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# HS2 isn't about speed, it's about demolishing the north-south divide

SIR JOHN PEACE



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**H**S2 is the defining infrastructure project of a generation. Not since the motorway-building boom of the 1960s and 1970s has the UK had such a chance as HS2 to revolutionise our country's transport system and invest in the whole economy.

This investment isn't only about future-proofing the UK's transport network, nor is it being advocated by business and

Instead its legacy will be enhanced regional and national productivity, a rebalanced UK economy and prosperity spread to people of every background and region. HS2 will help us all reach our full potential.

It's about developing new skills, building a new UK industry, and becoming a world leader in high-speed rail so that we can export our expertise across the globe.

One of the UK's greatest barriers to social progression and economic growth is our perceived north-south divide. Often drawn below the Midlands, from the Wash in the east, to the Severn Estuary in the west, this invisible wall denotes a decades-old disparity in social and economic opportunity.

If you live below the line you are likely to benefit from better GCSE results, a longer life expectancy and earn a higher annual salary than your compatriots in the Midlands and the north.

Closing this gap is a priority for government too. Chris Grayling, the transport secretary, spoke out last week to say that failure to complete HS2 would be a "betrayal of the Midlands and the north". I say a failure to build it in full would also be a betrayal of London and the southeast.

market. House prices are increasingly out of reach for many, and first-time buyers in the capital now need a salary in excess of £100,000 to get onto the housing market.

Let's be clear: projects like HS2 are what we need to demolish this wall of economic and social division between north and south. As we seek to forge our new place in the world, bringing our country closer together and building the right conditions for business and industry to flourish must be our collective priority.

Last week I was among more than 40 business and civic leaders from across the Midlands and the north who signed an open letter to all main party leaders, calling for continued support of HS2. We signed it because we know the benefits it will bring to the UK as a whole.

We'll continue to champion HS2 until the day the first trains run — not only from London to Birmingham but to Crewe, Manchester and the northwest; through the East Midlands to Leeds and York and Newcastle; and beyond to Scotland. Just like when we built the motorway network, we have a chance to create something we can all be proud of and benefit from for many decades to come.

**Sir John Peace is chairman of Midlands engine and sub-national transport body Midlands Connect**



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