All that mighty heart: Culture, Brexit, and the soft power of London

'All that life can afford'. London Town. Photo © CC Creative Commons, adapted from the original.

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London is often claimed to be the greatest city in Europe and one of a handful of global megacities. It has been called 'the cultural capital of the world', and represents a huge soft power asset for the UK. Post-Brexit, it will have to fight hard to maintain this status whilst also working with the rest of the country. But successfully doing so will be vital for the nation as a whole.

CITIES AS CRUCIBLES OF CULTURE

The history of politics has been the history of states. The history of culture has been the history of cities. This has arguably been true of major cultural innovation from the first stirrings of civilisation in the rival towns of the Ancient Middle East, through the beginnings of Classical culture in the warring polities of Greece, India, and China, to the flowering of the Renaissance in the competing city states of Italy, to the boiling ultra-modernity of the vast world metropolises of today. People outside major urban centres are no less creative than those within them, but they are connected to and often dependent on them. And the concentration of people, together with greater resources, diversity, specialisation, and exchange of ideas that have been possible within them have meant that cultural innovations have tended to be concentrated in cities. Indeed, some argue that economies of scale continue to make cities more efficient and more innovative however much they grow (Geoffrey West: Scale: the Universal Laws of Growth, Innovation, Sustainability, and the Pace of Life in Organisms, Cities, Economies, and Companies (2017))

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Great cities have also created or commanded vast nations and empires. But large empires have often been relatively culturally and technologically static, compared to the innovations which take place within great cities themselves at the height of their trajectory. And from Medieval Florence, to Enlightenment Edinburgh, to Manchester during the Industrial Revolution, to modern city states like Singapore and Hong Kong, many of the world's most important cities have achieved greatness not by ruling large territories but by their openness, connections, and trade - in people and ideas as well as in goods. Anyone looking for the cultural engines of the 21st Century would start in vibrant urban centres like Shanghai, Mumbai, Istanbul, Lagos, Rio, LA, New York, and London. It is striking that of the cities just listed, only London is also the political capital of a nation state. This brings with it advantages, as well as extra complexities. Some of these tensions were shown during the EU referendum when London voted very differently from all the other regions of England and Wales. London and the surrounding South East are also unique, amongst the nations and regions of the UK as a whole, in being net contributors to the UK's public finances.

CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

London enjoys its status as a great – perhaps currently the greatest – city of contemporary world culture (it was recently named museums and galleries capital of the world, for example, with more people visiting the British Museum every year than visiting Spain, and the universities capital of the world, with more top 50 ranked universities than any other city). It is also at the cutting edge of education, technology, entertainment, and many creative industries, as well as being the world's largest centre for finance and law. Not only is London bigger than the next twenty British cities put together, it is one of the largest, wealthiest, most visited, and most diverse metropolitan areas in the world – with three million foreign born inhabitants and over 300 languages recorded as spoken there. This reputation will be one of the UK's most important soft power assets to protect and project as the country seeks, post-Brexit, to forge a successful 'global Britain'. Larger, wealthier, more cosmopolitan, and more internationally-connected than any other city inside the EU, London will have to work hard to maintain its position once outside it.

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Brexit will pose threats to many of London's key industries, as continental rivals attempt to steal its crown. Brexit will also offer opportunities as London plays a part in orienting the UK more closely towards the wider world. As it does so the capital will also have to maintain its sometimes precarious balance with the rest of the UK. This will necessitate finding a more comfortable balance with other British cities, many of which are increasingly flexing their own diplomatic muscles and raising their own international profile.

This will not be easy. Many of the factors that give great cities their status are subtly interconnected. Centres of business, trade, finance, and politics are often also centres of public or private patronage for entertainment, architecture, culture, and the arts. At the same time, cities with vibrant cultural, heritage, and entertainment scenes are attractive places for the increasingly international workers of the global financial and business sectors to come to work, or for ambitious young people of all backgrounds and skills to try to make their way. Attractive places to live, good educational opportunities, and global transport links, are also important - as is an open and welcoming atmosphere.

Meanwhile 'cluster' effects mean that groupings of organisations and individuals in the same sectors gather to work and exchange ideas in ways that feed innovation and success. The existence and evolution of such clusters, self-reinforcing but also fragile to shocks, contributes to the fact that cities can gain or just as easily lose their leading status. London is fortunate enough to be a sort of super-cluster of several such clusters, from Silicon Roundabout's 'Tech City', to Theatreland, from the Square Mile of the City of London, to the Knowledge Quarter around Kings Cross, from 19th Century Albertopolis to (it is hoped) 21st Century 'Olympicopolis'. A 'critical mass' of positive factors can elevate them to leading status - but their dominance can end just as quickly as the talent and the action moves on elsewhere.

From a policy perspective this raises all sorts of challenges for a country like the UK, that may be too large to be simply a London-based city state - a 'Singapore-on-steroids' - but too small to cope with the huge impact of London's position as a world city without the generation of significant political tensions with the rest of the nation. The UK's other cities, which some argue were long neglected by a political class based in London, are beginning to assert their own increasingly international reach, with the 'Northern Powerhouse' of Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle and others attracting the most attention. Many such cities have increasingly strong international links and soft power, whether through official partnerships or from the global popularity of their football teams. A new wave of directly elected mayors is likely to help. Meanwhile London, which for centuries sucked in people from across the rest of Britain, now does so from around the whole world. Balancing the needs of London to attract international talent and to be supported by world-class infrastructure and amenities (from airports and transport to schools to museums), with the important needs and wishes of the other cities, regions and nations of the UK, will be a defining challenge that Brexit will likely exacerbate. Overcoming these challenges will however be vital to the continued prosperity and influence of the whole of the country, as well as of London itself.

The key mechanisms for overcoming these challenges will be on the one hand recognising that - far from being the zero sum competition for resources and political outcomes that it at first appears - the UK needs London, which generates almost a third of UK GDP and often acts as the UK's gateway to the world, to continue to be a successful world city; but also recognising that London continues to need the rest of the UK to be a stabilising support. On the other hand it will also be vital to balance the ease of movement of people, goods, and ideas that London needs, with the legitimate interests and preferences of the inhabitants of the rest of the country. There are tensions between the needs of cities which flourish on diversity and innovation and the needs of countries to maintain a degree of cultural and

political cohesion if they are not to fall apart as unified entities. Many of the current political debates in the UK reflect aspects of these tensions, which has serious implications for individuals and organisations as well as the level of city and national politics. Yet it is important to remember that the size of London's economy supports the prosperity of the rest of the UK, but the heft of the rest of the UK is necessary for London to project international influence.

London has always needed the rest of the UK, and post-Brexit, the UK will now need London more than ever. Maintaining this balance will not be easy. But if it can be achieved then the status of London as one of the great cultural world cities of the future as well as the past - and the prosperity and soft power of a 'global Britain' as a whole - can be both be assured.

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