

London's Five Futures

Just a month ago London's main challenge seemed to be how to cope with its own runaway success. Now listening to some of its leaders in business and public life, it seems as if the city is staring into a Brexit shaped abyss as capital and talent, businesses and jobs plan to escape to Edinburgh and Dublin, Paris and Amsterdam.

London was at the peak of its game, as its diverse and creative culture and its freewheeling cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial population, drove mutually reinforcing innovation in finance, technology, and the arts.

Yet as the great urbanist Peter Hall warned in his epic *Cities and Civilisation* creative cities have golden ages, when everything seems to hum only to run out of steam, sometimes after only two or three decades. Success and wealth easily makes cities complacent and inward looking: the story of Manchester in the 19th and Glasgow in the 20th century. Events can overtake them: the Depression and World War II brought to an end Berlin's pre-eminence as a centre for the electrical industries which were then just emerging.

Perhaps 2016 will mark the end of London's golden period which started in about 1996, not with the rise of New Labour but the arrival of Jamie Oliver and Britpop, a new generation of outspoken young artists based in Hackney and foreign banks filling up Canary Wharf, who together announced London's new cosmopolitan mix of wealth and culture.

Cities can renew themselves in the wake of a shock like Brexit but only if they build a very broad alliance across politics, business and civil society, to respond creatively and inclusively. This moment of stark challenge for London is thus also an opportunity for creativity and leadership. London and its leaders now face five scenarios for the city's future, each informed by a model loosely drawn from five other cities, Detroit, Montreal, West Berlin, Singapore and Athens. Which route will the London go down?

1. The Collapsed City: Detroit

Cities can implode, especially when they face a catastrophic shift in the environment to which they cannot respond. Petra, in Jordan, once one of the richest cities in the world, could not respond as trade routes shifted taking with them the wealth. Petra's classically inspired buildings became monuments to a lost civilisation. Perhaps this will be the fate of the Walkie Talkie and the Cheesegrater? Built at the height of London's financial boom they could come to resemble the forlorn statues of Easter Island.

The most telling modern examples of this kind of collapse are mono-industrial cities, which failed to respond to change. A classical example is Youngstown, Ohio, which was for a long time the fastest shrinking city in the US as its population plunged from 250,000 to only 65,000. The most famous example however is Detroit.

What killed Detroit was not just the rise of Japanese competition in car manufacturing but the flight of white people to the suburbs. If London suffers a flight of European talent, driven out by the sense of simmering hostility the Brexit vote revealed, combined by the dimming economic prospects, then the city could be in trouble. The over-priced warehouses of Shoreditch, which has become a tech cluster only in the last decade, could within a decade once again become poor but sexy. A poorer London might then have to engage in the bottom up, makeshift, tactical urbanism which has revived Newcastle Australia, which a decade ago was on its knees after years of suburban flight, an earthquake and the collapse of its steel industry.

At first sight that kind of flight does not seem likely. London has 1.75m high skilled migrants, many of them with roots in a city that has a complex web of services to support foreign nationals. London has more high skilled foreign nationals than the next four European cities combined. Walk around it: the city still has huge momentum, propelled by its young, exuberant population.

Yet there are no grounds for complacency. If there is a churn of about 150,000 high-skilled migrants a year, it would only take a decade of strict immigration controls for the population of London to be ethnically cleansed by Brexit. It might take only five years for it to become evident that London was losing its edge as a cosmopolitan high skilled city. In an economy driven by innovation, knowledge and culture money follows talent. London at all costs has to hang onto the talent it has and attract more.

2. An Inward Turn: Montreal

A slightly less scary scenario is that London could go back to where it has come from, to become a city deliberately more representative of the UK and especially England as a whole. It could become once more a British city, rather than a cosmopolitan one.

This would return London to the role it played in the 1950s, when it hosted the Festival of Britain, introducing the rest of the country to the modern world, when the Finsbury Health Centre offered a vision of Britain with an NHS that people up and down the country could support. It was a London evoked by the television serial *Dixon of Dock Green*, based around a reassuring, older beat sergeant who would end each episode with a salute and by saying “Evening All” before walking off into a pea souper. London is after all still home to most British institutions: the British Museum, Library, Broadcasting Corporation and so on. It should be a proudly British city.

