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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Tory minister raises doubts over HS2 line

Jack Grimston and Mark Hookham Published: 7 July 2013



David Lidington: high-speed line's costs are rising (Viktor Chlad)

A SENIOR minister has suggested that the government should scrap the HS2 high-speed rail line and spend the money on other transport projects instead.

David Lidington, the Europe minister, whose Aylesbury constituency in Buckinghamshire will be severely affected by the proposed railway from London to Birmingham, has written to Patrick McLoughlin, the transport secretary, detailing concerns over the new route.

Lidington is known to have serious reservations, but his letter is the closest he or any government figure has come to calling for it to be scrapped altogether.

His letter to McLoughlin follows an announcement by the transport secretary that the expected cost of the route has risen by about £10bn to £42.6bn.

Lidington writes: "My constituents have said to me that this increase in cost gives them no confidence that the final figure for constructing HS2 will [not] be significantly higher and in the current economic climate this cannot be justified.

"My constituents have said to me that in light of this increased cost the HS2 project should be cancelled and the money spent on other infrastructure projects. I would be grateful for your comments."

Lidington's constituency saw strong advances by UKIP at this year's county council elections and the party, which opposes HS2, has the seat firmly in its sights for the 2015 general election.

Lidington has also written to Alison Munro, HS2's chief executive, accusing her of failing to give residents full information on the level of noise they would have to endure along the route of the railway line.

He suggests HS2's analysis of "average noise" includes times between midnight and 5am, when no trains will run, leading to "very serious underestimates of what my constituents are likely to experience between 11pm and midnight and 5am and 7am".

He also says HS2's noise estimates fail to take account of the "prevailing wind direction in this part of the world".

All three main parties support the building of the new north-south line, which is due to continue beyond Birmingham in its second phase of construction.

Last week, however, Lord Mandelson, the former Labour business secretary, broke ranks to withdraw his support. He warned that HS2 could prove an "expensive mistake" and said his party had been too quick to support it. Earlier this month, 27 MPs voted against a bill to authorise more money to be spent on designing and planning HS2.

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