

WARM UP

1 How long has work been in progress on the high speed rail link between Turin and Lyon? What is the current situation?

GLOSSARY

backed: *sostenuto*
inception: *inizio*
zoom: *sfrecciare*
boosting: *spingendo*
naysayers: *oppositori*
stilts: *pali*

***** A **white elephant** is an idiom for a burdensome possession which the owner cannot get rid of and which costs more than it is worth. It is often used to refer to a business scheme or venture which is considered to be without use or value.

Turin-Lyon high speed railway

Italy's 10-metre Alpine mega-tunnel

[February 2013] Work on the Italian side of a high-speed rail tunnel designed to link Turin with Lyon in France has finally begun. But with protesters in the woods and hills around the site, the Italian army has been brought in to provide security.

For 20 years, well-organised local protesters and environmental campaigners have successfully resisted grandiose Franco-Italian plans to drill a 57 km tunnel through the Alps. They have lobbied tenaciously – and at times violently – in their fight against the rail link. 400 people were injured in clashes with the police in 2012 when the tunnel site was first fenced off.

While the French have already completed 10 km of exploratory tunnels – on the other side of the border, Italian progress on an eight-kilometre tunnel amounts to a small hole in the mountainside approximately 10 m deep.

The EU has backed the tunnel ever since its inception in the early 1990s, but its leaders have just agreed to cut the overall budget for the union for the next six years – and grand infrastructure projects could be vulnerable. Last year, the French Court of Auditors projected that the final bill for the tunnel would be double the €13bn predicted in the 1990s. It also concluded that there was not any certainty that it would ever make a profit. The pro-tunnellers use a mixture of hyperbole and economic facts as they argue for the project. The Atlantic will reach out to the Urals with this new link, they cry. Freight trains will zoom to and fro, boosting the slow economies of southern Europe. British tourists are more interested in the fact that the journey time from London to Milan will be just six hours. The naysayers insist that the tunnel will be an ugly, expensive **white elephant***. They point out that the existing trans-Alpine road and rail routes seem to cope very nicely, thank you. They claim that projections of traffic were drawn up 20 years ago and are hopelessly out-of-date. They are also worried that potentially dangerous minerals which are buried underneath the mountains will be released into the air and water. But, honestly, even the most intelligent protester would struggle to claim the Susa Valley was an area of outstanding beauty. The narrow pass is already crowded with human development – a motorway crosses the valley on gigantic stilts, above railway lines and factories.

People have tried to cross this valley in all kinds of ways – one of the first was Hannibal. The journey across the mountains, with 20,000 soldiers and 37 fighting elephants, took him just 16 days. No-one stood in his way...

Source – BBC News – © 2013 BBC

READING COMPREHENSION

2 Read the article and answer these questions.

- 1 What role does the Italian army have in the construction of the tunnel?
- 2 Who has campaigned against this tunnel and for how long?
- 3 What difference is there between the work done on the French side and that on the Italian side of the tunnel?
- 4 What economic problems could there be for the tunnel?
- 5 What positive effects could the high speed rail link and tunnel have?
- 6 What arguments do people use against the rail link and tunnel?
- 7 How does the writer describe the Susa Valley?
- 8 Looking at the title and tone of the article, how do you think the writer feels about the rail link and tunnel?

SPEAKING

3 Have a class discussion. Half the class should support this statement, while the rest should argue against it.

‘The Turin-Lyon high speed rail link has more advantages than disadvantages.’