

WESTMINSTER WATCH

Crossrail

"The Government continues to support the development of Crossrail," said Transport Secretary Alistair Darling on 13 May 2003.

"We are now evaluating proposals from the Strategic Rail Authority and Transport for London to see whether they are financeable and deliverable.

Edward Davey asked about "more delay and indecision".

Mr Davey, the Liberal Democrat MP for Kingston and Surbiton, added: "If the Government really cannot make a decision on this essential investment for London and the country, will Mr Darling use the intervening period profitably by asking the valuation office to assess the value of the property and land either side of the Crossrail corridor?"

"Armed with that information, we could find new options for the future using American financing models, for example, and tax-incremental financing. Will the Secretary of State ask the valuation office to do that?"

Mr Darling: "I agree with Mr Davey that, sadly, Crossrail has a long history. Many MPs will recall that it was severely damaged when it could not get parliamentary approval in 1991, and that it was effectively killed off by rail privatisation a couple of years later.

"We need a proposition that is financeable and deliverable before we can consider how it should be funded.

"I have not the slightest doubt that it will need to be funded with a combination of support from the Government and the private sector, but the first thing is to get a proposition on which we can proceed.

"The time spent on getting that right now will be time well spent. Not nearly enough preparatory work was done in the early 1990s, with the result that the whole scheme was cut to bits under scrutiny in the House."

Ilford's Labour MP Mike Gapes said: "Does the Secretary of State recognise that there is increasing concern in a wide number of areas across London, including my constituency, that important regeneration and



development plans could be badly damaged by further delay to the Crossrail programme?"

Mr Darling: "We need to improve capacity on the railways running between the east and west of London."

Tory MP Cheryl Gillan said: "In Chesham and Amersham, two railway schemes affect us: Crossrail, which would be of great benefit to my constituents; and the Central Railway project.

"I urge the Secretary of State to support the former, which is urgently required, and to rule out the latter once and for all."

Mr Darling: "I have made my position, and that of the Government, clear in relation to Crossrail."

On the Central Railway, he said: "Before we can do anything further, I would like to be sure that there is actually someone standing behind that proposition who has the money to develop it."

The Tory MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale, Tim Collins, said: "The Mayor of London says he thinks the project will cost about £10 billion, the chief executive of Crossrail says it will cost between £7 billion and £11 billion depending on routes, and the Secretary of State has been quoted as saying that he thinks it might cost £15 billion. Can the Secretary of State explain why his estimate is so much higher than the others?"

Mr Darling: "The cost depends largely on the nature of Crossrail. The London Regional Metro scheme, for instance, is also called Crossrail, but is very different from the SRA-TfL scheme.

"I am very cautious about costs. My experience over the past 12 months has been that costs relating to railways, in particular, usually turn out to cost rather more than was originally anticipated."

Olympic Games

In the House of Lords on 15 May 2003 in a debate on Olympics 2012, Baroness Blackstone said: "It is vitally important that we have a transport infrastructure in place that can deliver what is needed to host such an enormous event.

"I should like to make it absolutely clear that we shall be able to do this without the completion of Crossrail. We could not give a guarantee that that would be completed by 2012, but a number of other improvements will be made to London Transport. These include improvements to Stratford and Bromley-by-Bow stations, a dedicated road from central London to the stadium and significant enhancement of links to motorways."

(Comment: It will be interesting to see where this 'dedicated road' is to be built and how much that will cost.)

"An enormous amount of thought has been given to whether Crossrail could be completed by 2012; the answer is that it cannot be. The amount of preliminary work that still has to be done to make it happen is simply too great."

Lord King of Bridgwater: "The Minister's answer regarding Crossrail is extremely disappointing. She will not stand up and pledge herself to that.

"It is a lot of money and many Ministers will be listening to what she says. But it is critical for London, irrespective of the Olympics, to have better communications, and this must be the opportunity. If we do not do that, I think it will seriously prejudice our chances on the bid."

Skipton reopening

In the Commons on 13 May 2003, Gordon Prentice (Lab, Pendle) asked Transport Minister David Jamieson:

"What recent assessment he has made of the viability and desirability of reopening the (a) Skipton to Colne and (b) Skipton to Grassington railways."

Mr Jamieson: "The Strategic Rail Authority has set out its current plans for the development of the rail network in its strategic plan, which was published in January.

"Those do not include reopening the Skipton to Colne line or opening the Skipton to Grassington line for passenger services."

Mr Prentice: "That is very disappointing. Why does calling for the reopening of an old railway line appear eccentric, while calling for a new road, as my misguided friend (Peter Pike, Lab Burnley) has done, is OK?"

Mr Jamieson: "I recognise Mr Prentice's concern, and the Government recognises that there is great value in reopening railway lines when that is appropriate.

"However, he will appreciate that for both these lines - in particular, the Skipton to Colne line that is currently not in use - it is a matter for those locally, and for the local authority in particular, to formulate a plan and make it known to the SRA, so that we can implement it."

Busway

When asked seven detailed questions by Lord Berkeley about the safety of converting the Cambridge-St Ives rail line into a busway, the Government's transport "expert" in the Lords said on 7 May that Cambridgeshire County Council is still "developing the technical details". (So we still have no answers to crucial questions about signals, level crossings, fencing, pedestrians, rules of operation, safety rules, and frequency of any service.)

Earlier on 28 April, Lord Macdonald answered another question from Lord Berkeley about what guidelines the SRA followed when awarding franchises.

Lord Macdonald said the SRA uses "a variety of criteria" aimed at encouraging competition and getting value for money. He said there was no restriction on the number of franchises a company could operate.