

A city-state?

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The Swinging Sixties: a hundred years ago, London was at the centre of world news, with front covers of international magazines and the world's media curious about what was going on. London's experience of loosening the belt opened a period of creativity and change that started the separation of London from the rest of the country. Was this where the seeds of change, for the creation of the London city-state were sown? London was and wanted to be different.

The real turning point came in 1999. Devolution in Scotland and Wales and the powers given to the Mayor of London started an irrevocable process of separation. When Scotland voted for independence in 2014, the transition to the federal state of Great Britain began in earnest. Then, as now, it was the role of England that seemed to be the big issue and it is hard to look back without remembering the intense debates about the establishment of the English Parliament. The main concern was about where it would sit, and when Manchester was chosen, it seemed to galvanise London's position as an international, outward, global city and as a separate part of the UK. Even fifty years ago in 1912, the Mayor of London had more powers than any other elected politician apart from the Prime Minister.

Looking back, what led to the creation of the London city-state after the referendum in Scotland? And what difference has it made? Firstly, the UK referendum to leave the EU put London at odds with England, and it found that it had more in common with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The federal structure of Great Britain, as it was devolved, immediately demonstrated that the lack of leadership, vision and agenda for England was different from the drive and determination of London and its people. London was already separate in its governance; why not take the next step?

Manchester was always interested in running the rest of the country. When the Blair government set up Manchester as the second English growth pole after 1997, not many people noticed the way in which it was consistently privileged through government decisions made by both Labour and Coalition governments. Devolved spending, new local authority arrangements and eventually transferring taxation and civil servants to the Greater Manchester authority showed the Government's intent. When it was proposed in 2016 that the government of England should move to Manchester, London wanted the UK government to stay. This separation was needed to enforce

How to cite this book chapter:

Morphet, J. 2013. A city-state? In: Bell, S and Paskins, J. (eds.) *Imagining the Future City: London 2062*. Pp. 159-161. London: Ubiquity Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bag.x>

some independence on England but London feared what might follow. In the end, the establishment of the English Parliament in Manchester and the associated move of some civil servants created a governance machine that was as small as that in the other devolved nations. Many civil servants, faced with a move to Manchester, opted out through retirement, particularly as future pensions could no longer be guaranteed.

The effects of this change in the seat of government for England could be anticipated at the time. However, what has proved more critical to London's position is the creation of the United States of Europe (USE) in 2057, one hundred years after the EU was formed in 1957. Since the UK/EU in/out referendum in 2017, the potential for differential relationships between the nations in the UK and the EU emerged. The decision of the UK to opt out and the subsequent decisions of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to opt back in created a way for London to re-join the EU and support its transition to the USE. This has been a difficult path to take, not least for London's financial economy and through the adoption of the Euro as its currency, but without this, London was faced with a major threat to its international position.

Yet despite these changes in government structures and institutions, is London any different from the way it was fifty years ago for ordinary Londoners? Firstly, there are more Londoners. London has continued to grow, not just in the centre but also in those high-priced housing areas of Barking, Romford and Dagenham that accompanied the East London airport expansions. Of course it would be difficult to accommodate so many people if there were still private cars, but the decision to abolish the use of cars in zones 1-2 in London has meant more buses and bikes, which have now become the predominant modes of transport. It is rare to see a petrol filling station or car park within these areas now, most having been redeveloped for housing in the 2020s and 2030s. It also has opened the streets to more walking and running which more people do on their way to work.

Much of London's housing looks the same, but the major housing retrofitting programme which began after the nuclear energy crisis in the 2020s has also had a major effect. London is no longer dependent on external energy supplies, and those long-held objections to local energy stations have been tempered by the domestic energy production modules that most buildings now have. London has more parks, green space and wildlife than many rural areas, as streets and roads have been planted with trees and shrubs in the place of cars and traffic signs. The dramatic reduction in food consumption in the 2020s when high sugar, fatty and processed foods were banned has had the same effect on health as earlier bans on tobacco and alcohol. London may be a larger and denser city but is now more self-sustaining than it has ever been.

So, what next for London? Will 2062 herald a new swinging sixties era? Many of today's most active people were born in the 1960s and are the product of that generation. What has London learned in this last century? That change is inevitable, and London's energy to lead its own future is not diminished. London is now at the heart of the USE and a leading member of the federated state of Great Britain. Only the problem of England remains.

