

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for giving me the chance to raise with the Minister responsible for roads the vital need for the A5 to M1 link. When I made my maiden speech, on 2 July 2001, I stressed the urgent need for a bypass for Dunstable, Houghton Regis and the surrounding villages. I also stressed its importance to Leighton Buzzard as a business location. The need for a bypass in Dunstable is not new; indeed, the first mention of congestion in the town that I have been told about is in a 1924 newspaper article that talked about the traffic bottleneck in Dunstable. My predecessor, Sir David Madel, who was the Member for South West Bedfordshire for 31 years, from 1970 to 2001, also campaigned for a bypass for Dunstable throughout his time in Parliament.

Not long after my election, I presented another petition to the House, signed by 25,000 of my constituents-more than elected me in 2001-calling for the urgent need for a bypass to be addressed. I was therefore delighted when, in July 2003, the then Secretary of State for Transport-now the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Mr Darling)-announced to the House that he was

"endorsing recommendations for improvements to some trunk roads of regional importance,"

one of which was

"a northern bypass for Dunstable".-[*Official Report*, 9 July 2003; Vol. 408, c. 1177.]

I asked him when the Dunstable northern bypass would be built. In reply, he said:

"In the past five years, there have been long and detailed studies, but the time has now come when we need to get on and implement them, precisely to remove some of the inconvenience and congestion and to deliver the improved safety about which he is concerned".-[*Official Report*, 9 July 2003; Vol. 408, c. 1195.]

I was therefore hugely disappointed when, at the end of the Parliament after which the then Secretary of State announced that the Dunstable northern bypass would be built, not a shovel had hit the ground.

It is a huge source of concern to me how long it takes for a new road to be built in this country. I understand that other European countries are able to build roads much more quickly. I understand that there is a much shorter delay between the announcement of a road being built and its completion in many of our competing neighbouring countries. One consequence of delay is that the cost escalates hugely, making even more demands on the public purse. The cost of the A5 to M1 link has virtually tripled since the first estimates back in 2003. I have spoken in the past of the near-Zimbabwean levels of inflation on major roads contracts. I understand that the Department insists on open book accounting, yet I cannot help believing that there must be cheaper ways for such roads to be built. I suggest that we need to take an urgent look at how genuine the competition is between road builders, to ensure that the Department and the taxpayer get real value for money in building new roads.

Sometimes I am tempted to think that the area that I represent has become, if not the land that time forgot, then the land that successive Governments have forgotten to build the necessary infrastructure in. In the north of Bedfordshire, the county town of Bedford seems to have all the bypasses that it needs. I had not even heard of the village of Ridgmont, to the north of my constituency, until I was told that it was to receive its own much-needed bypass. As I will demonstrate shortly, the need for a bypass to the north of Dunstable is overwhelming for the residents of Dunstable, Houghton Regis and the surrounding villages, but a bypass is also essential for Leighton Buzzard.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the village of Ridgmont. The bypass there has been gratefully received. Ridgmont is a village, and there are other villages in my constituency that will benefit hugely from the A5 to M1 link. Those villages will suffer from a lack of connectivity if the road to which he has referred is not built. Does he agree that it is imperative that the road should be built, not just for his constituency, but for the whole of Bedfordshire?

Andrew Selous: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support. The road will also benefit major towns such as Aylesbury, in providing fast direct access to the national motorway network.

I do not want Ministers or officials at the Department for Transport to think for one moment that the Luton-Dunstable busway will provide the answers to the problems of congestion, retail decline and lack of business growth in Dunstable and Houghton Regis. It will not. The only hope to secure economic regeneration to provide much-needed jobs for my constituents and to provide much-needed local housing is for the A5 to M1 link to be built urgently.

The need for the A5 to M1 link can be demonstrated by many examples of life in Dunstable. Dunstable high street has 56 empty shops in it because of the length of time it takes for shoppers to get into and out of the town centre. Some reductions in business rates have been granted as a result, which obviously means a loss of revenue to the Exchequer. During recent times of economic growth, every other area of Bedfordshire increased its level of employment between 2001 and 2008, but in South Bedfordshire there was a loss of 1,850 jobs—overwhelmingly due to congestion. Those figures are taken from the annual business inquiry data provided by the Central Bedfordshire council.

