

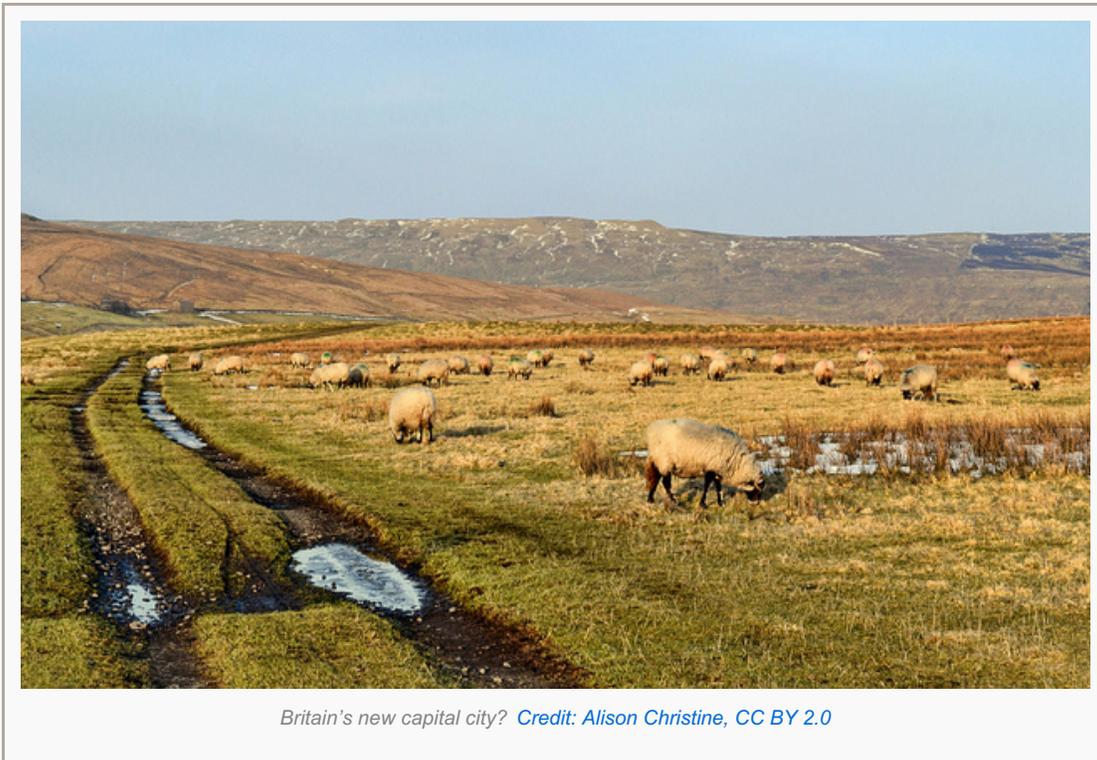
It may be time to revisit the old idea of moving the seat of British government out of London

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*London continues to dominate British public life, with political decision-making centralised to an almost unbelievable degree. Previous reformers have posited separating the financial and political capitals of the UK, by moving the political element elsewhere, with the Yorkshire moors even being suggested. **James Dunnnett** argues that it may be time to revisit that radical proposal.*



2011 was the centenary of Britain's most recent venture in building a capital city. On December 12 1911 the King-Emperor George V announced at the Delhi Durbar that the capital of the British Indian Empire was to be transferred to Delhi from Calcutta, and a new city built to accommodate it. He laid a foundation stone, and New Delhi – a real garden city – was duly inaugurated twenty years and one World War later in 1931. Is it time to consider emulating this feat? The reasons for moving the Indian capital were many, but to achieve greater geographic centrality was certainly one – especially in relation to pre-partition India. This consideration was also important in the building of most other recent new capitals – Brasilia, Islamabad, Abuja, Dodoma. It would, prima facie, be a first reason to consider relocating the British capital, London being tucked away in the south east corner of the country and very eccentrically-placed compared to the capitals of comparable European countries.

London is in fact composed of two distinct cities – the Cities of London and Westminster, the centres of commerce and government respectively – and it is arguable they should be further separated. In the eleventh century Edward the Confessor established his palace-cum-monastery of Westminster on a marshy island in the Thames at some distance to the west of the commercial city of London which stood on higher ground near the best crossing point in the river. Westminster became the base initially for a peripatetic administration. As the government gradually became fixed there, major medieval cities such as Norwich and Bristol grew to provide a regional commercial counterbalance to London. With the Industrial Revolution, the Midlands and the north, the south of Wales, central

Scotland and northern Ireland experienced dramatic development and surges in population. By the end of the nineteenth century the wealth and population of the country was fairly widely and evenly distributed, balanced between government and commerce in the south east and industry in the north and west.

