

The HS2 Rail Proposal: a difficult political decision

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Many years ago a British politician, on learning that he was about to be appointed Minister for Transport, exclaimed: 'Some enemy hath done this!' It is not hard to see why he might have said this. The transport portfolio is often brimming over with some extremely difficult issues; and the HS2 (High Speed Rail 2) proposal is certainly no exception.



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Perhaps the most fundamental political problem is that the benefits of the proposal would be spread thinly across the population and wouldn't begin to accrue until some time well into the future: 2026 in the case of the London–Birmingham section and 2032 for the Birmingham–Manchester and Birmingham–Leeds sections. But the disbenefits of the scheme would start to be felt immediately or in the very near future and would intensely affect a relatively small number of people who happen to live close to the line and who would suffer all the disadvantages of environmental intrusion but, if located in the countryside of counties like Buckinghamshire and Staffordshire, would not even be able to use the line because there would be no intermediate stations there. Not a very comfortable position in which politicians have to make a choice. It is not possible to debate all the complex arguments for and against in such a brief article as this; and so the focus here is on what other countries have done in this sphere.

To some it may seem strange that the UK, the country in which railways were invented, should have fallen so far behind other countries in the development of high speed rail. Even the United States, which has not traditionally embraced inter–urban public transport with much enthusiasm, is now ahead of us in this field. The original pioneer was Japan, where the 320 mile high–speed *Tokaido* line between Tokyo and Osaka opened in 1964. That's almost 50 years ago! The success of the Japanese *Shinkansen* lines, with the so–called 'bullet' trains, has been followed by similar developments in France, Germany and, quite recently China, as well as in about a dozen or so other countries. In Europe the TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse) services pioneered by the French are now spreading throughout Germany, Italy, Sweden and Spain and are providing some stiff competition for intra–European air services. In France an *ex post* appraisal is conducted of all high speed lines. With one big exception, that of the link to the Channel Tunnel, the forecast benefits proved to be vindicated in each and every case. The case of the Channel Tunnel link, the counterpart of which on the English side is known as HS1, might have been exceptional because, unlike the other lines, it involved generating entirely new flows of rail traffic. This point might be borne in mind, before associating the rather disappointing HS1 traffic figures with forecasts of likely HS2 traffic. In any case it would seem rather important that the two lines be linked together, so that they can easily feed traffic to each other. The HS2 line should also be linked to airports, not just Heathrow, but the airports at Birmingham and Manchester as well. The German example of ICE (InterCityExpress) trains offering airport express services between Frankfurt and Dusseldorf via Bonn and Cologne has been a highly successful one.

Who stands to gain most from HS2? It could well be Birmingham, with its position right at the heart of the eventual Y–shaped network. But would HS2 do much to help rebalance the UK economy overall? Or will it just reinforce London and the South East's pre–eminence as the most economically active region? That's a very difficult issue for the Government to consider. HS2 may be a very long–term project but successive transport ministers have had precious little time to consider it — their tenure in post is usually very short, with no less than six ministers having come and gone in the past five years.

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