

Lord Adonis defends HS2 following claims it is an 'expensive mistake'

Adonis remains committed to proposals for train connecting London to the north following criticism from Lord Mandelson

Rupert Neate and Gwyn Topham

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Lord Adonis said he would not be drawn into a 'war of words' with Mandelson over the HS2 plans.

Photograph: Martin Godwin

Lord Adonis, the architect of High Speed 2 for the last **Labour** government, has launched an impassioned defence of the £50bn rail link from London to the north of England after his former Cabinet colleague Lord Mandelson attacked the plan as an "expensive mistake".

Adonis, who announced plans ~~for HS2 in 2010~~ when he was transport secretary, said he and the rest of Labour party "remained fully committed" despite the estimated cost spiralling by £10bn.

"The status quo isn't an option - unless we are going to close Britain for business," he said. "There's no free lunch. If you don't do **HS2**, you have to spend more on legacy

upgrades [to existing lines]. It is not £30-40bn on this or nothing. There's no cheap option."

A row over the cost of HS2 was rekindled last week when transport secretary Patrick McLoughlin told MPs that ~~the total funding had increased by £10bn to £42.2bn~~, with the cost rising to £50bn including rolling stock.

Adonis said the case against upgrades was proved by the £10bn upgrade of the west coast mainline, which "only delivered a fraction of the benefits of HS2".

"It's nonsense to [put that amount of money] into 200-year-old Victorian railways with huge underlying problems," he told the Guardian on Wednesday.

Adonis said he would not be drawn into a "war of words" with Mandelson but he refuted the former business minister's claim that the estimated costs of the scheme were "almost entirely speculative".

He said analysis of the costs and benefits of the line from London to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds had been "robust and thorough". "The analysis shows building the new line was cheaper - plus we'd be benefiting from improved connectivity, reliability, speed and avoid - bar Euston - most of the disruption of a conventional line upgrade."

However, he had earlier complained that when he was planning the line the transport department had no experts in high speed rail. "It only happens to be one of the most important and significant developments in international transport... How many experts were there on international high speed rail? None at all," he said in a speech at the rightwing think tank Policy Exchange on Wednesday.

Mandelson, who backed HS2 when he was business minister, said: "I now fear HS2 could be an expensive mistake ... all the parties, especially Labour, should think twice before binding themselves irrevocably to it."

In a comment article for the Financial Times Mandelson said Labour's decision to back the project was "politically-driven" and designed to "paint an upbeat view of the future".

He said the economic benefits of HS2 were "neither quantified nor proven" and said the analysis at the time failed to present any "alternative ways of spending £30bn".

Adonis said politicians could have endless debates about the costs and benefits of big infrastructure projects, but "what we do at the moment is nothing".

McLoughlin said the government remained committed to HS2, which is "vitaly important for economic growth".

McLoughlin said it was "ironic" that the last time he met Mandelson was on High Speed

1 [the Channel Tunnel rail link]. "You can get to Brussels on High Speed 1, you can get to Paris on High Speed 1, but you can't get to Birmingham on high speed trains, you can't get to Manchester and you can't get to Leeds," he told the BBC. "I want to see the north of the country benefit [from] what the south has already got."

A spokesman for HS2 said: "Lord Mandelson does not call for HS2 to be cancelled. What he does is call for greater consensus for and stronger evidence of its benefits so that politicians and the public can make informed decisions as to its long term value to the UK.

"We must build on that consensus by providing up to date and detailed evidence of the benefits that HS2 will bring, including the creation of 100,000 jobs and the economic return of £2 for every £1 invested through linking eight out of our 10 biggest cities. However, we recognise the challenge that has been laid down and our need to respond."



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