

HS2 should be finished sooner, Patrick McLoughlin suggests

Patrick McLoughlin, the Transport Secretary, has indicated that he wants to speed up the delivery of the HS2 project.

By Peter Dominiczak, Political Correspondent

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Mr McLoughlin said that he would “want to look” at any future proposals that would allow the beleaguered project to be finished sooner.

His comments came after Sir David Higgins, the new chairman of the £50billion scheme, said that he does not “understand” why the scheme has to take so long.

The first phase of the controversial project is not due to be completed until 2026.

Sir David, who helped to deliver the Olympic Games, told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme: “One thing I don’t understand, admittedly I haven’t been through it in detail, is why it needs to take so long and time is money.

“We have some of the world’s best designers and best contractors, we should challenge them to plan properly and then challenge them to do it quicker.”

Responding to those comments on BBC Radio 4’s World At One programme Mr McLoughlin said: “I will listen to what David says when he’s sat down behind the desk and gone through [the project] and if he comes forward with other proposals which speed it up I will want to look at those. There has to be a proper process, you know, we’ve got to take a bill through Parliament, Parliament has got to do the hybrid bill, that will take some time.”

The project’s first phase would see 225mph trains running on a new line between London and the West Midlands by 2026.

A second phase would see the line extended further north, with branches to Leeds and Manchester by 2033.

His comments came as Ed Balls, the shadow chancellor, warned that a future Labour government could scrap the high-speed rail line because of spiralling costs.

Labour have appeared split over HS2, with senior sources in the party briefing that Mr Balls “overstepped the mark” when he made his comments.

Sir David said that for HS2 to succeed, it must be “bipartisan” in the same way as the Olympic delivery project was.

He said that he has demanded that the HS2 project must not be treated like a “political football”.

Sir David said that he has demanded that the Chancellor allows him to brief Labour politicians on HS2 to ensure that it has cross-party support.