

Outer London is ‘not proven’ – either as an economic space or a state of mind | British Politics and Policy at LSE

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/07/01/outer-london/>

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With less than a year to go until London's next mayoral election, it is clear that the capital's outer suburbs will be a key battleground between Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson. [Max Nathan](#) takes a closer look at the concept of 'Outer London', and finds that as a concept, it is relevant to social and economic policy than it is to elections.

I left yesterday's [LSE/Demos Outer London seminar](#) scratching my head. What is 'Outer London' for? It doesn't make much sense – except as a voting bloc. Given we're less than a year from Mayoral elections, though, perhaps that's the point.

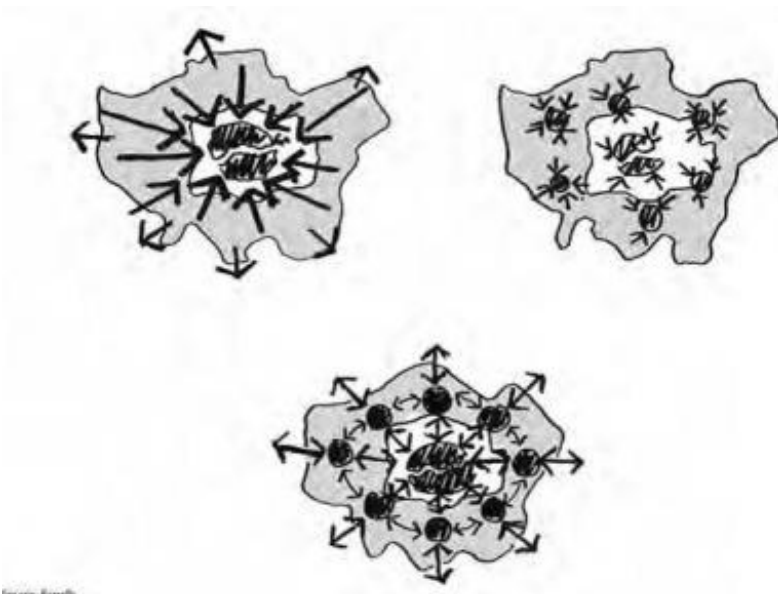
Here are some brief thoughts from the day. (Disclosure: I'm affiliated with Demos' new [Centre for London](#), but these views are my own.)

There are **different ways of thinking about cities**. Planners focus on systems and zones. Economists think about markets, and clusters of people and firms. Sociologists look at communities, neighbourhoods and relationships. In practice, we need all of these lenses to understand real world places.

London has many distinctive features. For now let's pick two. First, it's a '[city of villages](#)' – over time, the capital has emerged from dozens of small centres merging in a single urban mass. Second, it's a [mega-city-region](#). London's economic system spills over political boundaries and across much of Southern England.

Given this, **drawing lines around bits of London is a bit of an arbitrary exercise**. Using official definitions of 'Inner' and 'Outer' London to make policy is actively unhelpful.

Credit: Terry Farrell



Source: Farrell

This became very clear during the morning. Demos' [Paul Hildreth](#) took a classic **systems approach**, tracing links between Outer London and the rest. But his slides demonstrated just how hard this is to do. Data on people flows, industry mix, residence types and productivity all show how interconnected the London system is. 60 per cent of Londoners live in the outer Boroughs, but most don't stay there: commutes within Outer London make up less than a third of total journeys.

[Alan Mace](#) from LSE London took a **communities angle**, presenting

some very rich data on three outer boroughs. These showed some classic suburban features – stable populations and a strong sense of belonging. But it's not clear these neighbourhoods are distinctively different from inner suburbs like parts of Hackney or Islington – or that similar to other outer communities. In the Q&A, it became obvious how heterogenous 'Outer London' neighbourhoods actually are.

As Scottish law would say, **Outer London is ‘not proven’ – either as an economic space or a state of mind**. But it does work in political terms.

Boris won the 2008 Mayoral election [largely on the basis of outer boroughs’ votes](#). Ken, learning from past mistakes, [began his 2012 comeback bid in Croydon](#). No surprise that Boris is re-launching the [Outer London Commission](#) less than a year before the vote, with [£10million to spend on Outer London town centres](#) before May (and £40m after).

What does this mean for policy? The political imperative means Outer London features heavily in [the new London Plan](#), which launches on 11 July. Economic and social realities mean **there are tensions in the Plan’s overall strategy**, and in the **gap between policymaking and impact on the ground**.

On strategy, the Plan has a welcome focus on thinking across ‘mega-London’, and identifies high-growth development hotspots across the capital. But it then goes on to set out a number of Outer London-specific policies on the economy, transport and quality of life.

On impacts, [OLC chair Will McKee](#) rightly said at the seminar that planners can’t turn market forces around, and need to work opportunistically within the business cycle. So given the deep trends taking retail off high streets and onto the internet, what can the OLC’s £50million town centre fund actually do? It is unlikely to have more than a marginal effect on retail employment. Better, [as Mary Portas suggests](#), to take a hard look at how shopping behaviour is changing – then intervene where sensible to help high streets adapt.

Outer London is driven by electoral realities, more than economic or social truths. Let’s hope the next Mayor, whoever they are, recognises which of these is the best basis for policy in the capital.

This article [first appeared on Max Nathan’s squareglasses blog](#) on 30 June.

