Great Western Railway Routes

Sarah Wollaston Totnes

In highlighting the beauty of the line to Exeter, may I encourage the right hon. Gentleman to stay on the train and see how even more beautiful the line gets once it passes along the coast? It is not just about the beauty of the line, which I hope everyone will experience, but the economic importance of the line via Dawlish to the economies of south Devon. Will he join me in saying that whatever we do we must protect the line through Dawlish and protect the economies of south Devon?

Ben Bradshaw Labour, Exeter

I know the line through Dawlish very well. I spent childhood holidays in Salcombe. In fact, my parents used to get a train all the way to Kingsbridge in the good old days before Beeching took his axe to our rural rail network. It is beautiful, but vulnerable. I will come on to say something about it in a second.

Having said all those positive things, we still have rolling stock that was introduced, I think, in the early 1970s. As I have said, travel speeds have not actually increased very much for decades, if not for a century. I mentioned the loos and the heating, and the hon. Member for Torbay mentioned electrification. It is puzzling that Spain and Italy have full comprehensive networks of high-speed electric trains, but in this country we still do not have a network of high-speed trains. We are getting one slowly, but in the south-west we are set to be probably the only major region with big cities left in western Europe that does not have either high-speed trains or electrification. There is absolutely no reason why we should not already have electrification down to Exeter. There have been technical challenges, but having been on electric trains in the Alps that go up steep gradients I have never quite understood what the barrier is to electrification where there are gradients. As the hon. Member for Torbay says, we will very soon have the technology to overcome that.

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