

The U.S. Is Not Alone: Britain's High-Speed Rail Challenges Mirror Those Here

By Peter S. Lewis

Earlier this year, RAIL Magazine formed a partnership with [The Railway Chronicle](#) and [OnShed](#) – which fall under the [Steam Tube](#) umbrella – to share content on international passenger rail news ([click here](#) for full details on our partnership). This article from Peter S. Lewis – Owner and Editor of Steam Tube – is the first in a series of regular contributions as a result of this partnership and provides updates on the United Kingdom's planned HS2 high-speed rail network – ed)

What Is HS2?

Since 2009, high-speed rail has been supported by the major political parties in the UK. A high-speed line from London to Birmingham (Phase 1) would be followed by the development of a Y-shaped split to Manchester (via Crewe) and Leeds (via the East Midlands and Sheffield). Phase 1 would start construction in 2017, and be operational by 2026, whilst Phase 2 would have 2032 as its completion date.

Opposition has centred on these main issues: passenger congestion at Euston, the impact on Camden and the northwest suburbs of London, the Chilterns – which is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which UK cities should be served, the environmental con-



sequences and the economic viability of the scheme.

Supporters cite increasing capacity and encouraging economic growth throughout the UK.

Prime Minister David Cameron said on July 24, 2013 that a new high-speed rail line is “essential” if the UK is to be a “winner in the global race.”

Speaking in a question-and-answer session with members of staff in Crewe, Cheshire, the Prime Minister was asked what he thought the HS2 rail development would bring to the country, particularly the north.

In his reply he said he thought that it (HS2) will bring a big benefit to the North West and to the whole of the UK for this reason: “If we want to be in the front rank of countries, if we want to be a winner in the global race, then we’ve got to have a really fast and efficient transport infrastructure.”

He added, “I think when you look at what really makes a difference to the economic geography of a country, it’s those big decisions to build the big motorway, to build the high-speed line as we did through the Channel Tunnel. It’s those decisions that can make a real difference to your country.”

Of course, there have been many who have eloquently spoken against the scheme, even more so as the estimated costs suddenly rose to £42 billion, a £10 billion-plus increase on original costings. One politician even suggested that the cost would rise even further northwards, upwards to £70 billion and beyond.



HS2: To Be or Not to Be? That Is the Question!

As things currently stand, the United Kingdom’s (UK) government plans for a high-speed rail line from London to Birmingham – then splitting northwards to Leeds and Manchester – have survived the latest legal challenge, with a majority verdict in the Court of Appeals. Fifteen councils and many other objectors – including residents’ associations along the route – had asked appeal judges to order further assessment of the scheme as a whole. The three judges – Lord Dyson, the Master of the Rolls, Lord Justice Richards and Lord Justice Sullivan – supported the Department of Transport’s

contention that an SEA (Strategic Environmental Assessment) under a European Directive was not required, by a 2-to-1 majority.

Lord Justice Sullivan disagreed and added the warning, “if, as I have concluded, an SEA is required and there has not been substantial compliance with the SEA Directive, it would be difficult to think of a more egregious breach of the Directive given the scale of the HS2 project and the likely extent of its effects on the environment.”

Because of its public importance, the appeal court gave the objectors permission to bring a further appeal on the SEA issue before the Supreme Court, the highest court in the land. Supporters of the project are exultant, whilst

opponents of the scheme drew much comfort from the comments of the dissenting judge and that they were given permission to bring a further appeal on the SEA issue before the Supreme Court, the highest court in the land. They were also given permission for a further appeal over a second EU Directive - the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (EIAD).

So the legal challenge continues.

The Economics of HS2

On the other hand, prominent commentators have expressed themselves on the economics of the case.

[Christian Wolmar](#) has written several articles...the headline is enough to get the message.... HS2 struggling to justify £50billion bill Rail 723: HS2 slammed by National Audit Office.HS2 spending plan puts project at risk .

And you can read Penny Gaines' evidence to the High Speed Rail (Preparation) Bill [here](#).

The experience of several European countries might give some clue as to the enthusiasm, or otherwise, to the enormous cost of high speed rail, and whether it is a price worth paying.

For example, the Belgian government decided not to build a high-speed rail line between Brussels and Luxembourg as the result of a cost-benefit analysis. Instead they chose to upgrade the line so that the maximum speed of trains was raised to 160 kph.

In France, Guillaume Pépy – President of the SNCF – said, “we risk having longer and longer high-speed lines which are used less and less.”

He thinks that France is going too fast in its further construction of high speed lines. TGV fares have increased by 100 percent in the last decade compared to about 30 percent for car travel.

He went on to say, “the whole basis of the high-speed rail revolution – that the TGV should be the normal means of travel, not just something affordable by the business elite – is under threat.”

The SNCF president also described the state railways as “decaying,” “facing a financial impasse,” and “heading for the wall.”

And that comment was certainly prophetic, given the accident at Bretigny-sur-Orge, on a regional intercity line, possibly due to a broken plate linking the rails.

La Vie Du Rail commented, “the accident at Brétigny could definitely mark the end of the so-called “all TGV” policy.” This, according to one comment, was “the dark side” of high-speed rail.

The high-speed line between Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Breda has been saved from bankruptcy with a £250m government bailout. It has been losing £320,000 per day due to disastrous levels of patronage.

RailwayGazette.com reported that on 7 December 2011, Poland announced it was shelving plans to build a 480km, Y-shaped high speed rail line. Projected costs had already risen by 40 percent. The government will instead focus on upgrading existing lines.

The Portuguese government abandoned plans to construct its 3.3 billion Lisbon – Madrid high-speed rail link in March 2012. Priority

will be given to building lines for rail freight instead.

And what of Spain's experience?

The disastrous derailment at Santiago de Compostela of an intercity express may yet prove to be another watershed in the pursuit of speed on the railways.

For although this section in which the accident occurred belongs to the high-speed line Ourense-Santiago-A Coruña commissioned in December 2011, the train was an Alvia, which could run on both high speed lines and standard Iberian gauge and still run at fast speeds.

So, future developments will be interesting to watch.

What's Next?

The last month has been something of a disaster, PR-wise, for the railways.

The Lac-Mégantic tragedy in Quebec, the SNCF Bretigny-sur-Orge accident, and the Santiago do Compostela disaster may not change the ever-increasing desire for high-speed rail. Indeed, these accidents did not involve high-speed trains. But they bring to the fore serious issues involving safety, driver training, speed and signalling devices, and cost.

Whether or not HS2 will be, or not be, we will have to wait and see.

Note: www.steamtu.be does not endorse any specific railway policy, but brings the news items to inform and educate our discerning readers. 