

Fortress London: Why we need to save the country from its capital [Book review]

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Citation:

FLETCHER, Del (2023). Fortress London: Why we need to save the country from its capital [Book review]. People, Place and Policy Online, 17 (1), 53-56. [Article]

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Book review

Fortress London: Why we need to save the country from its capital

Sam Bright

Harper North, 2022, 327 pages, £20 (Hb).

ISBN: 978-0-00-847422-5

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Socio-economic inequality has increased rapidly in the West since the early 1980s. In particular, the top decile's share of wealth has grown at the expense of the bottom 50 per cent of the income distribution (Piketty, 2020). Many countries are now more unequal than they have been for over a century. The UK has never had so many billionaires while millions of its citizens have become dependent on food hand-outs. It is against this backdrop that 'Fortress London' is a welcome contribution to the debate about geographical inequalities. The book shows that a huge economic gap has grown between London and everywhere else. Its economic output per head is, for example, 30-50 per cent higher than the rest of the country and it is the epicentre of the UK Government, financial services, the performing arts, the media and the professions. House prices are double the England average, with up to 93 per cent of wealth gains since the 2008 financial crash delivered through asset gains.

Bright argues that this is a bad thing for the rest of the country. The author combines reflections on his own personal experiences of leaving Yorkshire to become a journalist in London with interviews with politicians and an array of economic and social data. This can, at times, mean that the narrative flow of the book feels a little disjointed. He also seems to wander down a few intellectual cul-de-sacs. In addition, he is clearly more adept with interviewing politicians than he is at marshalling the relevant economic and social data. Nevertheless, this is an engaging and at times witty and insightful read. The book is comprised of nine chapters.

The first chapter tackles the subject of education which is an engine of social mobility. Bright draws upon his own experiences before examining the UK education system. There is much that we are already familiar with here. He shows, for example, how private education gives students an unfair advantage which translates into better life chances. Although only seven per cent of students are educated by private schools, their graduates account for 29 per cent of MPs, 57 per cent of peers, 44 per cent of newspaper columnists and 29 per cent of BBC executives. The author then shows how London's secondary schools have increasingly outperformed their counterparts in the

rest of the country. Less well known is the fact that London children benefit from an enhanced state school system- largely thanks to the transformative impact of the 'London Challenge'.

He then turns his gaze to employment and argues that London has become the only meaningful destination for graduates. Britain is becoming two nations- a prosperous South East with London at its centre and a permanently struggling periphery. Deindustrialisation and Thatcherite free market reforms are identified as playing key roles in this process. Regional income inequalities are now at their widest for over 100 years. The reader learns that gross disposable income per head in 2018 was £29,362 in London while in Port Talbot it was just £16,535. Consequently, for every minute spent on the train from Paddington to South Wales, income falls by £85! He argues that London's appeal has been created by the state which has invested disproportionately in the capital for decades. A key weakness in his analysis is that not enough space is given to financial deregulation and its transformative impact on the capital.

The spotlight is then shone on the growing inequalities between the property markets in London and the rest of the country. A vivid example is given of how a couple in London who bought a property in the 1980s worth £80,000 will have accumulated £390,000 more than an equivalent property worth the same amount bought in Yorkshire. This is unearned income and confers a myriad of economic and social advantages, nurturing harmful disparities between the regions and London and between London's own inhabitants. In terms of the latter, those on low incomes are being shunted into low quality and high-cost private-rented accommodation. More recently, London's prime real estate and even its landmarks are being purchased as foreign assets.

The next chapter considers the Labour Party's growing intellectual and physical dislocation from the rest of the UK. He persuasively argues that the 'Left' has developed a 'borderline religious faith' towards London that is blind to its many faults i.e., that it has become the international capital of property speculation, financial deregulation, money laundering (popular with Russian oligarchs seeking to clean their dirty money) and inequality. He intones that it is right to celebrate the generally progressive attitude of Londoners towards race, sexuality and religion. However, this social liberalism is accompanied by a malignant concentration of power, wealth and opportunity. A new agenda that is oriented towards geographical equality while retaining a vigorous campaign for social justice is recommended. If not, he cautions that Labour risks repeating the humiliation of the 2019 General Election.

