

HS2 and all that

In Britain we have, for many years, looked upon the French with envy of their very successful TGV network of high speed trains. So why, when we start to plan for our own UK high speed network, is there so much opposition not only to the route but also to the principle of high speed.

There is no question that we need new railway capacity to relieve our overcrowded main lines, as highlighted by the recent West Coast Route Utilisation Strategy from Network Rail. Failure will result in suppressed demand seriously restricting economic growth. We also need to reduce CO₂ emissions and the most effective way is to replace, wherever possible, air and road journeys by rail journeys powered, ideally, by 'clean' electricity. Our population is growing fast and this will fuel increased demand for transport.

New railway capacity is needed and high speed rail offers many benefits over conventional speed (up to 125 mph) railways. Not least are the benefits to business of shorter journey times for essential travelling. Even if productive work can be carried out on the train, the higher speed will enable business meetings at places that would otherwise have involved expensive overnight accommodation. With higher speeds more people will travel, strengthening the business case for investment.

Why is there so much opposition to the current HS2 plans? One possible answer is that the wrong route has been chosen. If we look at the instructions given by the previous Government to HS2 Ltd we see that effectively tie their hands behind their back. This is extracted from Government Command Paper "High Speed Rail", CM 7827 March 2010.

"HS2 will make recommendations on options for a terminus station or stations serving London and possible options for an intermediate parkway station between London and the West Midlands. It will also provide a proposal for an interchange station between HS2, the Great Western Main Line and Crossrail with convenient access to Heathrow airport. HS2 will also provide suggested means of linking to HS1 and the existing rail network."

What is so obvious, now that HS2 plans have met so much opposition, is the micromanagement of the project by the Government before HS2 Ltd had even started work. These instructions left very little room for HS2 Ltd to design a route other than through the Chilterns.

The attitude of Government to Heathrow airport is highly unclear. Either HS2 serves Heathrow with a station at the airport, as suggested by the Bow Group, or there seems little point in the westerly exit from London through the Chilterns. If that is the case then an M1 alignment for HS2, as proposed by Railfuture and the 2M Group is far more appropriate now that the 'Y' extension to both Leeds and Manchester has been agreed by Government.

Philip Hammond has to be congratulated for insisting that HS2 is connected to both Heathrow and HS1. But for HS2 to win public support, the benefits of HS2 do need to be spread more widely. There is a feeling that trains services to places not served by HS2 may be worse after HS2 is opened and this may explain the opposition to HS2 by Coventry City council, one of a number of councils that have voted to oppose HS2. Direct trains from Wolverhampton will take 6 minutes longer after HS2 as no high speed trains are planned to go beyond Birmingham. The lack of interoperability between HS2 and the existing railway is a cause for serious concern.

These, and other, problems do need to be fully addressed by the Government to win the arguments for building HS2. There is a lot more yet to be discussed on HS2.

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