In the twentieth century industry began to decline as a result of a variety of factors until today the overwhelming economic power in the land lies in the south east, with large areas in the formerly wealthy north and west in serious decline. This process can only be exacerbated by the convergence of the British economy with that of the rest of the European Union immediately across the Channel. Recent figures put the average price of a home in London at about £450,000 and in the north at £150,000 – a threefold difference. The town centre of West Bromwich near Birmingham is reported to be the most depressed in the country, with nearly 45% of retail floorspace vacant. Meanwhile development pressures in the south east are intense, – a major new shopping centre with nearly 2 million sq. ft. of retail floorspace has just opened in Stratford, east London, prompted by the forthcoming Olympics nearby, the tallest commercial tower in Europe is nearing completion in Southwark opposite the City of London, and there is intense study of the options for much increasing London's airport capacity – though Heathrow is already the busiest international airport in the world. Quite a lot for one corner of the country.

The Government has for many years sought to spread its spending outside the south east by moving certain departments to the regions, such as Vehicle Licensing to Swansea and Revenue collection to Newcastle, and has now persuaded the BBC to move much of its operations to Salford near Manchester. But it could be argued that it should consider moving itself, moving 'Westminster' out of the south east, leaving behind the City of London. Nothing less will carry sufficient weight significantly to alter the balance in wealth between the south east and the rest of the country. Whether this move should be to the West Midlands, perhaps the centre of gravity of the country in terms of population, or further north, the geographic centre of gravity, would remain to be argued.

A government based in an area such as these would perforce have a different perception of the country as a whole. It would be further from the centre of banking and commerce, which in light of recent history might be considered desirable, and nearer the remaining industrial areas. It would be seen as belonging more to the country as a whole and less to the prosperous south east. It would be more a 'professional' capital where politicians would go specifically to govern, rather than to enjoy the lifestyle of a wealthy area.

A new capital should not be built on a green-field site – our problem is not, as Brazil's was perceived to be, an undeveloped jungle hinterland. Our problem is precisely the decayed former industrial areas. The new city should be built there, erasing at the same time the decayed amorphous unplanned residue already on the site. I have never been to West Bromwich for example, but it lies near the motorway hub of the land – 'Spaghetti Junction' – and, with its decayed centre, I find it hard to imagine there is very much worth keeping. It might be the place to start – and we need to start afresh. There will be many other potentially suitable locations. But York, though it has been suggested as suitable, should be avoided: not only does it not need regenerating, but by analogy with New Delhi, a capital there would have to be called 'New York'.

A move of the capital might of course have constitutional implications, on which I would not like to speculate, but with increasing pressures for regional government, such a move might open up the possibility of beneficial new constitutional arrangements. There would be the question of what would happen to the iconic buildings of the present seat of government – the Houses of Parliament, No10 Downing Street, even Buckingham Palace (since presumably the seat of the monarchy would have to move with the Government). Such problems accompany every move of a capital and have not proved insuperable. If the move were to coincide with the establishment of an English regional government, for which some have argued, the 'icons' might suit that purpose. Tourism would adjust to the new realities – as it has done in Brazil, where Rio is no less desirable a destination since the establishment of Brasilia.

This of course may all seem totally fanciful, the wrench with history too great, but unless something really radical is done to counter the lopsidedness of wealth and development in the country, the present problems of dereliction and over-development will continue and worsen. A new capital away from the south east could throw a different light on

the need for the HS2 rail link and for more airport capacity in the area. The Olympics, apparently on track and on time, show that we can handle a major project. A new capital would be a project on a far larger scale again and provide a new national focus for endeavour, to follow on. It would give the country an entirely new image – one not tied to the legacy of the Middle Ages. The opportunity would exist to design a new capital along rational lines, drawing on the work of the advanced thinkers about urbanism of the last hundred years.

Back in the 1970s a northern MP asked in parliament whether the Government would consider building a new national capital ‘on the Yorkshire Moors’ to which the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, answered simply ‘No’. Is now the time to reconsider that verdict if not that location, and recover the boldness of the government of British India one hundred years ago?

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