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Conservative conference



Scrapping HS2 rail link would be a disaster, warns transport secretary

Patrick McLoughlin faces down doubts before Tory conference, even as other parties start to hedge support for high-speed line

Toby Helm, political editor
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Patrick McLoughlin says it will be more difficult to press ahead with HS2 without the Labour party's support. Photograph: Karen Robinson for the Observer

Abandoning plans to build the £42.6bn HS2 high-speed rail line would be a national disaster, the cabinet minister in charge of the project has said, as he admits for the first

time that it will be more difficult to press ahead without the Labour party's support.

In an interview with the *Observer*, the transport secretary, Patrick McLoughlin, insists that he, David Cameron and the chancellor, George Osborne, all remain fully committed to building the new line from London to Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. He also says a fresh commitment to the project will be included in the Tories' manifesto for the 2015 general election.

However, speaking on the eve of the Conservative party conference, which opens in Manchester on Sunday amid more anti-HS2 protests, he conceded that, with opposition mounting from Tory and Labour politicians as well as from leading business groups, it would be "more politically difficult" to get through parliament if the current cross-party consensus crumbles.

McLoughlin said: "I'm not going to start guessing what I might do in the future if the facts change." He added: "I am not going to prejudge where I would go if the Labour party do something. At the moment we have cross-party support."

He made clear that he would want to push on without Labour's full backing, but conceded that the ultimate decision will not be his. "Having seen what I now see about the railway structure, would I personally go ahead without cross-party consensus? Yes, I would. I mean, that's not my decision."

His comments will be seen as a recognition that the Tories may have to adopt a fallback position – which will probably be to blame Labour for pulling the plug and harming the UK's long-term economic prospects – if opposition continues to mount and the costs, which McLoughlin insists can be contained and even reduced below £42.6bn, continue to rise.

In recent weeks the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), concerned about soaring costs, has called on the government to re-examine the case for HS2, while the Institute of Directors (IoD) has described the new line as a "grand folly". Some 21 Tory backbenchers, led by former Welsh secretary Cheryl Gillan, have also come out against the new line, which will slash journey times to the Midlands and the north, carrying trains travelling at speeds of up to 250mph, but will carve through many Tory heartlands.

Labour, urged on by former chancellor Alistair Darling, has diluted its support in recent weeks, with shadow chancellor Ed Balls saying there would be "no blank cheque" under Labour for HS2, a position that was endorsed by Ed Miliband. Ukip also hopes to take votes from the Conservatives by campaigning against HS2 up and down the route at the next election.

Last week, the incoming chairman of HS2 Ltd, Sir David Higgins, said it was vital that

the project did not become a "political football", a point he stressed when he met Osborne recently to discuss its future. "I met with the chancellor last week and I said, 'There's only one thing I really need on this project: this has to be bipartisan'," Higgins told the BBC.

Asked what the effect of abandoning HS2 would be, McLoughlin said: "I believe it would be a disaster. I believe it would be a particular disaster for the cities of England and Scotland as well, not to go ahead with high-speed rail."

Speaking after opening the £550m King's Cross Square redevelopment in London, he added: "I do find it rather amazing that I can go from here to most cities in Europe on high-speed trains and I can't go from this station or that station up the road [Euston] to any cities in the UK on high-speed trains."

Emphasising the importance of investing for the future, he added: "If you're concerned about Britain, if you're concerned about us competing in a global race, if you're concerned about us helping hard-working people who are trying to get their jobs, who are trying to get business in this country, who are trying to secure investment, I believe HS2 is essential."

The first phase of HS2 between London and Birmingham will open in 2026, before a V-shaped second section will be added in 2033, going to Manchester and Leeds. Until this summer HS2 was priced at £32.7bn. But in June the government revised its estimate up by a further £10bn to a maximum of £42.6bn, triggering a new wave of criticism over the way the project was being handled. Rolling stock is expected to cost another £7.5bn.

This week's Conservative conference, the transport secretary said, would show that the Tories had put the country "on the right track" and that investing in infrastructure was a key part of that. He added: "It'll be about hard-working people. It'll be about whether the government is on the right course. We're not taking anything for granted. We're talking about the things that matter to people."

He refused to denigrate Ed Miliband or play down the threat that Labour will represent at the next election. "Oh, I don't think you ever underestimate your opposition," he said. "Margaret Thatcher never did it. It was never done with other opposition leaders. I don't underestimate the opposition."

"My message to the Conservative party is: take nothing for granted. We're going to work for a majority at the next general election. I think we can get a majority at the next general election – but I don't underestimate anybody."



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