

A more devolved kingdom may now emerge

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The highly charged referendum campaign appears to have revealed significant geographical differences towards membership of the EU.

The share of the Remain vote in Scotland (62%) raises questions about constitutional futures and the scale of the Remain vote in London (60%) has gained a lot of comment. However, several other cities actually had stronger votes for Remain (Edinburgh, Oxford, Brighton, Glasgow, Bristol, Aberdeen, Manchester and Cardiff). That noted, many other parts of the country, including several large cities, voted decisively for Leave.

During this disjuncture, effective local leadership is most needed. The best approach is one that avoids stereotyping people and places. Given a binary choice, it is inevitable that plural and diverse opinions get shoe-horned. We need to appreciate the diversity of our nations, which underlies the differences of opinion.

Population density is key to understanding the likely interdependencies and connections between places within a nation. France has a population density of 120 people per square kilometer and Germany has 230. England has 410; at least double the population density of other large European countries. Only the Netherlands (and to a slightly lesser extent Belgium) has a comparable population density to England; this is one of the drivers of opinion that migration needs stronger controls.

Large cities draw talent and ambition together and amplify people's capabilities. This is the case in all of the UK's nations where the two biggest cities are home to about one in five of the national populations. In Northern Ireland, 23% of the population live in Belfast and Derry; in Scotland, 20% live in Glasgow and Edinburgh; in Wales, 19% live in Cardiff and Swansea; and in England, 17% live in London and Birmingham.

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Five years ago, Edward Glaeser declared the "triumph of the city" in a book of the same title. It was a reminder of the incredible success of cities despite the stagnation of many national economies.

In London, economic growth over the past three decades has been palpable. With 14% of the UK population, London generates 22% of economic output. London's success thereby benefits the nation but London's success isn't based solely on people who started their lives in London. In fact, 40 in every 100 Londoners were born overseas. London is Europe's premier global city. Its people and communities are a part of the world, not apart from it.

In a global economy, nation states may regulate borders but it's cities that build bridges and enable connections. As Glaeser writes, "The most successful cities like London, Bangalore, Singapore and New York still connect continents. Such cities attract multinational enterprises and international expatriates. Immigrants are often a vital part of their economic model, both at the top and at the bottom ends of the pay scale, and the success of global cities depends upon national policies towards trade and immigration. An open city can't exist in a closed nation."

More recently, the city strategist, Praga Khanna has focused attention on intercity connectivity. He suggested that all large cities pursue "competitive connectivity". Global cities have the strongest competitive connectivity. This stems from their long-standing institutional advantages and their cultural openness, such that they are able to play a key role in global infrastructure networks. In short, they enable flows of people, capital, goods, services, value and knowledge.

It is for this reason that immediately after the Brexit vote that some commentators called for consideration of a special constitutional and economic status for London. Such special economic zones exist elsewhere but mainly in emerging nations or in China in the famous "one nation, two systems" approach for Hong Kong, for example. Other UK cities, such as Manchester, have rightly been quick to emphasise their open, pragmatic and internationalist stance.

Should Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty be triggered, a series of new constitutional and fiscal choices will have to be made. This may be after a general election. A far broader approach to devolution within the UK may develop. These may be very different from the deals developed in the pre-Brexit era. If there is not a general election, with luck, Greg Clark will retain a hand on devolution, for the 'bricolage' approach he has pursued over the past two years will most certainly be needed.

What might emerge over the coming years is a more a 'devolved kingdom' in a new constellation of nations, cities and county regions. This may seem fanciful, but ask yourself, can the current settlement hold in the aftermath of a post Brexit world?

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