

Hinterlands

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Studies of the future of London almost always talk of its relationships to suburbs, green belt and the preservation of it, and the connectivity between London and other cities in the UK and elsewhere; these might be classified as the physical hinterlands of London. What will become increasingly important over the next five decades are the value propositions of other dimensions of 'hinterland': political power, economics and finance, trade and commerce, international diplomacy, resources and supply chains, and skills and education and the interactions between them.

The balance between the political power of the London Mayor and the Lord Mayor of the City of London, and the Prime Minister of the UK National Government is already showing signs of change. As the social and economic activity of London becomes a more important share of overall national activity, recognising the impact of this change will be critical. This impact will be on a range of factors, all of which interact with each other. The pragmatic approach of reacting to pressure for change is one route forward (that seems to have been taken up to now); but for leaders to be informed by analysis of the sensitivities of possible futures to their political decisions or indecision would seem to be a fruitful avenue for research.

The importance of economic and financial activity in London is obvious; what is less obvious is its sensitivity to activities elsewhere on the planet. Whilst the financial markets service the domestic markets, London as a global hub services a very significant fraction of global markets in a range of financial instruments. This came from London's past dominance of finance, particularly in insurance and shipping sectors. Is it reasonable to expect this situation to continue? And what are the conditions for this assumption being valid? As other cities develop, they will grow a capability to compete in this hinterland of financial and economic activity, especially as the centre of gravity of trade moves to Asia. What skills and experience does London have that can be sustainably maintained to offset this growth elsewhere, or should London plan for a reorientation of its financial markets? History shows that cities that depended on one major industry without planning for a more efficient future or diversification do not do well when more efficient competitor cities enter the marketplace. London has managed this transition in the past, but now needs to continue to do so, and at an accelerated pace in the near future; it cannot afford sclerotic public administration to be a barrier to progress and innovation

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The brand of London is projected worldwide, and its culture, arts and heritage are known the world over; this benefits the tourism industry significantly, which in turn is supported by good but diminishing air transport links. But as other nations develop their tourist industries based on their own heritage and cultural assets, they will capture a greater percentage of a more global tourism business. This will not be helped by London allowing its air transport links to decline. This is one stark example of where London is a node of a global network, in this case air transport, where maintaining the ability to exploit the network is critical to sustainability. Connectivity throughout the global aviation hinterland is crucial to survival, and this equally applies to commerce and trade where most goods leave and arrive in our ports by ship. The understanding by London of its dependence on other airports and ports for a wide range of goods and services is also critical. Modelling possible futures, based on good data from across the world, will allow London governance to be executed in such a way that the resilience of London to shocks elsewhere is understood, and its ability to exploit opportunities elsewhere is sharpened.

Crucial to success for all these factors is a body of well-educated and skilled people who are motivated to make London one of the best cities in the world to live, work and raise families. So the 'hinterland' of schools, hospitals, universities, places of work and leisure are part of the value proposition that a sustainable development agenda for London must contain. Such an agenda is not new, but sustaining it over five decades is a political challenge which has yet to be successfully met.

Almost all of these issues are not new; what may be more novel is consideration of them all at once and in a 'joined-up' way, and to then maintain continuity of policy and of execution to 2062. This will demand sustained leadership and vision not seen in London (or, it might be argued, in the UK) since the end of the Second World War. A master plan for London has been created many times; were such a plan to be created again it should include all the factors of hinterland described above, because of globalisation, the situation is more complicated than before. But without such a plan London will continue to adopt pragmatic short-term solutions that will be less than optimum for London and its hinterland and hence cause progressive 'deep water' to open up between London and its competitor cities. A master plan does not have to be executed centrally, nor is it set in concrete. It can be executed locally in a way that is compliant with the overall plan, and it can be reviewed at a sensible periodicity; say every five to ten years.

A master plan provides a common aim point for all activities in London; then all our futures as Londoners might be provided through a process that is more like a journey in daylight with a map than an expedition at night with a torch.

