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Self-Driving Cars Could Undermine British \$80 Billion Rail Project

By Neil Winton
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Autonomous cars, if and when they finally arrive, could spell doom for railways in general, and could render obsolete a British government project to spend up to about \$80 billion to link London, England's second biggest city Birmingham, and Leeds with a high-speed rail system.

Self-driving cars would offer a direct, private, comfortable door-to-door link for travellers, with at least competitive average speeds for journeys of up to about 200 miles.

The project is called HS2, short for High-Speed 2. HS1 is a link from London to the Channel Tunnel on the South-east tip of England linking Paris and Brussels. The HS2 project, which is still in the planning stage, wouldn't be completed until 2030. By then it is likely that autonomous cars would be ubiquitous on the roads of the U.S. and [Europe](#). This would mean that car drivers could get in the back seats of their cars at their homes in London, tell it the exact location to go to in say, Birmingham in Britain's midlands, and sit back and relax, work or watch movies. The car would join a high-speed convoy on the motorway system cruising at say, 100 mph, go directly to the required destination and avoid the hassle of getting to and from the mainline station. Meanwhile, the high-speed trains would be zooming, empty, at 250 mph between London and Birmingham.

The issue came alive in Britain again today when newspapers revealed another government scheme, HS3, to provide an east-west link between Hull and Liverpool, this one costing an estimated \$11 billion.

In a report for the libertarian CATO Institute last month, senior fellow Randal O'Toole said so-called autonomous cars will transform the 21st century, just as the mass-produced automobile transformed the 20th. They could render obsolete mass transit systems in America, and no doubt everywhere else in the West. A combination of self-driving cars and Uber and Lyft car-sharing apps would make urban transit out of date. Autonomous cars would take people from door-to-door rather than using mass-transit with its inflexible locations and unreliability. If the car's computer was taking the strain, people would move further way from their jobs, with a two-hour commute becoming the norm.

O'Toole, said today trains were already approaching obsolescence and self-driving cars would complete the process. The train's small speed advantage would be wiped out by the self-driving car's convenience.

“There is supposed to be a “sweet spot” for travel distances in which high-speed rail has a competitive advantage over driving and flying. Supposedly, for trips shorter than 100 miles, cars have the advantage; and for trips more than 600 miles, flying has the advantage; leaving 100 to 600 miles trips for high-speed rail. “I am dubious that such a sweet spot exists. Many people are willing to drive hundreds of miles in order to have the convenience of their car when they get to their destinations, while flying is practical enough for trips of 150 miles or so that airlines currently offer 30 flights a day between Portland and Seattle airports, which are 161 driving miles apart,”) O'Toole said.

O'Toole was speaking from his office in Camp Sherman, Oregon.

“But even if such a sweet spot exists today, self-driving cars will make it even less viable because they will change the way we look at travel time. If you can be productive or entertained while you are travelling, you will be willing to spend more time in the car. That means the 100 miles that is supposedly the range in which cars have a competitive advantage will easily increase to 200 miles or more,” he said.

Birmingham is 120 miles from London, Leeds is 200 miles away.