

HS2: London-based critics should 'stop moaning' says minister

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin has hit out at critics of HS2, accusing London-based commentators of "moaning" about the rail link's cost.

He told the Conservative conference that the high-speed line would leave the country "stronger" and provide a boost to "all of the great cities".

The project could be delivered on time and on budget, he insisted.

He also announced that plans to charge foreign lorry drivers to use UK roads would be brought forward to April 2014.

Critics of the £50bn HS2 scheme have grown as costs have escalated, with many Tory MPs with constituencies on the proposed route opposed and Labour warning it could cancel the project if it was no longer value for money.

Addressing Tory activists, Mr McLoughlin said the UK's rail system was "almost full up" and said the HS2 rail route would be the equivalent of a "heart bypass", freeing up capacity elsewhere on the rest of the network.

'Great rewards'

He said he had taken on board criticism of the project, which will initially link London and Birmingham, insisting that "we will build it carefully and we will build it right".

But he said HS2 would bring "great rewards" for cities across the country, including Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow, Derby, Nottingham and Birmingham.

And he suggested that people who were saying HS2 was unaffordable or unnecessary were not saying the same thing about the £15bn Crossrail link in London.

"I hear the critics, boy I hear the critics. But the truth is we need a new north-south line to make our country stronger.

"I am tired of the moaning London commentators who are pleased enough about the billions we are spending on the essential Crossrail transport system in London but can't understand why the rest of the country needs a great transport system too."

'Dream team'

He said the project was now being run by the "Olympic dream team" of former Locog bosses Sir David Higgins, now HS2 chairman, and infrastructure minister Lord Deighton.

He added: "We will do everything we can to squeeze every penny of economic benefit out of the line and cut down costs."

On Sunday Prime Minister David Cameron told the BBC that the government would not spend unlimited amounts on the new line, but insisted it would be delivered on time and on budget: "HS2 is going to happen."

The transport secretary also rejected suggestions the existing rail and road network were being "starved" of investment to fund big projects, citing improvements to Reading, Nottingham and Manchester stations and the building of new motorway lanes.

More than 70% of rail passengers would have access to ultra-fast broadband on board trains by 2020, he said.

And he also announced that plans to charge foreign hauliers to use the UK's roads would be introduced a year earlier than planned.

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