

The Stonehenge Tunnel development

by Tom Holland



- 1 The Conservative Party, over the course of its lengthy history, has been defined by two particular traditions. One emphasises the duty of care to the past. It nurtures a suspicion of grandiose and ill-founded schemes. It never forgets that the responsibility of a conservative is ultimately to conserve. Then, parallel to this, there is a second tradition. This emphasises the importance of sound finance. It scorns to believe in magic money trees. It does not spray taxpayers' cash around like there is no tomorrow. It pays scrupulous attention to the bottom line.
- 2 Today, a supposedly Conservative government has made a mockery of its legacy. Upwards of £2 billion, at a time when the country's finances are in a shocking state, will be blown on a monstrous white elephant of a road development that will permanently disfigure Britain's most significant and sacred prehistoric landscape. The decision of Mark Harper to green-light the building of a tunnel through a stretch of the World heritage Site that surrounds Stonehenge is as inexplicable as it is disgraceful. Certainly, no one can be in any doubt that the scheme will inflict "permanent, irreversible harm" on a landscape that is the supreme icon of British archaeology. We know this because the Planning Inspectorate commissioned by the Government itself to deliver a 560-page report on the Stonehenge tunnel, said so. The inspectors did not mince their words. Proceed with the development, they declared, and it will "introduce a greater physical change to the Stonehenge landscape than has occurred in its 6,000 years as a place of widely acknowledged human significance." This was why, two years ago, the High Court ruled that Grant Schapps, the then Transport Secretary, had acted irrationally and unlawfully when he approved the project: a ruling that the Government has 15. By doing so, they threaten the gravest act of desecration knowingly perpetrated by any recent British government.

- 3 But what about the economy of the South-West? What about the need to keep Britain moving? What are aurochs bones or long barrows when weighed against the interests of the haulage industry? Reasonable questions – except that the Stonehenge tunnel makes no sense as a transport investment either. It is not only 17 who have pointed this out. So too have the National Audit Office and the Tax Payers Alliance, nobody's idea of tree-huggers. Stretches of the A303 west of Stonehenge will remain single lane. There will still be every chance of getting stuck behind a tractor. According to Highways England's own figures, the Stonehenge Tunnel development will save a mere 4.8 seconds/mile on an average 100mile journey. Perhaps, were the times more prosperous, the prospect of spending billions on a development that 18 would seem less grotesque. As it is, with the country's finances currently shot to pieces, it beggars belief.
- 4 All of us are left to pray that the Government will come to its senses before it is too late – or, much more plausibly, that the High Court will once again come riding to the rescue.

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