Chapter Five considers in more detail the lessons emanating from the 2019 General Election. The scaling of the 'Red Wall' by the Conservative Party has, he maintains, provoked an identity crisis in the Labour Party. He is right to argue that Red Wall voters (and Labour supporting Brexit voters) are rebelling against the status quo. Globalisation and the decoupling of Labour from its former heartlands mean that people increasingly feel neglected and abandoned. It is striking that while London has become the richest region in Northern Europe, the UK now has six of the ten poorest regions. It is ironic that Labour voting London has grown richer and healthier under Conservative rule, whereas the increasingly Tory-inclined North has become sicker and poorer. Bright suggests that Labour must broaden its geographical base and jettison unpopular policies.

The task is a monumental one. Piketty (2020) has shown, for example, that the 'classist' post-war political party systems in western democracies have given way to systems of multiple elites, in which a party of the highly educated and a party of the wealthy alternate in power (Piketty, 2020). Social democratic parties, such as the Labour Party, have traditionally drawn their support from the disadvantaged classes (measured by income, education or wealth). The less educated have ceased to vote for social democratic parties and the same voters have sharply reduced their participation in the

political process. More recently, there has been increasing conflict over globalisation and the European project, pitting the relatively advantaged classes (favourable to the status quo) against the disadvantaged classes whose legitimate feelings of abandonment have been exploited by parties espousing nationalist and anti-immigrant ideologies. The primary cause of this cleavage is the jettisoning of redistributive ambitions by the social democratic parties.

Bright then turns his attention on the media where he draws on his personal experiences of seeking a career in journalism. This is a revealing and insightful chapter. He examines the media's failure to predict Brexit and the 2019 General Election results and maintains that it stems from their intellectual and geographical ignorance. It is well known that all national newspapers and broadcasters are headquartered in London which circumscribes their gaze. This is familiar to many of those living outside the capital. The BBC also employs people from higher social classes who find it difficult to understand the day-to-day problems confronting ordinary people. He points out that although the corporation has diversity targets, social economic diversity is not one of them. The author goes on to persuasively argue that the physical proximity of lobby journalists encourages a form of collusion with Westminster politicians. The political agenda is then forged in a closed system explaining why pundits have been so shocked by recent political events.

The next chapter focuses on recent moves towards greater devolution. Despite this the UK remains uniquely centralised. Metropolitan Mayors have been given few genuine powers and Austerity has shifted power back to London as local government budgets have been repeatedly slashed. It is in this context that 'Levelling Up' is correctly portrayed as a partisan election tool rather than a serious attempt at tackling regional inequalities. He acknowledges that this ultimately might weaken enthusiasm for further devolution. Nevertheless, Bright is optimistic maintaining that the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have provided a model for the democratisation of power across England's regions.

The penultimate chapter examines the attempts of France and Germany to tackle regional inequalities. The reunification of the former Communist East Germany with capitalist West Germany in the 1990s is especially instructive. During the early 1990s GDP per capita was 40 per cent less in East Germany compared to the capitalist West. These were two materially different countries. Yet the author shows that a national mission to reunify the two countries and a \$2 trillion reconstruction package has been transformational. Furthermore, Germany has many thriving regional centres. The result is that regional inequalities are more profound in Britain and the two countries are travelling in opposite directions. Bright concludes that Britain needs to embark on its own national unification project rather than the 'Levelling Up' sham.

The final chapter outlines some policy options. First, he would move Parliament out of London, politicians will then be forced to see the lives of the people that live outside the fortress and will experience their daily problems. This is laudable but politically unfeasible. Second, he would dedicate £billions to build new train links, schools and hospitals, invest in the research capacity of universities and the pay of public sector workers. The intention would be to 'incubate pockets of economic heat outside the capital'. Third, he would create four overarching regional governments in England- the North, the Midlands, the South West and the South East. Fourth, new investments would be funded through a wealth tax. This idea is gaining traction among some politicians on the left and academics concerned with social justice. Nevertheless, this debate underlines the key weakness of Bright's book highlighting as it does the need for a much more progressive fiscal environment not just to fund new regional investments but also

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to facilitate a redistribution of wealth. In short, policy should focus on both socio-economic and geographical inequalities.

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