

Editorial

By Graham Smith

Norman Fowler's Transport Act is now on the statute book. For over 50 years every coach and bus service in Britain has needed a licence from the Traffic Commissioners. On October 6th that requirement was abolished for express services over 30 miles. The Act also makes it easier to get licences for short services and legalises car-sharing arrangements

Suddenly the roads are full of earthbound Freddie Laker's cutting fares, filling coaches with passengers and frightening the trains. At least one commuter carshare register is under way, set up by a young civil servant with spare time and a bank loan.

Welcome though this orgy of competition is, a nagging question has to be answered. If the government thinks it is a good idea to abolish licensing for journeys over 30 miles, why not for 29 miles? And if for 29 miles, why not for 25 miles, or ten miles, or half a mile? Why have bus licensing at all? Abolition has cut fares on long routes. It would achieve the same on short routes.

Several possible reasons why the government has left the job unfinished come to mind. Abolition would expose local authority bus services to competition. The government has already upset local authorities with its scheme to control their expenditure. It may not relish more trouble. Associations representing existing licensed bus operators have warned against a free-for-all. Licensed taxi drivers might be alarmed by the prospect of competition from unlicensed buses. Perhaps the government has had visions of cities choked with public transport and of bus stops littering the pavements.

If the government has taken account of vested interests, it should not have done. As for scare predictions of the results of a completely free market, it is never sensible to predict what a free market will produce. But one can say that in an unregulated market Problems have a way of resolving

themselves. Chaos does not often occur. When it does, the State is usually in there somewhere.

An utterly safe prediction is that in a city of privately owned streets and no traffic licensing, the means of public transport demanded by consumers in the market would operate in an orderly way; in a city of State-owned streets one cannot be so sure. That, however, is reason to denationalise the roads. It is no reason to keep the licensing of traffic. We have suffered enough from high prices, poor service and licensed transport. Let us see Norman Fowler finish off the job he has started.

Free Life