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Intercity express project: the costly high-speed rail plan that time forgot

Unlike HS2, the Department for Transport's other major rail project has not been the subject of scrutiny or debate

Anonymous Inside View

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The Intercity express project will replace British Rail's Intercity 125 trains with newer models. Photograph: Science & Society Picture Librar/SSPL via Getty Images

Amid the heated debate that has accompanied proposals to construct the HS2 line from London to Leeds and Manchester, it's been easy for the Department for Transport to slip proposals for another costly rail project quietly through, without any real debate or scrutiny from the wider media.

And while you'll find many railway workers who will eagerly sing the praises of HS2 and its importance to the future of the national railway network, I've yet to meet anyone who thinks the Intercity express project, which involves replacing old British Rail stock with new high-speed trains on several major routes, is a good idea.

Originally the project derived from the previous Labour government's desire to replace the iconic Intercity 125 fleet on the east coast mainline and great western mainline. Ten years after the idea was first floated, the Intercity express project has managed to survive political reviews and market pressures. Unfortunately, however, the project has become something that the rail industry is increasingly wary of because of its limited involvement and a lack of consultation from the outset.

The project has become a political toy for politicians and civil servants to play with and keep out of the railway industry's grasp. It remains primarily for the creation of jobs in Newton Aycliffe where Hitachi, the contractor for the project, has promised to build a factory creating thousands of jobs.

The government is keen to point to the success of the Nissan factory in nearby Sunderland, yet fails to understand that the market for new trains is fundamentally different to that for cars. The famine and feast nature of the market in the UK, and the

highly protectionist market in most of the rest of Europe, suggest that Hitachi could fail to succeed in winning new contracts following completion of the Intercity project, meaning that the Newton Aycliffe factory will be on borrowed time.

Of course, all of this will be paid for by the taxpayer. The increase in rolling stock costs on the east coast mainline, where it is now proposed that the service will be entirely operated by brand new Intercity express stock, is forecast to be £181m per annum, wiping out the £187.7m premium paid by East Coast to the government.

You can bet that no private operator will sign up to a contract offering margins as tight as that as the government rushes to re-privatise the east coast mainline.

For further information on the Intercity project, I'd urge you to read Roger Ford's articles in Modern Railways on the subject – although there is a lot of technical jargon in his articles which may make them difficult to navigate for some readers, Ford is the only journalist I've come across who has looked at the project in sufficient depth and exposed it for the sham it is.

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