

Sensational and Superficial

WAS THERE a referendum prior to building the M1? Was there a referendum on the Newbury bypass, the M25 or the M6 Toll Road? No. Did any of these events proceed without any consultation? No. If any of them had been subject to a national referendum none would have been rejected or stopped by a majority necessary from those taking part across the UK as a whole. Why?

Well it's pretty simple, most people are not materially affected by big infrastructure schemes but most, following completion, do have the opportunity to benefit from them. So that means the vast majority of people are not really bothered and that usually extends to not bothering to exercise their right to have a say by voting.

The latest ridiculous manoeuvre by a dwindling bunch opposed to High Speed 2 (HS2), designed largely to gain publicity in the face of diminishing interest, was to put a bill before Parliament for a referendum on HS2. The result, which several correctly predicted, was an absolute shambles that demonstrated just how little support those opposed to HS2 now have.

Indeed, due to the lack of interest in Parliament the first hurdle of the 2nd reading was not even reached with the Bill's sponsor, Christopher Chope MP, seeking its withdrawal. Any objective analysis of this leads one to conclude that with so little interest in the Bill by Parliament there is simply no chance of a referendum on the issue of HS2. Clearly common sense continues to prevail across all main political parties on the issue and long may it continue.

The problem with so much of the HS2 issue is the level of superficiality and the sensationalism that has been consistently applied to it seldom challenged by any area of the media with the exception of the specialised transport press.

A number of local authorities have spent nearly £5 million of Council Tax opposing HS2, confirming that at least nearly £2 million of Council Tax has been spent on 'non formal' (political) opposition. Some of this Council Tax has gone on 21 ill-conceived legal actions at the High Court, Court of Appeal and Supreme Courts, the result, a spectacular 20 out of the 21 failed - a failure rate of over 95%. Have you read, heard or seen this in local or national media?

Has any coverage been given to Chiltern Railways recent response that supports HS2 and points out a considerable number of factors why existing railway services and infrastructure will not cope in the future even if more money was spent effectively tinkering with existing railways at the edges? No.

What journalist or News Editor exposed the alarmism from the right wing think tank called The Institute of Economic Affairs who suggested HS2 would cost £80 billion? Plenty took the one line of "HS2 could now cost £80bn" and reported it with what has been the customary superficial and sensational approach. None checked to find that the sum had been cynically arrived at by adding in a number of unrelated capital projects with some purely fictional in concept.

The campaign has become a transport equivalent of one of those "fad diets" that every so often pop up that attract a couple of so called 'celebrities' and before you know it everyone says they are following it and they have lost weight. This diet has concentrated on a few core elements such as alarmism, deceit, denial and on occasions the purely fictional. And there lies the problem... one of those elements is the one that causes most diets to fail - denial.

Put another way, it's like getting on the scales and learning that you have not reached your target or worse still you have put weight on and then blaming the scales for being wrong. The equivalent for the vociferous minority of those opposed to HS2 is receiving the latest independent ORR data showing rail passenger usage increasing and consequently rubbishing it's basis or saying its temporary.

Journalists, if they are doing their job properly and to a standard we expect and used to enjoy, are the independent verifiers of 'the scales' rather than a remote mouthpiece that merely repeats a weight they are given. Why is this so important? Simply because if people are told something time and time again and for long enough they will increasingly start to believe it especially if it comes from a source they believe is independent and thus has examined and checked such information.

Is it any wonder then that opinion polls show a large number of people as intimating they do not support HS2? No. Its entirely predictable and the campaign to Stop HS2 can be very pleased with itself that it has pulled off such a level of deceit and by doing so appeared to have gained much support from the general public. It owes much of this success to a supine mass media that increasingly trades in the superficial and sensational and largely ignores the informed and detailed analysis so important to any significant issue.

The use of a 9 year old boy to give evidence before the House of Commons by the Manager of Stop HS2 (it was his son) is the latest example of attracting such superficial and sensational publicity and I acknowledge to a degree it worked. Some national newspapers gave it coverage and so did some regional TV. But was this serious stuff? No. So for those on either side of the HS2 debate one must conclude that it is lamentable that a House of Commons Committee allowed itself to be used in such a way and by doing so setting precedent for Parliament that will surely come home to roost on another issue on another day.

This is where the answer lies as to why Stop HS2 has failed to do the very thing it set out to: stop High Speed Rail. A few involved who liked the sound of their own voice increasingly liked it to the point of drowning out most others, some of whom were understandably concerned about detailed or specific issues. To get an audience using the media these few quickly became adept at understanding that the best way was by using the superficial (quite easy when most of the reasons you are saying you oppose something are just that) and making it sensational.

So with such a successful media campaign why after over 4 years has it failed to stop HS2? Simple, using the superficial and sensational to garner media coverage does not translate into fundamental belief which is crucial for a person to decide to support or take up an issue or point of view. It might have persuaded a few but that's all. Using the superficial is to ensure that any interest or support you attract is in reality superficial. Large parts of the media may have been duped but crucially most of our politicians and the people have not.

Just think... if there was a referendum there would have to be an objective case set out by both those opposed and those for. So a case that deals with exponential rising rail passenger demand by creating new and releasing existing capacity that also provides jobs and enables accelerated growth to the regions leading to jobs, homes and greater economic consumption would be pitched against a case that opposes new infrastructure yet has no credible alternative solution, denies rail passenger growth and ignores the economic prosperity of the regions in particular and the country in general.

Alarmism, deceit and denial would be unable to play much of a part with news editing and reporting having to be much more on the mark.

Put that way those opposed to HS2 would do well to consider what they wish for.

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