The Leave vote was intended to rein London in, to close the yawning gap between the city and the rest of the country. Perhaps this could be the moment when the provinces and suburbs take back their nation’s capital, in the process forcing it to share more of its prosperity with the rest of the UK. Jobs might not just go to mainland Europe but also to Stoke and Sunderland. London might go slower but perhaps that would be no bad thing, as the architecture critic Rowan Moore puts it in his recent investigation into the state of the city: “The ideal is that cities should burn slowly, their social ecologies and physical forms should renew through change not be devastated by it.” London may go through a few

years of slack but then new life will emerge in the cracks of a city that would be much more British in its orientation as it would have to abide by strict immigration controls which put British, English speakers first.

Perhaps the most tragic example of a cosmopolitan city killed by nationalism, was Salonica, the extraordinarily polyglot Ottoman city, which was ruled by Muslims between 1430 and 1912 but which provided a home to Jewish industrialists, Turkish army officers, Greek merchants, Bulgarian traders, Albanian labourers and many more. A shoeshine boy in Salonica needed mastery of eight or nine languages. Salonica, was multi-confessional and hybrid in spirit, until the early 20th century, when a combination of war, depression, nationalism and ideology led to its ethnic cleansing. By 1950 it was 95% Greek and almost entirely Christian.

London will not suffer such a fate but it too has been shocked by a political instruction to take greater heed of national identity. A slightly different model for its future, as Tyler Brulee pointed out in this newspaper, is Montreal. As the capital of French speaking Quebec Montreal in the 1980s it turned its back on the English-speaking business world, which was anyway already migrating to Toronto, in the name of greater equality for French speakers. Critics say the result is a melancholy city with lots of lovely old streets with boarded up houses and shops. Defenders would say Montreal is happy with its lot, home to much cross cultural creativity, symbolised by Cirque du Soleil and busy promoting home grown social innovation. There are many different ways to be successful.

This option assumes there is a coherent Britain for London to be a part of.

3. European Enclave: West Berlin

One result of the Brexit vote is that London will have to become more organised politically. London, long culturally confident, will have to become more politically assertive. That will involve the Mayor leading the creation of a very broad alliance of people and institutions – London MPs, the boroughs, cultural institutions, universities – to make the case for greater London autonomy,

perhaps in alliance with other pro-European cities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Bristol. This alliance would press for London to be given greater autonomy within the UK and enable it to remain very much integrated with Europe. In time who knows, this might lead to a new Heanseatic League of European cities. London now shares as much with Paris and Barcelona, Madrid and Rome as it does with Preston and Wigan, Truro and Todmorden. The tensions between urban and rural, exposed so visibly in the Brexit vote, afflict most European countries. Cities now share more with one another than they do with the countries that host them.

One model for London might be how West Berlin survived as an enclave of West Germany in hostile East Germany after the Berlin Wall was built. The Vatican is an enclave within Italy. Beverly Hills is an enclave within greater Los Angeles. London could vote to become a EU enclave within the UK.

That would require quite a lot of creativity in what it means to be a citizen. As proposed by Rohan Silva, founder of the collaborative workspace Second Home, London might have to have its own visa system, which would allow for freedom of movement between London and the EU so long as people live and work in London. (Presumably this would have to be matched by complex arrangements over London's access to the single market and contributions to the EU budget. One leading London politician described the visa plan thus: "It is an absolutely bonkers idea and we are hundred per cent behind it.")

Were post-Brexit Britain to adopt a Canadian style points-based immigration system regions of the UK might be allocated quotas for immigration as part of a new national target. London might then bid to buy the unused quotas of areas of the country that do not much want immigration. A high immigration, cosmopolitan London could co-exist with low immigration provinces. Some of the money London makes through being so cosmopolitan could be redistributed to the rest of the country through the trade in immigration quotas. The UK might have to reimagine London as a "special European economic zone" much as Shenzhen was China's portal to the rest of the world.

An alternative might be that London, like many US immigration gateway cities such as Charlotte North Carolina could create its own identity card to entitle people to local services even if they do not have full citizenship: like the metics in Ancient Athens who were aliens, permanently resident in the city.

None of this will be possible, however, unless the UK becomes even more of a patchwork state of devolved powers to nations, regions and cities, something that central government would be unwilling to countenance. A new deal for London in Europe would almost certainly depend on a political remaking of the UK which the Westminster government would not welcome. A movement for London independence would have to gather momentum to force such a shift.

4. The Hovercraft City: Singapore

Another option would be to imagine London hovering just above the territory of the UK, a global city-state governed by British law like Singapore.

