

# Boosting the economy through travel

It's a real pleasure to be here.

My thanks to Policy Exchange for staging today's speech – in front of a modest but live audience, socially distanced of course, but the first real audience I've spoken to in 15 months. Another sign that we are gradually returning to more normal ways of doing things.

And I'm also delighted to be joined by a global online audience this morning, as well, though I suspect it's somewhat smaller than the one that tuned into a certain Select Committee yesterday...

It's great that we are gradually returning to more normal ways of doing things. And that means getting on with the job of changing Britain for the better.

Because, above all, we were elected to be a reforming government.

To be bold, ambitious, and when required, to take risks.

That's how we secured an incredible head-start with our vaccination programme.

We poured millions into research, development and manufacturing, all long before success was guaranteed.

And given the scale of the crisis, we used the might of the public purse to take that chance.

But we also invited the private sector to use its skills, agility, and speed to develop the vaccine at record pace, before then coming back to the public sector, for the NHS to efficiently inject it into tens-of-millions of arms.

Of course, there is another reason behind our vaccine success, and that's Brexit.

Yes, if we'd still been in the EU we could, in theory, have broken ranks and left its vaccine programme.

But in reality, that would have seemed somehow un-collegiate, as if we were letting the side down.

So the fact we were leaving gave us the push to pursue our own vaccine programme.

And with 62 million life-saving shots saving lives across the country, the result has been world-leading.

# Rail

Our experience with vaccines also contains important lessons for other areas of public policy.

Take our [rail reform plans – announced last week](#).

Like the vaccine rollout, they combine the best of the public and the private sectors.

The day we launched Great British Railways – our new public-service body to own the track and direct train operators – the hashtag “Corbyn was right” trended on Twitter, the inference being we’d just taken the country back 75 years and announced the full nationalisation of the industry.

At the same time, the unions were complaining that we hadn’t gone far enough!

Both those claims couldn’t be true.

And in fact, both were wrong!

Under nationalisation and British Rail, the railways shrunk by half, passenger numbers fell, stations and lines closed, with communities cut-off.

Under privatisation, by comparison, rail use soared and passenger numbers doubled.

But not everything improved.

The service became more fragmented, complicated – and expensive, for both passengers and for taxpayers.

And lack of coordination led to that disastrous May 2018 timetable debacle.

Something had to change.

I said when I started this job, getting the trains to run on time was my top priority.

But rather than obsess about ownership, we believe that what the railway needs is simplification.

That is the change Great British Railways delivers.

It’s an example, I think, of what this government is about.

And perhaps what this country is about.

Not driven by political dogma.

But by pragmatism.

And reforms that work.

## Levelling up and transport

And fixing transport could not be more important to this government's central mission, and that mission of course is levelling up.

Our drive to spread jobs and wealth around the United Kingdom.

To the North and Midlands making them places of greater opportunity to people and communities that have felt, for too long, power and influence reside largely in London and the south east.

And to all parts of the four nations that make up the most successful political Union in history.

Fixing transport is important, because currently it benefits some regions over others.

The areas that have better transport links also have a massive economic advantage.

More business investment, more mobile populations, more access to jobs.

So, transport is critical to levelling up.

That's why we've invested more than £29 billion in transport across the North since 2010.

And it's why we're building national projects like HS2. It's why we're reconnecting towns stripped of their rail connections under the Beeching rail axe – like those on the Northumberland Line between Ashington and Newcastle.

Now I am aware that some argue major transport projects should be paused post pandemic.

But this would be short sighted.

We've had a 'stop-start' approach to transport investment for decades in this country, and it's damaged our productivity and our ability to compete.

Both HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail are vital pieces of infrastructure which will transform connections across the North, Midlands, and further afield – and we're committed to both projects.

Actually, just yesterday [I announced more measures to bolster prosperity, with £401 million of rail investment to further improve the Transpennine Route](#), boosting connectivity between Leeds, Manchester and York, to build new stations in Exeter and Leeds, and to complete the first phase of the massive Midland Main Line electrification upgrade.

## Europe's biggest economy

But let's get one thing straight about levelling up.

It's not about at all weakening the productivity of the south east of England.

No, this is about raising transport quality in the rest of the United Kingdom up to south east levels. It's about sparking the talent, the flair, and the self-belief of regions that once led the world in productivity, ensuring every region has the opportunity to be as productive.

If we can do that, then we can achieve something remarkable. Every part of country, unleashed from the restraints of outdated public infrastructure, thereby matching the south-east's productivity. Well that would make the UK the biggest economy in Europe by 2050.

My contention is that, Great Britain, a country of 67 million people, can no longer afford to hold back human enterprise in a lopsided economy favouring one corner of the country.

The people who voted Conservative recently in Hartlepool, the rest of Teeside, and in the Midlands recognised what we all know to be true. That a genuinely successful economy has to be a fair economy, harvesting potential wherever it can be found, ensuring talented youngsters want to remain, want to build their futures, and their communities.

That's what 'levelling up' is all about.

Not only helping the current generation... but building for future ones as well.

## **Transport growth**

Now, I know some people think demand for rail and bus travel will never fully recover.

Videoconferencing, they argue, is now embedded as the way we do business. But I think that prediction will quickly be overtaken by reality, as our economy bounces back.

I'm not saying Zoom will suddenly disappear. Far from it.

