

EXCLUSIVE
by DAVID WOODING
Political Editor

WORK on Britain's high-speed rail network will start within FOUR MONTHS, The Sun on Sunday can reveal.

Ministers will defy the "naysayers" and blow the starting whistle on the £42.6 billion project tomorrow. Spades will begin cutting into the ground on the 140-mile first phase as early as next spring – triggering a jobs bonanza.

Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin, who will launch the planning process in the Commons, predicts the 250mph north-south line will be the biggest revolution in British travel since motorways.

In an interview with *The Sun on Sunday*, he vowed to face down opponents out to derail his plan for a "new, stronger backbone of Britain".

Mr McLoughlin declared: "HS2 is the most ambitious and important infrastructure project since we built the M25 30 years ago. In the next 30 years, it will be just as integral a part of the nation's prosperity. This isn't a railway system for the next 20 years, it's a railway system for the next 100.

"We could carry on patching and mending a Victorian railway system or we can get on with providing something modern, new and efficient.

"I find it ridiculous that you can get a high-speed train from London to Brussels but not Birmingham. Or to Lille but not Leeds.

'Sun readers to be first in line'

"It will create 22,000 jobs in the next five years alone and revitalise towns and cities along the 351-mile route. I want Sun readers to be first in line for those jobs."

Mr McLoughlin understands the concerns of local residents worried about the impact the line will have on their area.

He said: "That has always been the case when a big project takes place. Our great engineers changed Britain by building railways, roads, airports and motorways.

"They are the scaffolding of our modern economy. But all were opposed. So I ask now, are we sure that the criticism of HS2 amounts to anything more than a repetition of a national loss of nerve?

"We can't let the opponents who have learned nothing from the past strangle our future growth.

"Neither should anyone play politics with prosperity. I will not let the naysayers drag this country down."

If the line linking the major cities of London, Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester were to be ditched we would, he believes, pay a heavy price.

The Transport Secre-

Work on HS2 will begin in 4 months I won't let naysayers derail it

tary warned: "You can't count the cost of a lost future. Of the jobs that didn't happen. Of the cities and regions that found themselves left behind.

"Of the divided nation that could have been brought together.

"We'd have to make rail travel even more expensive – pricing people off the trains. I don't want to do that.

"Our cities would get even more clogged up because people would be using their cars more often.

"But if we tried to upgrade the present railways system it would lead to closures of the mainline for the next 14 years.

'Now is the time to be bold'

"Speed, of course, is an added benefit. An hour and nine minutes from Manchester to London makes it a lot easier to get to than the two hours and nine minutes it takes today."

Mr McLoughlin blasted Labour politicians, including Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls and ex-minister Lord Mandelson, for trying to make political capital out of the HS2 controversy.

He said: "It was unfortunate the way Ed Balls was giving behind-the-scenes messages that somehow he was going to look at it and he was unhappy with the budget.

"I have no idea what he was playing at. Perhaps he thought there was some easy money he could spend somewhere else.

"The truth is, we have not given a blank cheque to HS2. We are keen to deliver it within budget – or under budget.

"The last time I discussed it with Lord Mandelson was when he was on a high-speed train from Brussels to London.

"So he's quite happy to use high-speed trains to get into Brussels but he doesn't want others to be able to use them to get to the cities of Britain."

Only 11 Labour MPs voted against the high-speed rail link and the leaders of ten cities who will benefit – Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield, Glasgow and Edinburgh – have all voiced strong support.

Mr McLoughlin added: "We were the pioneers of railways and we exported them around the world.

"But we have slipped behind. That is why it is so important, as it marks the move from aspiration to delivery.

"Now is the time to be bold and make HS2 happen."

Says PATRICK McLOUGHLIN

Transport Secretary



Leeds to Birmingham

NOW 1 hour 45 minutes
HS2..... 45 minutes

London to Manchester

NOW 2 hour 9 minutes
HS2..... 1 hour 9 minutes

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