

HS2 was always a white elephant

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There is apparently no news this morning unless you want to talk about HS2. But even then, there is no news. There is just some speculation, confusion and almost certain misinformation.

No.10 clearly placed a story with the media saying that HS2 might be scrapped north of Birmingham. Grant Shapps, who was transport secretary for more than 15 minutes but not much longer than half an hour, denied that on Laura Kuennsberg's show yesterday. And all we can definitely conclude from this is that the Tories are so desperate for headlines for their party conference that they will say anything.

I am not bothering to speculate on what might really happen. What I do know is that HS2 was always a white elephant. The emphasis of rail investment should always have been on improving the system as a whole in the north, and on improving freight flows. The imperative was not saving a few minutes on journey times to London.

The whole system of working out what was significant dismally failed when it came to HS2, which the Tories always seem to have treated as a trophy project. As such if it fails it will say everything that we need to know about them, but not much more.

There are, however, lessons to learn. One is that if investment on such a massive scale takes place, it has to benefit everyone. The national grid requires such investment now.

Another is that to be economically efficient investment has to be capable of delivery at varying speeds to match the state of the economy. Delivery of green infrastructure does that, as I have been pointing out for about twenty years. If the economy booms it can be scaled back, and vice versa. As a macroeconomic stability programme, it is perfect in a way HS2 never could be. Once HS2 started, it had to finish and could deliver nothing until it was. A green investment programme could deliver in stages and so deliver a much faster return, whilst still being capable of delivery at varying speeds.

The lesson is quite simple in that case. We need investment. What we do not need are flashy projects. We instead need to create the infrastructure for a new way of living. It might not look as exciting to an egotistical minister, but it delivers a lot more for

society. One day we might have ministers who appreciate that.