

Should the government cancel HS2?

I voted against HS2 when the decision in principle was made by Parliament. I did so because the business case for it was very weak. The forecasts of likely passenger numbers and revenues looked far too high. The negative impact on revenues and traveller numbers on the competing routes was not taken very seriously. The main argument that we need to get to Birmingham faster changed into an argument that we needed more capacity to get to Birmingham, which the figures did not seem to justify.

I was on the losing side, and accepted defeat with a good grace. I accepted thereafter government and Parliament wanted it to go ahead.

Now the government is holding a genuine review. The immediate cause is the massive escalation in projected costs compared with the figures Parliament used to make the original decision. There is also substantial delay in delivering HS2 in the north, which was meant to be the main reason for the scheme. This gives me the opportunity to make a case again for cancellation.

The business case has clearly got a lot worse, as the capital cost is so much bigger. There is no way that the nation can earn a decent return on such a huge investment, given the likely passenger numbers and fare revenue possible on this new railway and the impact on the competing railways. It points to more subsidy and more losses.

Today though I wish to engage with the political argument that this railway is a totem of commitment to the development of the north and to fairer capital spending around the country, and must not therefore be stopped.

The irony is that for the next few years if we continue there will be massive capital spending in London on remodelling a main station and in London and the Home Counties as money is spent on providing a tunnel out of the city to limit the environmental damage. HS2 to Birmingham will be yet another major investment project where most of the money is spent in London and the south east, yet it is a project that the people closest to in London and the south east vehemently oppose.

HS2 will do nothing to ease congestion in London and the Home counties or to make it easier for people to get to work from outer London or Buckinghamshire. So it will be a big investment in the south east that is not helping the south east.

Meanwhile northern commuters will be frustrated that their journeys are still made difficult by old trains and too little capacity. HS2 unites a lot of people in both north and south saying this is not the right project. We all want better trains, with more capacity into the cities. HS2 does not provide that in ways most people want. If we cancel we could have a big boost to northern rail spending in ways that do directly help, and still save money overall.

Berkshire Fire Authority tax

When I was asked at a meeting to support a 7.5% increase in Council Tax for the Fire Authority I said I needed to see the financial case and to see their budget. They did not have this available at the meeting but promised to send it to me.

They did not do so, so I reminded a senior person from the Authority a week ago on Friday. He confirmed the original exchanges and promised they would send me the details. They have still not done so.

They wanted the Berkshire MPs to support their case for a much higher than permitted Council Tax increase to government. I am unable to support a case they have not made to me, with no budget information about what they currently spend and what they need to spend extra money on.

Constitutional change?

I will soon be submitting some thoughts to the government on possible constitutional reform.

The last Parliament submitted our constitution to a battering, as an alliance of MPs from all the Opposition parties aided by a few Conservatives who subsequently left the party worked with the Speaker and the law courts to delay or prevent Brexit. In acting in this way they opposed the decision of the majority in the referendum which most of them had previously pledged to honour. The Labour and former Conservative ones also reneged on or redefined their promise to see Brexit through, made to win the 2017 election.

The main issues that arise include:

Fixed Term Parliament Act

This became a major problem, preventing a government from holding an early election to resolve the tensions Parliament could not sort out. The Act also showed it was eventually meaningless, as we held three elections in four years under a law designed to limit elections to once every five years.

It should be repealed, leaving the power to hold an election at any time up to 5 years in the hands of the majority in the Commons. The Commons needs to have this option, as it also has the option of expressing or withdrawing confidence in any given government.

Powers of the courts to settle political and Parliamentary issues

The decision of the Supreme Court to delay Brexit by nine months to require an Act of Parliament prior to sending a letter necessitated by the referendum result was unhelpful and very costly to the country.

The decision of the Supreme Court to prevent a prorogation of Parliament which was only slightly longer than the normal September recess was seen by many as a partisan decision as it was designed to allow those who wanted to stop Brexit more time to debate and vote on it.

