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# This new high-speed rail line is a gargantuan folly

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(Richard Pohle)

dictionary defines a folly as “a great useless structure”, “built to satisfy a fancy or conceit”. You might have thought the days of follies were long gone, but you would have been wrong. The government is about to embark on a gargantuan new one: HS2, the £32 billion high-speed rail link between London and Birmingham and places further north.

Justine Greening, the transport secretary, is expected to give the go-ahead for the project this week, despite widespread objections. By 2026 the journey time from London to Birmingham will have been cut to 49 minutes, saving a mere 23 minutes. It is a folly and Ms Greening should think again.

HS2's cost, equivalent to £1,000 per income taxpayer, is huge. As a recent report from the Institute of Economic Affairs put it: “There is a significant risk that HS2 will become the latest in a long series of government big-project disasters with higher-than-forecast costs and lower-than-forecast

benefits. HS2 is not commercially viable and will require substantial and increasing levels of subsidy.”

Even if it comes in on budget, which only a Pollyanna would expect, the business case is not proven. Much of it rests on the notion that business cannot be conducted on a train, thus wasting time and damaging our productivity. This does not stand up to scrutiny. The first thing most business men and women do when they get on a train is to open their briefcase and their laptop. Many say train journeys are their most productive time.

Where business people are seriously restricted from working is when sitting behind the wheels of their cars. Even without disasters such as the indefinite closure of the Hammersmith flyover in west London, or this weekend’s temporary closure of the M6-M1 interchange, Britain’s road network is in a mess and desperately in need of investment.

It is one thing to build high-speed rail networks when you have a smoothly functioning motorway system, as in France. It is quite another when your roads are creaking under the weight of traffic. It is like installing a new roof just as the house is falling down.

Most of all, there is the need for investment in new airport capacity to ensure this country can compete in the 21st century and to ease the misery for airline travellers. What benefit is it for business people to speed down from Birmingham only to spend hours kicking their heels at overcrowded Heathrow?

What Britain needs is a new London airport in the Thames estuary. Without it we will run out of airport capacity in 20 years. HS2, in this context, will be seen as the ultimate transport folly. The £32 billion would be better spent on an estuary airport and improving our roads.