Major employers have closed down and left the area over the years and have not been replaced by sufficient numbers of new employers to provide the jobs that my constituents need today. Many of my constituents are forced to travel out of the area to find work, thus making congestion even worse.

Congestion is bad both for travellers going north-south on the A5 through Dunstable as well as for travellers heading east-west on the A505 through Dunstable. One story from a local shopkeeper illustrates this well. A customer was travelling east on the A505 along West street, trying to get to a shop in the Quadrant shopping centre in the middle of Dunstable. He was stuck in traffic as so often happens; he rang the shopkeeper who left his shop, crossed the middle of Dunstable, gave him the goods as he was stuck in traffic in his car. That customer then turned round in the road, and drove out of Dunstable never to come and shop in the town again. How

can the shopkeepers of the town I am proud to represent make a living when they are faced with an infrastructure deficit as bad as that?

The economic benefits of building this road have been estimated by both the Highways Agency and the East of England to be very significant. Central Bedfordshire council, with its private sector developers, also intends to build the Woodside industrial estate connection road from the new junction 11A, which will not require Department for Transport funds.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I support everything he says. Does he accept that what he is suggesting will also bring enormous benefits to the town of Luton, especially when the bypass right across north Luton is built?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I am grateful for the support from him and from Luton borough council on this matter.

This road will greatly ease congestion in Dunstable and lead to much lower pollution levels and a better quality of life for those who live and work in the town centre. Dunstable and Houghton Regis will once again become towns that people can easily get in and out of to do business, shop, see their friends and socialise. This will greatly help all the shops in the town, as well as attracting many new employers to the area and persuading existing employers to expand their operations locally.

The improvement in air quality in the town centre should be significant and GPs from my own practice in central Dunstable tell me that levels of asthma among children living near the heavily congested A5, which runs through the centre of Dunstable as the town's high street, are much higher than for children who live further away.

It has been estimated by the Highways Agency that the total economic benefits are in the region of £684 million, against the cost of £135 million. The Highways Agency says that there will be £263 million-worth of economic benefits for business users and £302 million-worth of benefits for consumers, while a study commissioned by the East of England and carried out by the consultants W. S. Atkins said there would also be a further £190 million of wider economic benefit. All those figures are at 2002 prices, following the Department for Transport's guidance to enable common comparisons to be made. It is also estimated that the road will bring 5,750 extra jobs to be created through the release of new employment land, and I understand that a proposed rail freight depot at Sundon, creating a further 1,100 to 1,800 jobs, is also not likely to happen unless the A5 to M1 link is built.

I am very conscious that a string of figures can seem very dry and technical, but the fact is that this new road has the potential to change the lives of my constituents for the better. Let us think of the mother in Dunstable who told me recently that her 18-year-old son had knocked on the door of every employer in the town to be told there was no job for him locally. I believe that this road will make a difference for that young man, as well as for very many others.

The reason why the private sector developer is prepared to put in such significant private funding is that the road will enable 5,150 dwellings, which are essential to meet local affordable housing need, to be built. The A5 to M1 link will also enable other new housing developments to be built, thus greatly addressing housing need.

Concern has been expressed locally about the decision to suspend the public inquiry, at which I was due to give evidence this Friday in strong support of this much needed road. I understand why the Government have had to suspend public inquiries to ensure that the funding is available for those inquiries that do proceed. I am greatly heartened, however, by the fact that there is the offer of very substantial funding to pay for junction 11A and the Woodside industrial estate connection road from a local private sector developer. That offer is an example of exactly the type of public-private sector partnership for which both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer have called. The offer will make the economic benefits I have described even greater as the cost to the public purse is significantly cut. I know that Department for Transport officials will tomorrow meet officers from Central Bedfordshire council and representatives of the private sector developer to discuss how this vital road can be taken forward.

I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend the Minister has to say in reply. My constituents are reasonable people and understand that this Government have to be responsible with our public finances. My constituents have been patient and long-suffering over many years as the infrastructure that they have needed for their towns and villages to flourish has been denied them. They understand the need for the Government's current spending review, but they also need to know that things will get better for them and that this road, which the previous Government agreed to build on 9 July 2003, will be built, and will be built soon. I will listen with hope and expectation to what my hon. Friend, who I know to be a conscientious and hard-working Minister, has to say.