

Of course HS2 hasn't worked: it was so over designed ...

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I saw a Renault 4 today, in near pristine condition.

It brought back many memories. I had one on the 80s. It had an enormous virtue. It was easy and cheap to repair. Whilst owning it I got as close to understanding what happened under the bonnet as I ever have.

I do, of course, know it did not meet modern safety standards. I also know it accelerated like there was something sticking the proverbial to the shovel. But oddly, you got where you were going, nonetheless. And it was the only car I ever had that got a name. It was so much fun to drive (once you got used to the gear lever on the dashboard) that it became Henrietta, based on the letters in its registration number.

Why mention this? Because it strikes me we could learn a lot from the Renault 4 and other cars like it.

Why has HS2 failed? Not because we cannot build rail lines: we clearly can. What we cannot do is build ones that run at more than 200mph. But then, we really do not need them. If we needed more capacity than an uninterrupted 150mph would have been more than enough, and vastly easier and cheaper.

It was the same for the Elizabeth line. It was so over-engineered it took forever to open it once the infrastructure was ready.

And then there are modern cars. Massive lumps of metal capable of being moved at high speed on enormous tyres by vast quantities of lithium in batteries for which there is insufficient charging infrastructure.

Why is this? It is all because we are perpetually told bigger, faster, and more complicated is better and so we must have it.

Look at your phone for evidence. What proportion of even its most basic facilities do you use? I am a geek and do not use a large part of what it can do.

I am not, of course, saying we should cease to innovate. That is not my point, at all. We need to innovate to save this planet. But the object of that innovation should not be to go faster. Or to consume more. Or to out-compete other countries. It should, instead, be about making life better and more sustainable.

So we do need innovation in public transport. We need to make smaller, safer cars, and to create a tax system that makes them much more attractive than alternatives. Progressive consumption, which favours sustainability, can be part of a progressive tax system.

And we need to innovate so that work suits more people, is more fulfilling and flexible when so much is at the moment an exercise in alienating people from their meaning.

We also, of course, need innovation in tax and the way we organise society.

But what we do not need is tech for the sake of it, because that makes no sense at all now. More than that, it is very obviously failing us.

If we learned that from HS2 we would have got somewhere.

We should have already known it, of course: Concord had already taught us that. It seems though that politicians are slow in this regard.

We'd get even further if we valued what we have and improved it, including rail lines in northern England and Scotland that need electrification, whilst addressing the deficit in the maintenance in public infrastructure.

If we made what we have work we could go a long way. In itself that would require massive innovation. I suspect that Renault 4 chucks out vast quantities of pollutants. But the idea remains sound. It was a simple car suited to the task demanded of it. We need to design that way, once more. That way we might get the chance to succeed.