In fact, it is the efficiency of online gatherings, meaning more meetings can be convened in a day. That will ultimately help boost our productivity. And a more a productive economy is, the busier it is, creating new reasons to travel.

It might not always be for the same reasons as before, or at the same times of day. But people need – and like – to travel.

Transport links are the arteries through which the lifeblood of human interaction flows, so as our country prospers and our economy grows, so too will our transport system.

The immediate challenge, in the months ahead, is to ensure that public transport recovers at least as well as private car use.

Our roads in some places already operate at capacity, and even beyond.

And our most productive places, our cities, simply can't function unless millions of people choose to take public transport rather than drive.

If journeys shift permanently from bus and train to car, our roads will slow down, our cities will choke, our economy will be damaged.

Everyone will suffer.

So, as well as setting out transport strategies for the coming decades, we're working on this vital short-term objective.

To get people back on to the bus and the rail network.

That will include offering flexi-season tickets from next month, reflecting people's new working patterns.

So, just as with the video conferencing economy we'll need better and more internet connections, we will need better and more public transport too.

To build a modern, productive, clean economy, in every part of the country.

That's what our new ['Bus Back Better' strategy](#) sets out to achieve.

No form of public transport is more fundamental to levelling up than buses.

Where they're reliable, where bus companies and councils work together, buses transform places like Brighton, London, Reading and Harrogate, with frequent, modern services that have sparked a bus renaissance.

Our new strategy will build on this success, with public and private sector partnerships introducing simpler fares, more routes and services, easier information, greener buses.

And we've already promised bus fares will be cheaper.

## **Future of transport**

These bus and rail reforms cover the vast majority of public transport journeys.

But we also have an unparalleled opportunity to benefit from a new transport world that is just emerging.

We are still a nation of inventors. Actually, we really can't help ourselves.

And in this new world, we have the chance to rediscover the British flair for invention that gave birth to the railway age, the jet age and the Internet age.

Technology is changing very fast.

The world will look very different in 2050 because of choices we make today.

So, we'd better get those choices right.

We have to envisage, create and drive that new world.

We must be more entrepreneurial.

More nimble.

And take risks.

Within the next three decades, our transport world will likely change faster and further than it has done in the past century.

Not this time dominated by a single technology, like steam or the internal combustion engine. Rather by a wave of technologies, interacting and influencing each other.

From electric power and autonomous vehicles, to drones, space travel, universal superfast internet access, and the use of big data.

Changing the way we plan, operate and use transport.

As the first major economy to legislate for net zero within the next 30 years, we are also leading from the front when it comes to green transport.

And by being in the vanguard of decarbonisation we can reap the benefits of changing technology.

We're already a global leader in the manufacturing and use of electric vehicles.

And we've pledged to phase out sales of new petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2030, with the full support of our dynamic car industry.

In one year, ultra-low emission cars have gone from accounting for just 1 in 30 UK car sales, to 1 in 10.

We're miles ahead in building a charging network too, with more than 23,000 publicly-available charging networks, and more fast chargers per 100 miles of key strategic road than any other country in Europe.

Decarbonisation, once seen as a burden on an industry wedded to fossil fuels, is now our greatest opportunity.

We're leading on other ground-breaking projects, like hydrogen trains, and Jet Zero aeroplanes, to drive carbon out of aviation by 2050.

We're seizing opportunities to locate new, green industries in regions which have been starved of investment.

I made Tees Valley a pioneering centre for hydrogen transport, paving the way for generations of hydrogen buses, trains, trucks, planes and ships.

There's the ever-growing electric vehicle supply chain to supply green cars

produced by Nissan in Sunderland, Jaguar Land Rover in the Midlands, and Bentley in Crewe.

And the amazing developments like Sheffield's Advanced Manufacturing Innovation cluster, helping create automotive and aviation systems of the future.

We will soon draw all this work together by publishing the first ever comprehensive Decarbonisation Plan, and I can promise you this – it will be ambitious!

## **Conclusion**

This has been, and still is, a time of unprecedented activity for my department.

Bus and cycling strategies. Rail reforms.

And still to come, the Integrated Rail Plan, strategies on transport decarbonisation, net zero and sustainable aviation.

The biggest investment in our roads for half a century.

And the biggest investment in our railways since the Victorians.

Perhaps in the past, in Whitehall, transport was seen as second order.

But now it is central to the country's economic future, and to the priorities of this government.

If we are to build Europe's biggest economy, then we'll need to level-up the UK.

And transport holds the key.

In many ways the Department for Transport is now viewed alongside BEIS and the Treasury, as a key economic department.

But no matter how inspiring the technological opportunities, we will not forget the immediate needs of the country.

As people return to the transport network after Covid, we will set about reforming and modernising public transport like never before, so that everyone who plans and delivers these services, has a singular, shared focus on their greatest asset... the passenger.

And so transport can do the job it is supremely well equipped to do – connecting communities.

Firing up business.

And levelling up our country.

You know, last week the FT called me “the Duracell Bunny”.

I’ll take that as a compliment.

If that means banging the drum for Britain – then they are right.

I believe our best days lie ahead, as a vibrant, inventive, sovereign nation – happy in our own skin – outward-looking, constantly learning.

A true union of extraordinary people, bound together by transport.

Thank you.