Sunak insists UK is not a ‘laughing stock’ as he fails to rule on HS2’s future

R
ishi Sunak has refused to commit to the future of HS2 amid fears that the route linking Birmingham to Manchester may be axed due to rising costs.

Speculation has risen over the project’s future after reports suggested its costs have breached the £100billion mark, even with the Leeds element being binned in 2021.

As the Tory Party Conference kicks off in Manchester, the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg referenced critics such as mayor of West Midlands, Andy Street who has warned the UK is becoming a “laughing stock” over the uncertain future of the rail link during an interview on Sunday.

In response, the Prime Minister said: “I’d completely reject that.

“I speak to business leaders all the time. I’ve just been around the world, I’ve recently been in Japan, in America, in Europe, we’re attracting billions of pounds of investment into this country, creating jobs everywhere.

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"That's what I hear from business leaders around the world, they're excited about the opportunity that investing in Britain offers."

HS2 was in 2015 given a £55.7billion budget for its route from London to Birmingham with a Y-shaped section to Manchester and Leeds.

Delays and rising costs have now thrown the project into jeopardy, sparking calls from three former Prime Ministers to make sure the project is linked to Manchester.

Asked during a Q&A at Henley Literary Festival whether HS2 should be scrapped, Theresa May said: "The answer is no.

"I will give you two comments on HS2. First of all, we have to think about why HS2 was designed in the first place.

"It was because there was a lack of capacity on the West Coast Main Line.

"So if there is a lack of capacity on the West Coast Main Line, we need more railway capacity to serve the North West."

She said there was also an issue for her constituents if the line does not end up terminating in Euston, in central London.

"If HS2 stops at Old Oak Common, it is going to make our railway journeys into London longer and disrupted potentially over the period that Old Oak Common's building is being done to enable it to take that end point," she added.

"So I am arguing with Government: 'Don't stop at Old Oak Common. You need to take it into Euston because my constituents will be disadvantaged if you don't'."

Boris Johnson expanded on his concerns in his Daily Mail column on Saturday, arguing the Tory Government would be “betraying the north of the country and the whole agenda of levelling up” if HS2 to Manchester is delayed or cut.

On Saturday, however, Transport Secretary Mark Harper refused to be drawn on the projects future.

Mr Harper told Times Radio that “spades are in the ground” on Phase 1 of HS2 between London and Birmingham but said he was “not going to comment” on “speculation in the media” about the line potentially stopping in the Midlands.

“If the Government has anything to say, we’ll say that in the usual way in due course,” he added.