Comments on the Westminster Energy, Environment & Transport Forum Keynote Seminar: Delivering major rail projects: priorities for electrification, High-Speed Rail and Crossrail (November 29th, 2016)

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The response given by Bernadette Kelly (Director General, Rail Group, Department for Transport) to Mark Balaam* would be entirely appropriate if the West London Group were simply proposing an add-on to HS2. However, their scheme offers a significantly cheaper alternative to Euston station. The government is desperate to reduce the cost of this project without losing any significant benefit. The West London scheme provides the link to HS1 craved by Toby Radcliffe. It gets them off the hook of how to do Euston, which John Smith was good enough to acknowledge has not been resolved: neither how to reconfigure the existing station nor to create a satisfactory approach for HS2. Not only is Camden full above ground, there is no space below to provide an HS1/HS2 link which is one of the reasons why it had to be dropped. Some mistakes are unavoidable. Old Oak Common was the right place for the Crossrail depot when it was decided, but it is the wrong place now that Old Oak Common is on the Opportunity agenda. Of course, if Crossrail had proceeded under John Major, we would have had twenty years' use out of the depot before it had to be moved, but what we are getting now is a better scheme. And my 1995 Crossrail pocket diary is coming in handy in 2017!

So let's not miss the Opportunity to get Old Oak Common right this time. Green space, not necessarily the Green Belt, is important but the loss of a small part of Wormwood Scrubs could be compensated for elsewhere, at relatively little cost (compared to the cost of lost homes in London).

Biography: Andrew Bosi has been campaigning for public transport in London for more than thirty years. The London Forum was established in 1987 as an umbrella group for civic societies across London.

*Mark Balaam: West London Line Group. Delighted to hear your comments on lack of complacency, flexibility and also the formation of a one rail team between HS2 and the existing rail network. Could I commend to you also Tony Rackliff's presentation this morning and his slides on Birmingham showing the enormous amount that's being done in terms of integrating HS2 with National Rail. But also he mentions the lack of world class connections elsewhere in the network and the huge gap that appeared in relation to Birmingham's connections to Southern England. Half the people who are going to be paying for HS2 live in Southern England and none of them is going to be incentivised to get to HS2 because it's going to take two changes to get there. And if you've got two changes you will go by car instead. I'm therefore asking, as I've asked this morning, if Lady Kramer will take forward to the House of Lords our request to have, even at this late stage, clause 1.3 of the Bill reinserted and amended to restore the link between HS2 and HS1 via a curve between Old Oak Common and the West London Line north of Shepherd's Bush. We've already given an indication to HM Treasury, we got a thank you for that, the possible minimal costs, we believe this opens up 80% of all rail heads between Exeter and Ramsgate, rather than being cut off, will now be within one train to both HS1 and HS2, and we also hope that you will look at the integration of HS2, Crossrail, the Old Oak Common MDC and local rail services, the full integration of those by ensuring a raft is placed on top of the HS2 station at Old Oak Common linked to local lines and the option finally of way stations to serve the South Midland, later on HS2 and also the eastward extension of HS2 by 2040 by which time it will be needed. Thank you.

Bernadette Kelly: Okay, lots of asks on High Speed 2, thank you, I will add my thanks to the Treasury's if I may. You will understand, I mean it's interesting, kind of reveals the challenge we have with railway which is, it doesn't matter how much we are investing there are many, many other ideas vying for yet more investment and all of those ideas have merit in their own sort of regard, but it's simply a massive challenge for us ever to get a programme which is kind of really deliverable and affordable. So you will not be surprised to hear me say that I think the challenges of adding significant scope to the Hybrid Bill at this stage for High Speed 2 are exceedingly small. As for the interchange at Old Oak Common, yes it's absolutely a really serious point how that is going to be a major, major transport hub when Crossrail High Speed 2 are there and running, and we have absolutely got to make sure that it delivers the growth and the regeneration that we would expect it to do, working very closely with the Old Oak Common Development Corporation and local stakeholders

Questions:

Andrew Bosi: London Forum of Civic and Amenity Societies.
I was very pleased to hear you say that your priorities would be the schemes that deliver the best outcomes, and I hope that includes social outcomes, but the suspicion remains that priority will always be given to those schemes where the private sector feels able to contribute even if they might not actually be the best outcomes. Can you say something to disabuse me of that suspicion?

Bernadette Kelly. Firstly the question about the risk that private sector investment will kind of squeeze out schemes which have social outcomes. Actually I think it's rather the opposite, in theory I would say that if we are able to attract private sector investment into more of our rail infrastructure improvements it seems to me the likelihood that there will be then the opportunity through our public funding to do more for social outcomes increases. So I don't see it as a threat, I think it's a challenge unquestionably because obviously the balance of kind of economic good and social good is one we have to kind of reflect all the time, so I don't see it as a simple thing, but neither do I see it necessarily as a threat, actually, to those outcomes.