High-speed rail

Train reaction

Putting a new train line underground will not bury opposition to it

Jan 14th 2012 | from the print edition

LIKE a steam locomotive chugging towards its destination, the government ushered in the next phase of its "railway revolution" on January 10th. It had already declared it a priority to build a £32.7 billion super-speedy rail link from London to Manchester and Leeds via Birmingham (see map). The plan has cross-party support. Justine Greening, the transport secretary, will soothe outlying critics in Parliament by altering the route. But such tweaks will do little to boost the government's wider economic case for the bullet train, due to start construction in 2016, reach Birmingham a decade later and farther north by 2033.

Opposition to HS2, as the line is known, is part environmental and part economic. Ms Greening is particularly sensitive to the first of these. Fellow Conservatives have expressed worries about zippy trains slicing up pretty countryside, particularly the Chilterns, home to many Tory voters.

To preserve such beauty spots, more than half the 140-mile track to Birmingham will now run underground. But the proposed tunnels will not bury all criticism. More than 60 miles will still be open; cross residents of several constituencies are already gearing up for legal challenges to the government's plan. There are no assurances that the northern part of the route, which will not be finalised until 2014, will see equivalent lengths of tunnelling. Tunnels are not just costly to build but also more expensive to maintain than open track, which will increase running costs, says Steven Hayter of the Institution of Civil Engineers.

The business case for the line has been watered down over time. This is mostly down to poor economic projections for the country, beyond a transport secretary's control. But the expected economic returns from this scheme are lower than for many other infrastructure projects. A large chunk of the supposed benefits rest on assumptions that businessmen are unproductive in transit—which might come as a surprise to those laptop-toting folk. And though the west coast line, which the new service will relieve, faces a supply crunch within 20 years, the projected doubling of long-distance rail passengers by 2043 seems overstated. Even if it is correct, less glamorous improvements could increase capacity more cheaply.

Like her predecessors, Ms Greening hopes this project will promote economic prosperity and bridge the north-south divide. Yet railway bosses fear the scheme will deflect investment from other lines. High-speed links in other countries have typically strengthened the advantages of the rich city at a route's hub. Parts of Britain, particularly those well-served by current links, will see fewer and slower services to the capital once the new line is running.

The idea of super-fast trains is beguiling: Ms Greening has evoked the Victorians, who built Britain's existing (and still rather good) network. But 19th-century railways were privately financed; HS2 will be paid for out of the public purse. MPs will vote on the first stage of this scheme in late 2013. Ms Greening urges them to "be ambitious" and show the world that Britain

"is a can-do country". The question is not if Britain can do it, but whether, if it does so, it will be able to afford to do much else.

from the print edition | Britain