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Abandoning HS2 would be act of national self-mutilation, says Lord Adonis

Former transport secretary says the lessons of the Channel tunnel and Thames airport must be heeded

Toby Helm, political editor
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Lord Adonis has spoken out as unease over the high-speed rail link grows. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Observer

The Labour peer conducting a review of the party's policies on economic growth said that abandoning support for the **HS2** high-speed rail line would be an "act of national self-mutilation", as doubts grew about the project's future.

Lord Adonis, a former transport secretary and architect of the scheme, spoke out as unease spread within both Labour and Tory ranks about the rising costs and economic benefits of the plans.

While the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, remains in favour of HS2, which will run initially from London to Birmingham and then, in phase two, branch off with separate lines to Manchester and Leeds, shadow chancellor Ed Balls is said to be less convinced, particularly if the costs rise above the latest sharply increased government figure of £42.6bn.

On Friday, Balls appeared to qualify his party's commitment, saying there could be no "blank cheque from a Labour Treasury for HS2". His comments followed ~~an intervention by another former Labour transport secretary~~, Alistair Darling, who called for HS2 to be abandoned, saying the money could be better spent on upgrading existing routes and other small-scale infrastructure projects.

Incensed at signs that support might be fracturing, Adonis hit back ~~in an article for the *New Statesman*~~, insisting that the case in favour was as strong as ever. Warning against cancellation or delay, he said the lessons of history had to be heeded. It would be folly, he argued, for Labour under Miliband to repeat the mistakes of Harold Wilson's government, which had cancelled plans for the Channel tunnel and a new airport at Maplin Sands in the Thames estuary after the 1974 general election.

The country was still being held back because of its past failure to take big transport decisions. "We are still paying the price in the current impasse over a third runway at Heathrow when the international airports serving Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt have six, four and four runways respectively. It would be a similar act of national self-mutilation to cancel HS2 in 2015, six years into the project."

Insisting that the need for HS2 was more to increase capacity than speed – and countering the idea that money would be better spent elsewhere – he added: "Detailed costings that I commissioned in 2009 suggested that to secure just two thirds of HS2's extra capacity by upgrading existing lines would cost more in cash terms than building HS2. So there is no free lunch or pot of gold which can be diverted to other projects in anything but the very short term, with more costly consequences thereafter."

But the time saved for travellers would, nevertheless, be considerable. "As HS2 proceeds further north, the time savings become steadily greater: nearly an hour off every journey between London and Manchester, Sheffield and Leeds. The connectivity benefits are also dramatic. HS2 transforms links between the Midlands and the north, as well as between London and those conurbations. HS2 includes a direct interchange with Crossrail, the new east-west underground line through London, opening in 2019, which will convey passengers to the West End, the City and Canary Wharf in a fraction of the time and with far less congestion than presently."

The issue has also become divisive within the Conservatives, with former deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft saying last week that David Cameron "must scrap HS2 and

scrap it now". Several Tory MPs and ministers with constituencies along the proposed line fear that they will suffer at the next general election unless there is a government U-turn.

Senior figures within Labour are also divided, with some on the front bench now believing that the money could be better spent building new homes and on other projects with a clearer and more obvious economic benefit. Many Labour MPs in the north believe that rather than spreading prosperity northwards – and narrowing the north-south divide – HS2 will suck even more prosperity southwards as a result of faster links.



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