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Bravehearts united in call for a high-speed rail link with London

BUSINESS COMMENT



BY GRAHAM BELL

YOU may have missed it, but last week saw the foundations being laid of a plan that could transform Scotland's transport landscape more radically than any previously proposed. A group of influential players with proven lobbying power met to promote a high-speed rail link from Scotland to London.

All of us are prepared for a long game, as such is the norm in a country that only rarely throws up practical visionaries like Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

Consider the Channel tunnel, first conceived in 1802. It took 80 years before an attempt was made to build it, but that proved abortive. It took another 100 years before the process was started that ended, 15 years later, with a working Channel tunnel.

Now, a further 12 years after the completion of that work (whose £12 billion investment Scotland played its part in providing), we in the United Kingdom still have only 98km of high-speed rail (HSR). A link designed to help all British business connect to Europe is bringing Scotland negligible benefit.

Since 1990, there has been fierce debate about how to make good the Channel promoters' unfulfilled promise of connectivity to Scotland. Significant contributors include the chairman of the Railway Forum, Chris Green, and Jim Steer, non-executive director of transport consultants Steer

Davies Gleave, whose pressure group Greengauge21 is building the case for northern expansion of HSR. A conference in Glasgow in December 2005 marked a significant step towards progressing the case, but nothing happened.

A recent survey by Atkins, the UK's largest transport consultancy on the business case for HSR makes interesting reading. An update of its 2001-2003 survey for the Strategic Rail Authority, it shows a cost benefit ratio for a north-south route of an astonishing 2.5 for the £31bn investment now needed to create a national HSR route. Its arguments deal with the climate change question (including the importance of reducing CO₂ emissions) and the regeneration benefits to businesses and communities both sides of the Border.

John McSheen, Atkins's head of project development, has described how the firm decided to update and expand its earlier study to see if the original business case still stacked up, and whether the British government's commitments and strategy would see us through the next 20 years. The conclusion: that high-speed routes deliver measurable economic benefits.

These points should be of vital interest to Westminster. Of the eight economic regions that comprise the UK, the eighth worst performing in terms of sustained growth is northeast England. The seventh is Scotland. A route running (for example) London - Birmingham - Manchester - Leeds - York - Newcastle - Edinburgh -

Glasgow would be a major time saver for all travellers. Edinburgh council's longstanding hope of achieving a link to central London in under three hours is genuinely possible. Moreover, moving travellers off short-haul air routes would increase comfort levels, offer more working time on the train, and free up London landing slots for international traffic and more regional flights from northern Scotland and elsewhere.

Last week's foundation meeting hosted by Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce brought together Edinburgh and Glasgow city councils, regional transport group Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) and its east coast equivalent SEStran, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Glasgow-Edinburgh collaboration project, the Scottish Association for Public Transport and Scottish Financial Enterprise. Since then it has attracted more supporters, including CBI Scotland.

All are agreed that a more detailed study is urgently needed to establish the best options for a high-speed line. Such a study should include up-to-date cost benefit analysis. Interestingly, the public sector agencies involved are convinced that ministers will only commit to such a step when they are "enlightened" by a strong lobby of business voices.

Every business and business organisation I have spoken to since last week's event is now confirmed to be on board. Alan Robertson, managing director of Jones Lang LaSalle for Scotland, under-

stands the value to business of high-speed connectivity. Brendan Dick, general manager of BT Scotland, is excited by the prospect of fast work-friendly links to London. Liz Cameron, director of Scottish Chambers of Commerce is in no doubt that the viability of high-speed connections benefiting both north and south, is overdue for examination.

None of us is calling this a "campaign", because the word implies entrenched resistance to defeat. Our hope is that all parties see the benefits. Faster journey times for the north, increased connections for the busy southeast and the liberation of slots on the existing network for local traffic and freight. Then there is the prospect of enhancing the economic regeneration for the north and midlands of England and Scotland's central belt. We have the opportunity to reduce the carbon footprint of distance travel, and in the process give Scotland direct connections to continental Europe.

Can we afford this? Or can we afford not to join the other 11 countries growing HSR links exponentially? From China to Spain, from Belgium to Turkey the rules of distance travel are being rewritten.

Brunel said engineers "besides being ingenious should be brave in proportion". Bravery is what we need now to produce a network that will serve us for as long as Brunel's centuries-spanning visions.

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