

The Rt. Hon. Theresa May

10 Downing Street

London

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Dear Prime Minister

HS2. Time to think again about this project.

I was very encouraged by the news that the Government is re-examining the case for Hinkley Point C. However the Department of Energy and Climate Change's estimated total lifetime cost of £37 billion (up just a tad from last year's forecast of £14 billion) is still substantially lower than estimates of the cost of HS2, recently put at up to £90 billion by the Tax Payers Alliance.

The Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir Amyas Morse, recently reminded us that the Government's portfolio of major projects is enormous with an estimated whole life value of £405 billion as of September 2015. He quite rightly questioned whether the public sector could deliver Hinkley Point C, nuclear decommissioning, a third runway at Heathrow or a second at Gatwick, HS2, a northern powerhouse, the replacement of Trident, the renewal of the Palace of Westminster and many other projects at the same time.

It was not just a question of cost but also of capacity. Many of these projects were drawing on the same pool of skills and many contained optimism bias in the planning. As we have seen all too often in the past, Government projects have a tendency to take far longer to complete and cost vastly more than originally planned, adding to the national debt.

The uncertainties created by "BREXIT" have added to our problems and to an outsider it looks as though the Government could be seriously over committed. If this is indeed the case, then the burden needs to be lightened, which means not adding to the load and cancelling projects for which no sensible economic case can be made. I strongly believe that the economic case for HS2 is weak to non-existent, a view which is shared by the majority of organisations which have taken the trouble to examine it in detail. Furthermore, the source of peak time electrical power for the trains is currently ill defined and any delay or cancellation of Hinkley Point C will add to these problems. By contrast, advances in electric vehicles (which can be recharged overnight using renewables) will make road a far greener option by the time that HS2 has been completed.

Over the past five years I have spent hundreds of hours studying this project and its likely impact on my town (Chesham) and the nation. In September of 2015 I and my colleague Dr James Conboy made a presentation to the Commons HS2 Select Committee, regarding the severely adverse effects of construction on our area. Our presentation was described by committee member Sir Peter Bottomley as "exemplary and most welcome".

The business case for HS2 was always highly dubious. The latest DfT passenger numbers show that while, over the past four years, there has been a 31% increase in the number of standing passengers during the morning peak three hours for the 11 major cities listed, Virgin West Coast trains into Euston were the only trains entering London without any standing passengers during the morning peak. This means that HS2 would be built to provide extra capacity on a route which is not overcrowded.

HS2 would do nothing to address the problem of standing passengers on trains into London. In fact it would do the very opposite by reducing the number of approach tracks at Euston. It is the London overground trains entering Euston which have the most standing passengers in the morning peak period.

The assumption has been that a large proportion of passengers on the new line would be former users of the WCML service. However currently there are not enough of these to achieve the desired occupancy rates and so the heroic forecasts assume a surge in travel on this route, for reasons which are quite beyond us. It is conceded by HS2 that its calculations could be upset by fares policies and the competitive response of existing mainline operators. Excess capacity could force HS2 down the route of heavy fares discounting, further undermining the economics of the project.

The National Audit Office has stated that "There is no evidence that HS2 would promote growth and bridge the North/South divide". Costs look to be out of control and thus far attempts to reduce them have made the project look increasingly pointless. The promised connectivity with Heathrow and HS1 for example has gone out of the window, without any discernible reduction in the budget.

HS2 makes no business sense at all judged by any criteria that I understand. It is very difficult to conceive of anything less "green" than this energy guzzling, massively CO₂ emitting, environmentally devastating juggernaut. It is a vanity project, which will only benefit rich businessmen. We do not need it. The nation cannot afford it. There are far more deserving and far less costly infrastructure projects on which money should be spent. The Government should think again about HS2 and decide to scrap it.

With very best wishes

Yours sincerely

Anthony Franks

3rd August 2016

Conservative Chesham Town Councillor for Waterside, Chesham Town Council Spokesman on HS2