

Should the government cancel HS2?

I voted against HS2 when the decision in principle was made by Parliament. I did so because the business case for it was very weak. The forecasts of likely passenger numbers and revenues looked far too high. The negative impact on revenues and traveller numbers on the competing routes was not taken very seriously. The main argument that we need to get to Birmingham faster changed into an argument that we needed more capacity to get to Birmingham, which the figures did not seem to justify.

I was on the losing side, and accepted defeat with a good grace. I accepted thereafter government and Parliament wanted it to go ahead.

Now the government is holding a genuine review. The immediate cause is the massive escalation in projected costs compared with the figures Parliament used to make the original decision. There is also substantial delay in delivering HS2 in the north, which was meant to be the main reason for the scheme. This gives me the opportunity to make a case again for cancellation.

The business case has clearly got a lot worse, as the capital cost is so much bigger. There is no way that the nation can earn a decent return on such a huge investment, given the likely passenger numbers and fare revenue possible on this new railway and the impact on the competing railways. It points to more subsidy and more losses.

Today though I wish to engage with the political argument that this railway is a totem of commitment to the development of the north and to fairer capital spending around the country, and must not therefore be stopped.

The irony is that for the next few years if we continue there will be massive capital spending in London on remodelling a main station and in London and the Home Counties as money is spent on providing a tunnel out of the city to limit the environmental damage. HS2 to Birmingham will be yet another major investment project where most of the money is spent in London and the south east, yet it is a project that the people closest to in London and the south east vehemently oppose.

HS2 will do nothing to ease congestion in London and the Home counties or to make it easier for people to get to work from outer London or Buckinghamshire. So it will be a big investment in the south east that is not helping the south east.

Meanwhile northern commuters will be frustrated that their journeys are still made difficult by old trains and too little capacity. HS2 unites a lot of people in both north and south saying this is not the right project. We all want better trains, with more capacity into the cities. HS2 does not provide that in ways most people want. If we cancel we could have a big boost to northern rail spending in ways that do directly help, and still save money overall.