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HS2 after the Budget – no more money for the railways from DfT.

Here's how they could get out of their financial hole and stop digging!

The reaction from the construction industry to the government's announcement of a pause in the construction of HS2 has been predictable – 'the work must go on to preserve jobs, to deliver Levelling Up, to enhance the reputation of the UK construction industry', with the Institution of Civil Engineers stating '*the UK's ability to deliver projects effectively may become more difficult*'. So perhaps the time has come to stop digging an ever deeper grave for our reputation!

This present pause has probably been caused by the Government running out of money (and hoping to put the problem onto the next Government). It should be noted that last week's Budget allocation to Department for Transport of Capital Departmental Expenditure Limits for each of the next three years was set at around £20bn, to include roads, railways and other capital expenditure. So there must be some truth in the comment in Modern Railways April 2023 that 'full Midland Main Line electrification to Nottingham and Sheffield is at risk of cancellation amid escalating costs of HS2.'

it may also have thought that the rocketing costs of HS2 (towards £150bn), the delays and environmental damage, coupled with increasing doubts as to the need for higher speed links to London, when the regional rail services, used by many more people, are awful, mean that the kindest thing is to put the project out of its misery and spend at least some of the money saved on more worthwhile rail projects.

So to those still lobbying hard for HS2 the choice seems to be simple: you either have HS2 in 20 years' time or an electrified line to Sheffield in perhaps five years with the all-important high skilled jobs coming sooner.

What can be salvaged now? At Manchester, the parliamentary bill process can be paused as a prelude to cancellation, so that an agreed East-West route through Manchester and on to Leeds can be designed and agreed.

Crewe to Birmingham already has four tracks on the West Coast Main Line and does not need the environmental damage that HS2 is already causing on the ground, and where no attempt has been made by HS2 to avoid the salt mines, causes of long-term settlements for rail, roads and properties for over 100 years.

The only part of HS2 where significant works on the ground have started is between Birmingham and London at Old Oak Common (OOC). The earthwork scars and damage to the environment, rivers, woodland etc are immense, little tunnelling has started, but some argue that one might as well finish the job. Michael Byng and I think that this part of the project is only 18% complete, although HS2 argues that it is nearer 40% to justify carrying on. We need the evidence of this higher figure!

OOC has already seen construction work for the new station, but the tunnelling to Euston has not started and, at Euston, there is no approved safe design for the approach tunnels.

What are the options?

- One can cancel the whole project, reinstate the grounds affected and sell off the land to the original owners or on the open market. Net cost to Government less than £10bn.
- One can cancel all parts of the project where significant ground works have not started – that means Birmingham to Crewe to Manchester and OOC to Euston. There is a smaller cost to Government of the still massive payments to consultants and advisers and contractor start-ups, and dispose of land as above.
- One could complete the construction of rail lines on the formation between Birmingham and OOC to create additional rail capacity for commuting to London. Cost to finish perhaps £50bn.

Options for the London end

A new line from Birmingham to OOC needs connections to other lines to be of any use. There are many options depending on where the trains are required to operate, but a terminal station at OOC is possible on the existing site for up to 10 trains per hour, enough to satisfy the aspiration of Birmingham and, via a connection to the existing West Coast Main Line, to Crewe and beyond.

But although OOC is next to the GW Main Line carrying Elizabeth Line services, there is a need for a connecting station there and the £7bn cost of this has not been included in any HS2 budget.

More intriguingly, the Elizabeth Line is designed to carry 24 trains per hour in each direction, but only 12 go west of Paddington because of reduced demand. If HS2 trains terminated at OOC, these extra 12 could surely continue to OOC to carry HS2 passengers across London, to many destinations more quickly than via Euston.

So HS2 Birmingham to OOC with 10 trains per hour and 12 Elizabeth Line trains would be a great way of getting quickly to central London and avoiding Euston, but at a cost of building a GW station at Old Oak Common and redesigning the HS2 station there as a terminus, at a cost of perhaps £50bn for HS2 and £7bn for the GW Station.

But even more radical and much the cheapest would be to abandon the HS2 works and open up an improved commuter line service to High Wycombe by diverting those 12 Elizabeth Line trains with nowhere to go west of Paddington via a connection onto the Chiltern Line – which already exists. This would reduce the pressure on Marylebone station which cannot easily be expanded. This avoids building any station at OOC and repurposing much of HS2 construction work already started.

There is no reason to retain Euston for HS2 trains since the need for 17 or 18 trains an hour rather than 10 (which OOC can accommodate) came from the original HS2 'Y' to Sheffield and Leeds, long since abandoned! One or two platforms could be added to the Network Rail station to increase the WCML capacity, but a new plan must be developed for the Euston area to avoid 20 years or blight to the whole area.

Conclusion

So ministers could save perhaps 80% of the overall HS2 cost - say £120 bn - and spend perhaps £10 bn on the Chiltern line/Elizabeth line upgrade.

The latter is clearly the cheapest solution going forward; I am sure that the residents of the Chilterns would give a hearty sigh of relief and come up with alternative uses for the scarred hillsides and occasional tunnel – which could become commercial mushroom farms!

But in the end, ministers have to decide how important it is to give the burghers of Birmingham a fourth rail alternative for their journey to London at a future cost of perhaps £57bn rather than spend some of the money saved on rail improvements where they are really needed – east-west in the North and Midlands and even electrify the Midland Main Line to Sheffield!

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