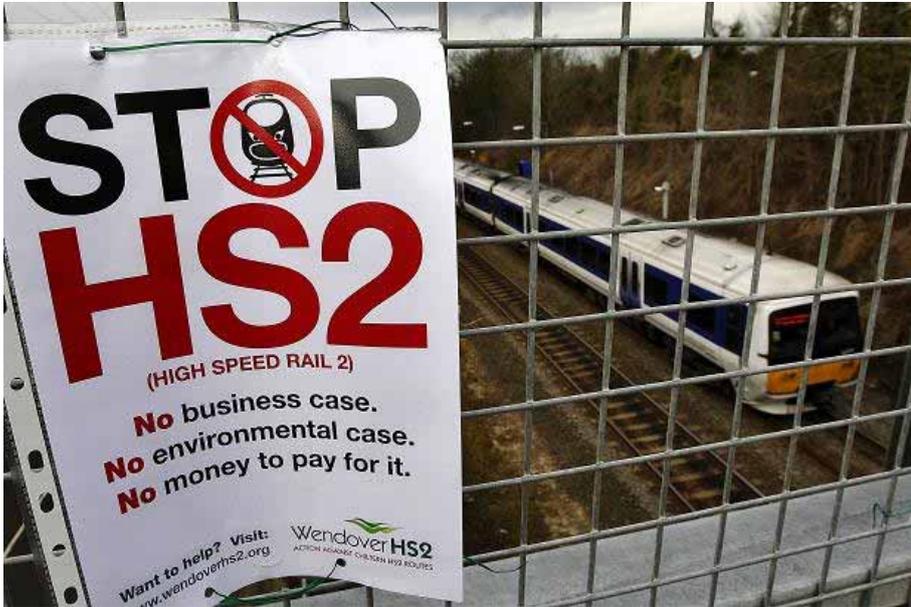


## Darling strikes body blow against 'foolish' HS2



Francis Elliott Political Editor  
Last updated at 12:01AM, August 23 2013

Alistair Darling comes out emphatically against the High Speed 2 rail line today in a shattering blow to the political consensus behind the project.

Writing in *The Times*, the former Chancellor says that HS2 risks draining investment from other railway lines for the next 30 years.

Costs, currently estimated to be £46.2 billion, could “easily run out of control”, he warns. “The next government and the one after that will be very short of money to spend on the infrastructure we desperately need. To commit ourselves to spend so much on a project which rules out other ma”



Mr Darling’s change of heart — as Chancellor he approved the first stages of the new line from London to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds — will dismay the coalition. Ministers are already growing nervous that Ed Miliband, who is under pressure to fund policy proposals, will abandon Labour’s support or argue for a delay.

Mr Darling is critical of the scheme’s business case, claiming that it overstates the economic benefits of time saved by a 225mph rail link. He cites the successful West Coast upgrade achieved through “tried and tested technology” as an example of the sort of smaller, less glamorous but better value, infrastructure project that will become impossible if HS2 goes ahead.

“Politicians are always excited by ‘visionary’ schemes. One thing I have learned is that transport, rather like banking, is at its best when it is boring,” he writes. “The case for HS2 was just about stateable in 2010. I don’t believe it is today.”

Ed Balls recently joined other senior Labour figures such as Lord Mandelson whose enthusiasm has waned on the project. Speaking after the official estimate of the cost rose by £8 billion in March, the Shadow Chancellor said he was concerned and urged the coalition to “keep an eye on value for money”.

George Osborne, the Chancellor, is said to believe that HS2 is an emblem of the coalition’s commitment to spread growth beyond London. Nick Clegg has talked about its potential to heal the “North-South divide”. However, Mr Darling, who also served as a Transport Secretary under Tony Blair, says that there could be better ways of encouraging growth outside London.

“The English regions have lagged behind London and the South East in terms of growth. They could well do with £50 billion worth of investment. I guess they would rather spend it on . . . housing or transport.”

His move from scepticism to outright opposition to the project comes amid reports of internal Treasury disquiet. Some officials

are reported to have started to use the figure of £73 billion — the official cost plus VAT and inflation — to draw attention to the scale of the undertaking.

Brushing aside those worries, Mr Osborne's aides insist that he is relishing the fight for public opinion with a concerted push to shore up support this autumn. "We think it's much better to have the battles now — to lay out why this is so important." The coalition's willingness to take on opponents, including Tory MPs, proves its determination to govern in the national interest and to use returning growth to rebalance Britain's economy, they say.

Mr Osborne privately points to Mr Miliband's recent appointment of Lord Adonis, a passionate supporter of HS2, to chair a review of Labour's strategy on economic growth as evidence of the leader's continuing commitment.

Maria Eagle, Labour's Shadow Transport Secretary, has said previously that the party has a "cast-iron" guarantee of its support.

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 **TerFar** 41 minutes ago

At a fraction of the cost, build a 4-lane motorway and reserve it exclusively for coaches and lorries with lorries forced to use the left hand lane only during 6 am - 8 pm. This will take away much of the heavy, slow traffic from existing A-roads and motorways.

At the same time it will open up competition to small independent coach businesses (even one man operations) bringing competition to the big multi-nationals with exclusive use of the railways. We will then see how wasteful the rail subsidy is to the national coffers.

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 **Moustachio Dave** 1 hour ago

Can anybody name a project that came in on or under budget.....All Governments of all hues have overspent the budgets for projects again and again . What makes anyone believe HS2 will be different?

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 **Bernard George** 1 hour ago

We are told that the rail network needs more capacity to meet demand.

So why not reduce demand by putting up ticket prices? Then we can ease back on the subsidies.

If rail travellers are not willing to pay the actual cost of the service, why should they expect everyone else to pay for them?

Meanwhile road transport is a cash cow for the Treasury, when you net off taxes against the costs of providing the infrastructure.

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**Nigel Brodrick-Barker**

9 minutes ago

@Bernard George

Commuting rail travel has an inelastic demand and those passengers travelling to work are at the mercy of the train operators.

In all the ToL discussion on this subject, I don't recall one post in favour of HS2.

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**Ricky Freeman**

1 hour ago

I am beginning to wonder if 70 billion is a bit over the top, that's a large slice of the national debt that could be paid back.

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**M Sheridan**

1 hour ago