

HS2 is a cancer that will cost our country dear

If David Cameron delved more deeply into transport policy, he would find he has been sold the wrong project

HS2 may fail to connect to HS1 and its access to Europe, or Heathrow or even with Birmingham city centre Photo: AP

By Cheryl Gillan

7:15AM GMT 06 Jan 2013

If the rail fare rises have made your eyes water, wait until you start paying the costs of the Labour-initiated folly HS2 – the leviathan scheme to take a few minutes off the time of a journey to Birmingham and create a

Y-shaped railway to the North, mostly at the expense of homes and virgin countryside.

In opposition, the Tories pledged to rejuvenate our railways with high-speed links – a laudable aim, and one Labour should have started in the years of plenty. But Labour barely electrified a single additional mile of rail, and came up with the idea of HS2 to “fill the gap”. Andrew Adonis, then transport secretary, announced the scheme in Labour’s dying days. (It had the added “benefit” of ripping through several Tory constituencies.) But the plan was neither integrated nor affordable. And, sadly, my own colleagues, in the melee of creating the Coalition, failed to do detailed work on Britain’s future transport requirements. Their idea of leadership was simply to adopt the previous administration’s skimpy plans.

Dazzled in the headlights of this “grand project”, successive ministers failed to query the plans in any great depth. Officials galloped ahead, securing their jobs at a time of a shrinking Civil Service, and building an edifice, in HS2 Ltd, which is separate from government and which is simply there to drive the project forward. Three transport secretaries have not had the courage to ask questions, because there is also a common view that both David Cameron and George Osborne want this railway and should have it no matter what the cost. In fact, neither the Prime Minister nor the Chancellor appear to have paid great attention to the details.

And HS2 may soon be unstoppable, growing like a cancer, a project in isolation – failing to connect to HS1 and its access to Europe, or our current main airport at Heathrow, or even with Birmingham city centre. Its price tag is rising steeply, and it has a cost/benefit ratio that in normal circumstances should shame the Treasury into calling an immediate halt. And if

any attempt at integrating HS2 is to be made, this should also be suspended at least until we know where our main hub airport is going to be.

If last week's fare rises caused consternation, the staggering costs attached to HS2 will ensure that the rail travelling public will face even greater charges, either through their tax bills or rail fares. The Government has adopted the logic that funds now being spent on the new Crossrail line in the South East will be transferred across to HS2, so the public will continue to pay at around the same rate for the Government's investment in rail infrastructure. But we already have a long-established railway system, along existing transport corridors: it would benefit greatly from more investment, rather than diverting money to the excessive expense of creating a whole new railway system.

So why does the Government not invest in the existing network? Well, it has made a start. The electrification of the London to Swansea line by 2017 will bring economic benefits at a fraction of the price of HS2. Adding longer trains, classless travel, better rolling stock and longer platforms could relieve overcrowding. This approach would give us the time to establish where the future hub airport will be; that, after all, is the key to our long-term prosperity. It would also enable us to plan efficient terrestrial transport connections rather than being locked into the Procrustean bed of HS2. Having spent seven years working around Mr Cameron, I know him to be impressive. He often asks penetrating questions of colleagues. But I do not think that he has ever asked those questions about this project, and it has now acquired totemic qualities.

Now, before the electoral timetable overtakes reason as it did under Labour, is the time to re-examine HS2. If Mr Cameron delved more deeply into transport policy, he would find he has been sold the wrong project. He could make far more impact by adopting alternatives, as well as saving taxpayers' money and protecting future fares from rising. That would take courage, and show the real leadership so many people wish to see from our Prime Minister.

Cheryl Gillan is Conservative MP for Chesham and Amersham

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2013