

# My contribution to the debate on High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill

The case for HS2 before the pandemic hit was made on the basis of the need to expand capacity. I always argued that there was a quicker and cheaper solution for capacity, and that was to digitalise signalling, introduce more short sections of bypass track and improve engineering around the main stations. By those means, we could have got a 25% or so increase in capacity much more quickly at a fraction of the cost, leaving over money to improve local services and the use of the existing railway, and for other purposes.

Now that we have had the pandemic, as we move to the recovery phase, which we hope will be quite soon, we have to accept, as the right hon. Member for Warley

(John Spellar) and others have mentioned, that the nature of work and the use of the office will change. We may well find that the intense pressure during the Monday-to-Friday morning and evening peak, as a result of people tending to start work at 9 and tending to leave for home at 5 or half-past 5, will diminish. We may well find that people will want much more flexible use of their railway—that they will not travel every day, and will not necessarily be going at peak hours. One of the big problems that the railways face—capacity on journeys to main towns and cities at peak—will be changed or relieved by that.

We are due, from the Government and the industry representatives that advise them, their interim thoughts on what the shape of the railway and railway demand might look like in two or three years' time, assuming that all has gone well with vaccination, and that there is a pretty good, robust recovery. We should not assume that it will be recovery to the same work and railway travel patterns that we had before.

I hope that we will make more intelligent use of the railway for freight, because there is still plenty of scope for that if we can get better at single-wagon marshalling, and can make better use of the railway for the relatively longer distances that freight often has to travel to get from ports to all parts of the United Kingdom. That would be a possible use of the capacity that we already have. I dare say that there will also be plenty of promotional schemes for leisure and tourist travel. The fact remains, however, that the use of the railway for work will change very dramatically. I do think this whole project needs appraising in the light of that, and that we are owed a proper plan with the latest forecasts, which must be very different from the forecasts that the Government were using when they first put this proposal to the country and to the House.