflict, Lemass' track record of dealings with the Northern Ireland government is a significant part of why the administrations thought they could achieve something substantive in 1965.

The failure of the GNRB initiative has had impacts which have persisted to the present day. Its legacy is keenly felt in the deficiencies in the transport infrastructure in the north west of Ireland. The Enterprise service was maintained, under an operating arrangement negotiated between the CIÉ and UTA, but it would remain subject to sustained underinvestment, and from the start of the conflict, intense security disruption, until 1997.[79] This lack of joined-up policy continues to be reflected in the Enterprise sharing tracks with the Dublin–Malahide Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) service, limiting the number of Enterprise trains and slowing the intercity service to a crawl as it nears Dublin.[80] The whole GNR(I) experiment thus has the feel of an idea out of time; it would become easier to run a cross-border railway against the backdrop of EU law,[81] which negated the need for complex customs arrangements (and which, post-Brexit, persists in this regard under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Protocol). There was, moreover, no established basis for cross-border dealings. After the intense period of negotiations to rescue the GNR(I) through joint ownership, the two governments sought to stand off from each other and engage only through the GNRB. Lemass would not develop any meaningful relationship with Lord Glentoran, who succeeded McCleery as Northern

[78] See C. Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York, 1972), 146–147. See also I. Hamilton, 'From Liberalism to Extremism' (1971) 17 *Conflict Studies* 5.

[79] That year saw Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann relaunch the Enterprise service with a new fleet of locomotive-hauled coaches, making it by far the most modern rail service operating on the island at the time; see Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, *Northern Ireland Railways: Financial Provision for New Rolling Stock* (2000) HC 512, para. 7.

[80] Department for Infrastructure (NI) and Department of Transport (Ireland), *All Island Strategic Rail Review Consultation Paper* (November 2021), p. 17.

[81] See J. Anderson, 'Problems of Inter-State Economic Integration: Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic in the European Community' (1994) 13 *Political Geography* 53.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

Ireland's Minister for Commerce.[82] For much of the period of joint ownership the archives illustrate that direct communications between the two governments were vanishingly rare, and ministers were left to divine their counterparts' intention through polite requests for copies of public speeches and reports. This was in no way comparable to the development of North–South cooperation under Strand 2 of the 1998 Agreement. The post-1998 arrangements should have provided an institutional foundation for a reconsideration of railway policy.[83] Railways, however, were not high on either the Irish government's or the Northern Ireland executive's list of priorities. It took many decades to return to the development of a cross-border rail policy in cooperative terms, and even today the ambitions of an all-island transport strategy faced delays caused by the stop–start nature of devolution in Northern Ireland.[84]

Conclusion

In *Oh Mr Porter!* – that classic Englishman-out-of-place comedy – the titular character finds himself waving off trains from Buggleskelly station to 'Ballyhooley, Ballyhelly and all the other Bally places', which turned out to uncomfortably reflect the level of interest shown by the UK Treasury's civil servants in Northern Ireland's transport infrastructure in the 1950s. The continued existence of the Fintona horse tram[85] into the mid-1950s was not treated by Treasury officials as a marker of persistent underdevelopment which needed to be addressed, but as illustrative of a rail transport system in Northern Ireland that was beyond reform and could be 'replaced quite adequately by road transport'.[86] The inadequacies of the devolution funding settlement had, by this juncture, generated multiple extraordinary funding requests from the Northern

[82] McCleery had been in failing health and retired from government (but not from active and senior roles in the Orange Order) immediately after the new GNR(I) arrangements were in place.

[83] See J. Anderson, L. O'Dowd and T. Wilson, 'Cross-Border Co-operation in Ireland: A New Era?' (2001) 49 *Administration* 6; and C. McCall, 'From Barrier to Bridge: Reconfiguring the Irish Border after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement' (2002) 53 *Northern Ireland Law Quarterly* 479.

[84] 'The review cannot be formally published until a Stormont minister is in place to sign it off'; L. Cullen, 'All-Island Rail Review: Londonderry to Portadown Line Recommended', *BBC News NI* (25 July 2023).

[85] Consistently misspelled as 'Filtona' in the Treasury documents, demonstrating the insouciance with which the issue was treated; Memorandum, n. 53 above, para. 13.

[86] Ibid., para. 13.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015

Ireland government and increasingly 'fraught' relations between Belfast and London.[87] When it came to the GNRB, the UK Treasury had had its fill of these efforts, adopting a narrow and costs-focused response. Key actors in this decision making would return to haunt Northern Ireland as it slid into conflict; Sir Edmund Compton would again demonstrate his loyalty to the UK government's position in producing an uncritical report into abusive interrogation practices in 1971.[88]

Amid the recriminations, in 1958 Seán Lemass publicly deplored the termination of the Railway Agreement as 'a backward step in the development of co-operation on matters of common interest affecting both parts into which our country is divided', but he laid the blame firmly upon the 'change of outlook regarding transport matters which has taken place in Belfast'.[89] There is, nonetheless, something missing from accounts which suggest that the story of the agreement was one in which '[t]he transport policies of Northern Ireland and the Republic were quite different, and the GNRB was caught in the middle'.[90] The Unionist government was, in this instance, playing a forced game. Its prioritisation, alongside Dublin, of the shareholders of an essentially bankrupt concern meant that from the outset of joint ownership they were focused on finding savings and not on the needs of the railway. They were, moreover, hemmed in by inadequate funding arrangements and a UK Treasury which did not see itself as being under any obligation to facilitate cross-border cooperation. As a result of this intervention, the best avenue for building substantive cross-border policy cooperation prior to the Northern Ireland conflict was summarily dissolved.

[87] Buckland, n. 25 above, 279.
[88] Sir E. Compton, *Report of the Enquiry into Allegations against the Security Forces of Physical Brutality in Northern Ireland Arising out of Events on the 9th August 1971* (1971), Cmnd 4823. See A. Deb and C. Murray, 'Sealing the Past: *McQuillan* and the Future of Legacy Litigation' [2022] *European Human Rights Law Review* 393, 394–395.
[89] Lemass, n. 68 above, Speech 325.
[90] Kennedy, n. 2 above, 146.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 15:08:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009797733.015