

Stanley Johnson **The Diary**

White nights in Sweden, the plight of circus animals and the spiralling cost of HS2



I wrote my first article for the *New Statesman* at the time of the first great UN environment conference, held in Stockholm in June 1972. In fact, I filed three articles from Sweden in the course of that two-week conference and Tony Howard, the then *NS* editor, published them all, though he grumbled a bit when my third despatch arrived. “I would have settled for two,” he told me later.

Forty years on, that first world environment conference lives on in my mind. It wasn’t just the substance, it was the setting, too. Stockholm in the summer is stunning. The sun barely sets. Thousands of us – delegates, journalists, NGO activists – walked at midnight through the streets of the Old Town, chanting: “Save the Whale!”

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.

Elephant in the room

When is the government going to deliver on its long-standing promise to ban the use of wild animals in circuses?

The government, pleading lack of parliamentary time (!), is in theory backing a private member’s bill, but this has failed to make progress through the Commons after being blocked repeatedly by – guess who? – a Conservative MP, Christopher Chope.

Why doesn’t someone from No 10 or the whips’ office have a quiet word with Chope? The Prime Minister is committed. He told me so personally last year and Lord de Mauley, the Defra minister responsible, has reaffirmed that commitment as recently as 8 January this year.

What on earth is going on?

Bathing Adonis

Poor Andrew Adonis, now Baron Adonis of Camden Town, who thought up the High-Speed 2 project in his bath back in 2008 as a shiny new toy to parade in the Labour Party’s 2010 election manifesto, must rue the day he chose that particular title.

The other day I was standing in for David Mellor on LBC’s Ken Livingstone and David Mellor show when the light flashed on

the console in front of us: “Martin” of Camden was on the line. “HS2’s plans for Euston will create the biggest construction site in Europe and cause traffic jams for 20 years,” he said. “I would invite Lord Adonis of Camden to apologise to the people of Camden.”

Another light flashed. Lord Adonis himself came on air, not to apologise but to claim that “upgrading the existing Victorian railway would cost as much as building HS2”. Not everyone agrees with the noble Labour lord on this point.

After the LBC broadcast, Chris Stokes, a former executive director of the Strategic Rail Authority, sent me an email: “The claim that upgrading the existing Victorian railway would cost about the same as HS2 is intellectually disreputable.

“The main line out of Euston is just about the least overcrowded route from London and capacity can be increased by lengthening the existing trains at a fraction of the cost of HS2.”

Stokes went on to cite a 2012 report by the renowned engineering consultants WS Atkins, which costed the “upgrading alternative to HS2” he had proposed at between £2bn and £3bn, as opposed to the £50bn-plus cost of HS2.

I can’t help feeling that Philip Rutnam, the permanent secretary at the Department for Transport, may want to take another look at the Atkins report.

Lankester bombshell

Rutnam is not only perm sec Transport, he is also the department’s accounting officer. Under the rules issued (or reissued) in July 2013 by Danny Alexander as “Chief Secretary of the Treasury”, the accounting officer has a personal legal responsibility to deliver “value for money”. I happened to be having dinner at a Greek restaurant in Camden Town with Sir Tim Lankester on the day the Commons public accounts committee said it was “sceptical whether the Department [for Transport] can deliver value for money for the taxpayer on High Speed 2”.

Lankester is an old friend. We joined the World Bank together in Washington in the 1960s. He went on to work in the Treasury and at No 10 before becoming permanent secretary at the Overseas Development Administration, now known as the Department for International Development.

As Lankester put it to me that evening: “Value for money is one of the things an accounting officer is personally responsible for – the other main things are regularity and propriety. If he has advised the minister that a particular item of expenditure fails to meet any of these tests, he is required to request a formal direction from the minister before money is spent. In that way, he is absolved from responsibility for the expenditure: it’s entirely the responsibility of the minister.”

Up here in Camden we believe there is one simple way of lopping between £15bn and £20bn off the costs of HS2 (assuming we are saddled with it). And that is for the train to stop at Old Oak Common. The HS2 bill currently before parliament already provides for a new station at Old Oak Common. Transport experts have demonstrated that you can get almost anywhere in London quicker from Old Oak Common than you can from Euston. And the link with HS1 has been cancelled anyway.

Great Brittan

I am sometimes asked whether Sir Leon Brittan was the model for the commissioner in my novel of that name. The answer is “no”. Leon, who died on 21 January, was a lovely man. He and his wife, Diana, could not have been kinder to lowly Brits like me who were working in Brussels at the time. But he wasn’t the basis for my book’s leading character. The dates don’t tally. *The Commissioner* was first published in 1987: Leon didn’t come to Brussels until 1989. He will be sadly missed by his many friends. ● *The second volume of Stanley Johnson’s memoir, “Stanley, I Resume: Further Recollections of an Exuberant Life”, is published by Robson Press*