

## HS2 must terminate here. All change, please

Alistair Darling



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# I can no longer back high-speed rail. There are better ways to spend £50bn than on one line

The great economist John Maynard Keynes is reputed to have said: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir?”

We might ask the same question today. When it comes to HS2, the high-speed rail link from London to the Midlands and the North, the facts have changed. The projected cost has risen from about £30 billion in 2010 to £50 billion in July this year.

In the past few days it’s been reported that the Treasury now believes the cost could top £70 billion on just one railway line. To put this in perspective, the Department for Transport spends about £9 billion a year on all capital projects, including roads, rail and other public transport.

It is time to revisit the case for HS2.

I am an enthusiast for the railways. By the time I left the Department for Transport in 2006, Britain’s railways were carrying more passengers than at any time since 1947. This was down to hugely increased investment by the last Labour Government.

The railways were starved of investment from the late 1980s while the Conservative Government delivered a botched privatisation. We virtually rebuilt the West Coast mainline, got rid of postwar rolling stock, improved the London Underground and finally gave the go-ahead to Crossrail.

All this, however, depended on a commitment to maintain investment year-on-year and for decades to come. HS2 runs the risk of substantially draining the railways of money vital for investment over the next 30 years.

My experience in government also makes me suspicious of big projects that can easily run out of control. In the Department for Work and Pensions it was IT. In transport the useless Railtrack had a plan to upgrade the West Coast mainline that would have cost more than £14 billion, and rising.

It assumed that we could switch from trackside signals to onboard signalling: a technology that was still in development and untested at the time. The costs were eventually cut to £8 billion by using tried and tested technology. The result was reduced journey times all the way to Glasgow.

Politicians are always excited by “visionary” schemes. One thing I have learnt is that transport, rather like banking, is at its best when it is boring. That is when it tends to work. Political visions can easily become nightmares.

So what is the case for HS2? The most compelling argument is that we will need increased capacity between London, the Midlands and the North West. That is true. But there are also severe capacity problems on commuter lines, particularly in the South East.

And why high-speed trains? Certainly it’s handy to cut the journey time between Birmingham and London by half an hour. But at what cost?

The economic benefit that is claimed will come from this is highly contentious. The business case depends on an assumption that passengers aren’t productive — that is that they don’t work on the train. That may be true on a commuter train but not on long haul intercity services. Arguably, more work is done on the train than in the office.

It is also claimed that we would then have a high-speed network, building on the existing link between the Channel Tunnel and St Pancras station in London. But this new line doesn’t link with St Pancras. Nor does it go to Paddington, which connects with Heathrow. Instead it goes to Euston, an already congested station.

Then there is the cost. This is £50 billion on current government estimates that can’t then be spent on upgrading the East Coast

mainline, the route to Bristol and South West or the lines out of Liverpool Street to East Anglia. Nor can it be put towards improving the much-needed links between cities outside London. Put it another way. If you gave England's biggest cities £10 billion each for economic development would they spend it on HS2?

The English regions have lagged behind London and the South East and Scotland in terms of growth. They could well do with £50 billion of investment. I'd guess that they would spend it on smaller scale investment, on housing or transport.

It's not just the railways. Road improvements are needed too, as well as spending to upgrade bus services and cycle routes.

And if we do want to be visionary, why can't we decide what we are to do with Heathrow now instead of halfway through the next Parliament? Certainly if we spend £50 billion on HS2 there will be no money for transport links to the proposed Boris Island or to any other new airport.

The next Government and the one after that will be very short of money to spend on the infrastructure that we desperately need. To commit ourselves to spending so much on a project that rules out any other major schemes seems foolish. And the costs are not yet nailed down.

The facts have changed. The case for HS2 was just about stateable in 2010. I don't believe that it is today.

It is not too late to revisit the project. We need to ask ourselves what we would gain if it goes ahead. Equally we must then ask ourselves what we will have to lose. Politics is about priorities. That will be especially so in the coming years.

### Alistair Darling was Transport Secretary 2002-06 and Chancellor of the Exchequer 2007-10

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stealingthunder

9 minutes ago

He makes a few decent points, but like Milliband just sprays alternatives around rather than backing one. And the whole piece is ruined by the 'Labour done good', 'Tories done bad' tone which just reflects that none of our politicians actually have any policies other than 'get me back into power.'

1  Recommend Reply

Alan Hawkes

11 minutes ago

The man writes sense.

 Recommend Reply

SB

54 minutes ago

Isn't part of the argument that by increasing capacity, you can reduce the number of internal flights and use capacity for more inter continental flights. Also by ink proving travel to the North we reduce the Drift for all economic activity to be done in the South.

Will it not also be the case that if we don't do it then in 20 years time both Cameron's and Darlings children, who will have entered politics and been given a safe seat, will be boring us about why their parents did not invest and the cost is now £500billion.

 Recommend Reply

TerFar

31 minutes ago

@SB

Railways are already old technology and will be dead before either of their children become politicians. Trains will never become eco friendly.

 Recommend Reply

stealingthunder

7 minutes ago