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## Minister confident over high-speed rail

By Jim Pickard, Chief Political Correspondent

The government is determined that a looming legal decision over the new high-speed rail line connecting London to the north will not derail the £34.5bn project, according to the rail minister.

Speaking from Japan, where he is on a fact-finding mission to the country which introduced the first high-speed “bullet trains” in 1964, Simon Burns told the FT the court challenge to the first phase would not cause any “major hiccup”.

Opponents of the line, known as HS2, have attacked the scheme on economic and planning grounds and mounted a challenge involving the London to Birmingham route, which is scheduled to be completed by 2026 at a cost of £18bn. If successful, the move could delay the project by at least two years.

They are waiting for a High Court judge to rule following a judicial review in January.

Councils and environmental groups claim the government failed to carry out a “strategic environmental assessment” or enough consultation. But Mr Burns said he was confident the government had carried out the “right processes” when laying the ground for the project.

“It is difficult for me to speculate what may or may not happen, but I don’t expect this to be a major hiccup in the process,” he said.

Mr Burns said there were lessons to be learnt from the Japanese experience, for example techniques to mitigate noise pollution.

These include enclosing the pantographs on train roofs that pick up power from overhead lines as well as the skirts of the trains. In addition, Mr Burns said, new technology minimised “sonic booms” as trains entered tunnels.

Ministers have drawn up plans for a second phase of the line, involving a Y-shaped route carrying fast trains north to Manchester and Leeds, which would take the total cost to £34.5bn.

The first contracts for phase two will be announced on Wednesday. Aecom and Mott MacDonald have won contracts worth just over £3m each to carry out preliminary engineering work while Arup has been awarded a £1.1m contract for environmental work.

Mr Burns said ministers were already considering how to take the line further north to Scotland. There could also be the potential in the future for high-speed “spurs” elsewhere, for example to south Wales, he said.

Under the plans, trains will travel at up to 320km/hour (200mph) compared with current speeds of 201km/hour.

A handful of Tory MPs, mostly with constituencies along the proposed route, have criticised the scheme on the basis that the money could be better spent elsewhere. The Department for Transport’s own calculations suggest the economic case for the project is relatively weak.

But the rail minister said there was an overwhelmingly positive case because the scheme would create 100,000 jobs, boost the economy and free capacity on existing rail lines. The estimated £8bn contract for rolling stock would also bring work for British suppliers, he added.

Mr Burns said he understood why fellow MPs were opposing the project: “They are representing the concerns of their constituencies,” he said. “But this is in the national interest to go ahead and the problems it poses to individual constituencies are minimal, particularly when you assess the benefits.”

There had been similar opposition to the HS1 link from London to Kent, he said, but locals were now largely happy about the line.

The government has not yet clarified how it will run the line and whether it will replicate the HS1 model by selling long leases to operators to recoup a large part of the upfront cost. “HS1 is one template but there could be a range of other ones,” Mr Burns said.

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