

McLoughlin: HS2 need is clear and indisputable

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Transport secretary Patrick McLoughlin has warned that High Speed 2 projections are likely to underestimate future demand for travel as he robustly defended the government's flagship transport programme.

Speaking at the Institution of Civil Engineers in London on Wednesday (11 September) the Secretary of State said other countries had shown high speed rail is not some untested fantasy as had Britain's High Speed 1 - despite the criticism levelled against the route through Kent prior to its opening.

Responding to opponents of the HS2 plans he said: "Are we sure that the call for retreat amounts to anything more than a repetition of a national loss of nerve? One that in the past has seen British governments cancel things like the Channel Tunnel, road and rail upgrades only to see them reinstated expensively many years later while our competitors race ahead?"

McLoughlin claimed the inexorable rise in demand for rail travel meant sufficient capacity could no longer be delivered by patching up the existing network. As part of the government's reframing of the business case from speed to capacity he said "the main reason we need HS2 is as a heart bypass for the clogged arteries of our transport system".

Responding to critics who have argued for upgrading existing rail infrastructure rather than building a new line the transport secretary highlighted the recent West Coast Route Modernisation programme, officially completed at the end of 2008 (TB 5371).

"We've already spent £9bn on the last West Coast upgrade but that didn't finish the job. The overhead wiring is getting on for 50 years old. The bridges and tunnels are Victorian monuments and I've been out with the track workers to see them," McLoughlin said.

"Pouring billions more into widening it and accelerating it would be like trying to run the M1 up the Old Kent Road. Already the line is operating close to the limit. That's why when Virgin wanted to run new direct trains this year to Shrewsbury and Blackpool, Network Rail said point blank: no there isn't the space."

There was a blunt message for those who argue that spare seats on existing train services prove that a new line is not required. The Derbyshire Dales MP said Britain deserved better than anecdotes about spare room at off-peak hours.

"You might as well argue that Britain doesn't need new power stations because we've got more electricity than we can use at one am. Or that Heathrow isn't full because planes land there every day with empty seats."

Those claiming that new technology means the doubling in rail travel over little more than a decade will not continue were also given short shrift. "These people are plain wrong. History shows it. The invention of the telegram didn't stop the railway revolution. The invention of the telephone didn't stop the car or the airplane. And the invention of the smartphone has been accompanied by a doubling of rail travel in Britain in just over a decade.

HS2: new cost benefit analysis for programme will be published later this year



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They are indisputable facts. As our economy changes and strengthens people will move more - not less."

Following recent reports that HS2 costs have soared and are set to rise further the transport secretary claimed the government has a firm grip on the programme's costs. "Let me spell it out. The budget for HS2 is £42.6bn. Not £70bn. Not £80bn. Not the scare stories from opponents. £42.6bn. Spent carefully over several decades. For the full network to Leeds and Manchester. More than 300 miles of new track. With links on to the East and West Coast main lines beyond to serve Scotland. Newcastle. And the north west."

After the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee criticised the way contingency has been allocated to the project (TB 9598) the transport secretary indicated that the amount set aside is likely to fall. "And that is an upper limit with contingency," he continued. "£14.4bn in reserve which we are determined to bear down on. We are commissioning work by the world's leading project managers at the Said Business School at Oxford University into the scope for reducing contingency."

McLoughlin repeated a comment by Network Rail chief executive David Higgins who said in July that he expects the final cost of construction to be significantly less than £42.6bn. And he explained that the way the cost benefit figures for the programme have been calculated are likely to underestimate the benefits of the new line.

"For instance the current cost benefit ratio caps growth in demand for HS2 after 2036," said the transport secretary. "It assumes - for the sake of calculation because that's how the standard model of assessment works - that the line won't get any busier after that. But of course it will.

"If - instead - in the model we capped the number of passengers using HS2 in 2059, which would be perfectly reasonable, the benefit cost ratio would effectively double."

McLoughlin confirmed that the government will publish a new cost benefit analysis for HS2 later this year as part of the wider strategic case for the programme but warned this does not capture the full benefits of the scheme.

Next month the HS2 paving bill will return to parliament and before Christmas the hybrid bill to allow the first stage of the route to built will also go before MPs.

Concluding his speech the transport secretary said: "Today you can get a reliable high speed train from London to Brussels - but not Birmingham. Or to Lille - but not Leeds. That's got to change."

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