London will respond to this crisis in the way a great trading city always does, by following the money. The money is all coming from Asia. The people who really see Brexit as an opportunity are Chinese and Indian investors who want to snap up London property companies and heritage brands. Central London at times already resembles Dubai-on-Thames. In future it could become Shangdon.

Seen in this light Brexit might be a blessing in disguise for London. An ageing Europe is gripped by slow growth and German inspired austerity. The banks were already planning cut backs as artificial intelligence and machine learning sweeps through trading rooms. This is a chance for London to jump onto a different trajectory. London's great strength compared to heavy-handed European cities is that it is not too planned, nor too utopian. It is a messy, pragmatic, commercial, trading city which gives shape to whatever forces are running through the world. That is how it gave rise to new centres of technology, finance and biotech. That is how it will prosper in future by turning away from slow Europe to make alliances with China and the rest of Asia. Just as Miami is a

largely Latin American city perched in the southern US, so London could become an Asian outpost in Europe. Indeed, one rarely remarked implication of the Leave campaign against unlimited European immigration was that there would be more immigration from Asia, especially into London.

This shift will require London to have its own foreign policy. It would have to be prepared to embrace Asian companies, values and culture in a way that it has only played with so far. Shanghai was once a Western enclave in China; London might become a Chinese enclave in Europe.

5. Muddling Through: Athens

The most likely and perhaps the most optimistic scenario is that everyone muddles through, in Europe, in the UK and in London as well, perhaps with aspects of all four of the previous scenarios in play at the same. The key to this is that London would be part of a UK that would still be part of the EU, albeit on strained terms. A model for this is Greece and modern Athens.

The Conservative Party now faces a challenge not unlike the Syriza led government in Greece, which also threatened to pull out of the EU, over the Greek bail out plan. Syriza led by Alexis Tsipras campaigned strongly against the bail out, winning elections and a referendum on that ticket. However the exit deal offered by the EU was so bad that eventually Syriza decided to swallow its pride and stay in the fold. Thankfully Greece is still firmly within the EU and Tsipras has become a familiar part of the wider European political leadership.

The task for a moderate Conservative leader over the next four years is to achieve something similar: to win an election on a Brexit programme that nevertheless allows her to stay in the EU when it becomes clear the deal to leave would be a disaster. One can only hope that Theresa May is prepared to take some tips from Alexis Tsipras.

For this outcome to come true the combined leadership of London needs to work hard on the leadership of the Conservative Party to find a way to keep the show

on the road. If Brexit negotiations are drawn out, if the Leavers grow remorseful, fearful and distracted, then the question of leaving the EU might once again become a dispute confined to the ranks of the Tory Party. London would have to be resilient, to learn to cope, to make do and get through the next few years before something akin to normality and common sense returns.

Whichever of these scenarios comes to pass the shock London has experienced over the past few weeks is a timely reminder of how finely poised cities are between cycles of growth and collapse. A few things are clear.

First, London will need new levels of ambitious, shared leadership from the Mayor, the boroughs, business, culture and civil society. London's universities should now be pooling all their combined expertise to help chart a better future for the city they all depend upon. Cultural institutions should be forming a campaign to promote European culture and values in the broadest sense. Civil society organisations should be protecting London's reputation for civility and tolerance. We need to show the world through thousands of everyday acts that London remains open and European, a place where minorities are succoured and celebrated. This is an extraordinary opportunity for London's leadership to save the city. It is of far greater significance than the easy wicket offered to Boris Johnson by the 2012 Olympics.

Second, London's great strength is its prodigious resilience and capacity reinvention, precisely because it is messy, slightly chaotic and not overly planned. Above all it must remain an open polyglot city, in which people mix and share to make the future together, trading ideas and money, goods and services, art and software. This is not new. It is deeply rooted in London's character, as the sixteenth century poet William Dunbar explained :

“London, thou art of townes A per se,
Soveraign of cities, semeliest in sight;
Of high renoun, riches and royaltie;
Of lordis, barons and many goodly knight;

Of most delectable lusty ladies bright;
Of famous prelatiſ, in habits clericaliſ;
Of merchauntis full of ſubſtance and of myght;
London thou art the flour of Cities all.”

London muſt be a city for people excited by mixing with people who are different. Thoſe who find that alarming ſhould live quietly in arcadian ſuburbs and provincial towns. Good on them. They ſhould leave London to purſue its own global role to give form to the ideas and forces that are remaking the world.

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