

If city-region government is the answer, what exactly was the question?

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The devolution myth

The prime minister-in-waiting, Andy Burnham, has made devolution of authority from Westminster to cities and regions his political calling card. His ambition to create a 'nerve centre' in Manchester to rival 10 Downing Street is understandable, given his long history as a regional mayor, but seems to ignore the realities of digital communication. Anywhere and everywhere can be a nerve centre. The postal address is a 19th century hangover.

Grandstanding about regional mayors is based on what Burnham claims are his successes in Granada-land: growth, buses, housing. In reality all the heavy lifting, as he half-acknowledges, was carried out by Howard Bernstein and Richard Leese, neither of whom had mayoral status. As for the buses, they were a gift from Boris Johnson. The service is now facing a budgetary crisis which no doubt Whitehall will be asked to bail out.

In respect of our experience of devolution since Tony Blair ripped up the British constitution, creating Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, can anyone seriously claim that those countries have been well governed since? The Nationalist elements of course claim that more devolution of power is required, and that is all that is holding them back. They never mention the 'Barnett formula', whereby English tax-payers pay massive irrecoverable subsidies to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

When John Prescott tried to introduce regional government in England, a gigantic majority threw out the idea in a referendum. Proponents ignore this, as they pretend that Brexit was a misunderstanding, not a democratic decision. Bizarrely, Burnham now appears to think that devolving power away from Whitehall means not only more localism, but the re-start of genuflection to Brussels and Strasbourg. You couldn't make it up.

Then there is the worked example of a city mayor – the city being London, given a mayor by Tony Blair as a reaction to the abolition of the Greater London Council by Margaret Thatcher. What is the record of mayoral government compared with what went on before? Housing has been an ongoing disaster zone. The mayor now has planning powers (positive and negative), a huge housing budget (because Homes England does not operate in London), CPO powers, the ability to create mayoral development corporations, and the power to over-ride boroughs. None of this has resulted in a directly procured housing programme for affordable and social units. Instead, the mayor has penalised house-builders by giving them unreachable targets to build out a social programme at their own expense.

This mad policy has demonstrably failed, to the point where there are now parts of London with no planning applications for any significant housing development. Too late, the mayor has slashed the target for 'affordable' to 20 per cent, only to be attacked by failed boroughs for doing so. It is hard to say whether this is because of politically-induced blindness to reality, or whether it is plain old stupidity, the expectation that repeating a failed policy will somehow guarantee success this time round.

Transport at least below ground, is a better story but owes little to London's three mayors. Strategy planners who understood growing needs have been hugely successful in implementing rail-based projects which have kept London moving and, particularly in the case of the Elizabeth Line, changed the capital and its 'mental map' for the better and forever.

Alas, surface transport is another story – one of malice and incompetence which is successfully reducing what should be a major world city to a laughingstock of traffic jams, closed bridges and a hostility to ordinary Londoners daring to drive about in their own city. Instead, we are forced onto sweaty and unreliable buses, many still using routes based on 19th century habitation patterns, or onto equally packed tubes. The failure to repair and reopen Hammersmith Bridge raises the question of whether it is worth having a mayor at all. If the mayor can't keep bridges open (Albert Bridge is now shut for a year, leading to massive congestion on Wandsworth, Battersea and Chelsea Bridges), what is the point in having one?

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>>> London government behaves as though it has a stable population, whereas it has increased by three million over the past four decades. That hasn't stopped the surreal situation developing of schools closing because of falling family populations, this the result of a failure to build enough new homes for local people. New arrivals and the growing numbers of unemployables on Benefit Street means social housing is no longer for ordinary Londoners. There is no evidence that this is being addressed by the mayoralty.

London boroughs being put in special measures because of financial and administrative incompetence (eg Croydon) give little comfort about the joys of devolution. The man from Whitehall has to come in and sort it out.

If city-region government is the answer, what exactly was the question? And was it a good one? ■

Pennycook temporarily torpedoes City Plan 2040

Pennycook's action may come back to bite him

A spectacular own goal for UK plc from Housing and Planning Minister Matthew Pennycook with his 29th June direction to the City of London Corporation requiring a further examination of the assessment of tall buildings and their impact on the Tower of London World Heritage site. The City rejected Historic England's suggestions the new plan should trim the 'jelly mold' outline of the City main cluster of tall buildings in the core to ameliorate impacts on views of and from the Tower of London. The inspector agreed. Pennycook's misguided direction stalls adoption of City Plan 2040 and opens up risk for investors.

Chairman of the City's Planning and Transportation Committee Tom Sleight came out guns blazing: "This is unnecessary and anti-growth. The issue was examined in full more than a year ago. To send a complete, ready-to-adopt plan back for more hearings on a settled point is the wrong call and the cost will be missed economic growth."

The City is receiving record numbers of applications for new and retro-fit schemes. Numbers of workers are 25 per cent up on pre-pandemic figures. It is running out of the 'right stuff' – new, improved space to satisfy a younger generation of workers, and businesses being transformed by AI. Phone calls to the Corporation have been made by irked investors wanting to know if Pennycook's Exocet will affect their schemes.

The heritage lobby has found a back door through which to nobble the Minister. A pronouncement from international heritage body ICOMOS is thought to be imminent. Pennycook's action may come back to bite him, however, in the anticipated Cabinet reshuffle should Andy Burnham choose to assert 'Manchesterism'.

As we report on page 49, the London Property Alliance's research shows central London's growth has taken a big hit post-pandemic, despite the return of workers, and a rapidly growing shortage of Grade A space in the City and across the Central Activities Zone is one of growing businesses' most pressing economic problems.

Lack of space compounds London's inability to grow its economy as diminishing supply forces up rents. Even Canary Wharf, which was seen as struggling particularly post-pandemic, is benefitting from both major letting and investment deals.

The property lobby has been ineffective in getting its act together to make the argument for more new offices in the CAZ that take advantage of its unmatched accessibility. London's economic decline relative to the rest of the UK, reducing supply, climbing rents, inability to tackle housing shortages, reducing London's appeal, spell decline.

Poor growth in London means less money for government to achieve growth. Voters and markets will punish that, and any increased government borrowing in the absence of growth will be torpedoed by the Bond Market. Devolutionist Burnham should follow the money to achieve his aims. ■