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The government's new doomsmonger case for HS2 [1]

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John Burton shows how the government's new case for HS2 is even less convincing than the last.

The Government -- or rather the Department for Transport (DfT), and its offspring, HS2 Ltd -- have (once again) today published "new, updated" reworkings1 of their strategic, business and economic cases for the High Speed 2 (HS2) rail mega-project; which is forecast for full completion (if eventually approved by Parliament) in 2037.

These are largely reworkings of their earlier argumentation; but they do, now, accept (grudgingly) that the Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) of their (Giant!) "pet" project is lower than earlier claimed; and the daft assumption that businessfolk do no work on intercity trains (eg, via ICT) remains, discreetly, embedded in the "new" analysis

What I *also* think is new about this "new, updated" case for HS2 is that it involves a histrionic resort to (what can only be described as) blatant scare tactics to try to "sell" the HS2 case to an increasingly sceptical public audience. A day before the publication of these new reports, a "Government source said":2 'The alternative to HS2 is a patch and mend job that causes 14 years of gridlock, hellish journeys, and rail replacement buses. 'The main routes to the north would be crippled and the economy would be damaged'.

However, these reports *do not* demonstrate this "doom-without -HS2" scenario! There would be some disruption arising from the implementation of alternative, rail capacity-enhancing projects; but not the "14 years of chaos" claimed by the Government. Moreover, the HS2 project would also involve much disruption (eg, around Euston, and in Middle England in particular)... but this is ignored by the Government in this pre-publication marketing ploy.

What *should* be done is to compare the alternatives side-by-side, dispassionately...which the new bevy of HS2 reports fails signally to do. In a seperate media attempt to market HS2 by doomsmongering, on the day before publication, the (London) Evening Standard3 was told: 'Tens of thousands more rail passengers will have to stand during their journeys if the HS2 rail link is cancelled, a new study warns. 'It says that there would be 17 passengers for every 10 seats on trains into London by 2026 if the current growth in rail travel continues...'. Obviously, this specific "marketing" ploy for HS2 was aimed at the (long-suffering) London commuter hordes, trying to read their Standard, whilst packed like cattle on some commuter line!

However, there are some very basic problems with this scare-tactic argument. First, Phase I of the HS2 project is not planned to open until 2027...one year *after* the 2026 "crisis scenario" fed to the Standard! So,

HS2 could *not* head off this proclaimed capacity crisis! Second, HS2 is not aimed*at all* at relieving London (or other-city) commuting congestion at all...it is, by very design, a high-speed *inter*-city proposition (with a £50bn.+ price tag).

There *are* genuine capacity problems looming in the British Rail system; but these mainly relate to the very crowded commuter services *in/around* Britain's large cities -- notably London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds -- plus the Paddington-West Country/S.Wales lines . There are, moreover, plenty of potential ways of incrementally improving North-South rail capacity in the UK, without recourse to HS2 (should that demand arise).

I have elsewhere4 compared the doomsmongering that now accompanies proclamations of the case for HS2 to the Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894; in which a (London) Times analyst forecast that London was doomed to be (literally) overwhelmed by horse manure -- to a depth of 9' -- by 1944 at the very latest... This Doom Scenario did not come about because alternatives to/substitutes for horse-drawn conveyance -- eg, cars, buses, rail, tubes, phones -- were developed. Likewise, if sensible alternative investments are made in infrastructure, we need not fear the "Doom-without-HS2" prospect that HS2's proponents now espouse to bolster their teetering case.

Sources referred to:

1:DfT, The Strategic Case for HS2, (29/10/13); HS2 Ltd, Economic Case and Other Supporting Documents, (29/10/13).

2: J.Groves, 'Passengers face "14 years of chaos" if HS2 is Derailed', Daily Mail, 28/10/13, p20.

3:Joe Murphy, 'Standing Room Only "Could Become Norm Without HS2"', Evening Standard, 28/10/13, p.8

4: John Burton, 'Conometricks and the new NAFF 'case' for HS2', Institute of Economic Affairs Blog, 24 October, 2013.

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