



HK LINKS ABOUND IN BRITAIN'S TROUBLED HS2

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has made a bold political decision to restart the HS2 project, the high-speed rail link from London to Birmingham with a fork to Leeds.



High-speed rail is the most efficient form of public transport between cities. Compared to flying, it is a lot more comfortable, almost as quick point to point, and more energy efficient.

China has proved that to the world.

One major limitation to building high-speed railway is the use of land.

High-speed railway alignments do not like sharp corners or slopes, so there is invariably a need to go through some built-up areas and for tunnels and bridges to traverse hilly terrain.

Tunnels are relatively easy, as they do not involve too much useful land.

Bridges and viaducts, in theory, do not take up land either, but the visual impact and the need to drive bridge columns into the ground may cause some environmental concerns.

The need to relocate people in built-up areas is probably where it meets the most social and political resistance. But Johnson has decided to push ahead.

I see links to Hong Kong in HS2.

The strong tool that Johnson used to help him restart the project was a review report by Douglas Oakervee.

Some may remember him as a construction manager of our early MTR projects. He moved on to become project leader for the Eastern Harbour Crossing and then project director for the Chek Lap Kok airport.

Over the past 10 years, he was an adviser to then London mayor Johnson, and helped to drive Crossrail and other projects. He has an illustrious record on projects and I trust he will continue to drive HS2 to fruition.

Another not so obvious link is the location of the depot for HS2 – Washwood Heath in Birmingham.

As in many rail projects, this is a key issue, as the depot needs to be along the main route but occupy a vast site.

The Hong Kong solution to efficient land use is to build podiums above depots for use as residential and commercial complexes, such as Telford Gardens, Shatin, Ho Tung Lau, Tsuen Wan, Heng Fa Chuen, Tsing Yi and others.

Washwood Heath was previously the site of the Metro-Cammell factory. It is an industrial site, shaped like a ribbon, beneath a network of highway viaducts near the famous Spaghetti Junction, and unsuitable for commercial or residential developments but perfect for a depot.

It was Britain's main factory for railway coaches, and the first few phases of our MTR rolling stock were built there.

France's Alstom acquired Metro-Cammell and promptly moved manufacturing to France, and this site has remained undeveloped since.

We hear China Railway Construction Corp is offering to complete the project in five years within budget.

I have full confidence that, with its broad experience, CRCC has ample competence to build to a high standard with top efficiency, but I remain concerned that HS2's social and political issues may prove too challenging for it.

Time will tell if Britain, who taught China to build railways in the past two centuries, will eat humble pie and let this eastern giant help it to build this much-needed railway link.

If it does, and assists in resolving the social and political issues, HS2 will get built on time and within budget.

Cooperation is always better than one-upmanship. Let all participants in infrastructure projects work closely together to achieve high goals. The citizens deserve it, and the country will prosper with efficient transport links.

Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over Hong Kong's iconic infrastructure