These two decisions were damaging to our constitution. It is most important most people more of the time believe in the impartiality of the court system and believe the judgements are fair and reasonable. Major issues of constitutional significance need to be decided by Parliament so both sides can put their case and the decision is made by majority vote, reflecting the votes of the people in a previous election.

These decisions were seen by many Brexiteers as being decisions to delay or prevent Brexit, however good the legal reasoning. It would have been better if the Supreme court had said in both cases they were not matters for a court but matters for Parliament to resolve, or a for a General election to settle.

The respective roles of government, Parliament and courts in prerogative matters needs clarifying, with more protection of the courts by removing their competence in matters relating to how Parliament conducts its business or how government with Parliament undertakes its Treaty roles and international negotiations.

Green growth

The EU tells us they are going to stimulate faster growth in the Euro area through commitment to faster decarbonisation.

They have announced a “Green deal” with access to just Euro 7.5bn of transition funds to subsidise the losing areas that face closures of mines, coal power stations, gas plants, petro chemical plants and the rest. They hope to top these funds up through money already included in their budgets for regional development

The big push comes from capital investment, where they suggest they might help foster a Euro 1 trillion investment programme across many industries and countries over the next five years. The EU itself will contribute to this investment through loans from the European Investment Bank. They plan a series of new rules and checks for private sector investment companies to encourage more of the savings they handle to be put to work in companies pursuing the green agenda.

The Commission is currently wrestling with the problem of inherited schemes for substantial additional investment in gas supplies as replacements for coal being phased out and to ensure sufficient capacity in energy supply. Some think they should refuse to assist in funding more fossil fuel schemes to accelerate change, whilst others are concerned that without additional and replacement fossil fuel investment the Euro area will be short of energy.

The difficulty comes over pace of change and over the interconnections of different sectors and activities. Over the last year the EU motor industry has taken a hit because tax and regulation has put people off buying diesel cars before enough are ready to buy electric cars instead. Car volumes are down and manufacturing has declined. Too speedy a transition away from gas energy could leave countries short of energy in total or could drive prices up with adverse consequences for energy intensive industry in a very competitive world.

Of course setting up new factories, launching new products, and investing in new ways to generate electricity and to deliver power to factories and vehicles creates jobs and adds to growth. It has however to be done at a pace which more than offsets the loss of jobs in traditional products and methods of production and propulsion. There also need to be good ways to retrain the people who are out of work and to reuse the assets that the old businesses can no longer operate profitably.

Central to success is a new generation of home heating systems and vehicles that people want to buy.

Tackling street works

One of the worst features of past highways mismanagement in the UK has been the practice of putting water pipes, gas mains, phone and broadband wires and electricity cables down the middle of busy roads and covering them with large amounts of concrete and tarmac.

The Highways authority has to grant access to the utility undertakers to close all or part of the road, dig it up and repair, monitor or replace the pipe or wire. Parliament has tried to impose some discipline, giving the Highways Authorities the power to schedule the work, to time limit it and to fine the contractor for non performance. Of course access has to be granted immediately if there is a gas burst or a water mains leak where safety is paramount. There are roads that are designated sensitive where the Authority can demand that repairs and replacements be done off peak or at night owing to how busy and crucial the road is.

I have urged utilities and Councils to put new networks and replacement networks into verges, under pavements or away from main roads, preferably in accessible conduits so there will be no need in future to drill through

layers of tarmac and concrete to find your particular pipe or cable without skewering someone else's. Wokingham Borough tell me they are doing this with new developments. It would be good if universally we were starting on a long work out to get rid of this problem.

In the meantime we have to manage a situation where most cables and pipes are under main roads. So today I ask how should Councils manage the demands for access to repair and replace? Do they need any new legislative powers? Is the balance right between the needs of the utilities and the needs of the users? Should we be tougher and demand more off peak working?