

## The 'United Kingdom of Commuterland'

Cameron David Appel

Bachelor of Arts Candidate, Economics, Department of Economics, Columbia University, New York, United States

### Keywords

United Kingdom, Londoncentricity, transportation, governance

### Article History

Received 3 APRIL 2018

Accepted 1 MAY 2018

**EVERY MORNING**, Johnny wakes up at 7:00 AM. Johnny graduated from university two years ago; he now lives with his parents in Reading and works for the civil service in Westminster. It takes Johnny 15 minutes to walk to the train station, then anywhere between 30 minutes to an hour to get to London, followed by another 30 minutes on the tube before he finally gets to the office. His working day begins at 9:00 AM and finishes at 5.30 PM, when he repeats his journey in the opposite direction. On any given day, Johnny will spend about two and a half hours in transit.

Once the envy of the world, Britain's railways are now the persistent subject of national scrutiny and derision. To start with, the already exorbitant rail fares go up every year. The train operating companies – which enjoy natural monopolies over the transport infrastructure – claim that these additional funds are used to maintain and improve the railway. Whatever they're spending it on, it certainly isn't their workers, whose strikes are almost as commonplace as the delays and cancellations. If, by some miracle, Johnny does manage to catch his train on time, he can forget about finding a seat; he usually jostles in the aisle all the way to Paddington. Such shoddy customer experience continues to fuel the growing support for the renationalisation of Britain's railways,

which were first privatised in 1993. Put simply, commuting into London is bloody miserable.

But the commute itself isn't the problem; the problem lies in a national planning policy failure known as Londoncentricity.<sup>1</sup> Londoncentricity refers to the economic and political pattern whereby the nation's wealth and power are concentrated in London, which bears numerous ramifications.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, people from all over Britain – and indeed the world – move to London in search of economic opportunity. This rapid urban migration is responsible for London's housing crisis, as demand for housing rises and pushes prices beyond the boundary of affordability. According to the latest figures from the English Housing Survey, people are now dishing out £300 a week on average for the privilege of living in London. This is almost double the average rent outside London, which is £153 a week.<sup>3</sup> To put these figures into perspective, the median earnings for full-time employees in London is £671 per week and £510 outside London, meaning that Londoners spend over half their salary on rent, while everyone else spends less than a third.<sup>3</sup> Many people, like Johnny, opt to live at home or rent somewhere outside London and commute. In some extreme cases, people rent properties in London from Monday to Friday, then return home on the

---

**CONTACT** Cameron David Appel, Department of Economics, Columbia University, New York, United States. Email: [cda2121@columbia.edu](mailto:cda2121@columbia.edu)

weekend.

The second ramification of Londoncentricity is perhaps more complex, intangible, and pernicious, as it pertains to culture. The current model of governance in the Britain reinforces the irrefutable north-side divide. It is characterised by gaping inequalities in house prices, earnings, public spending, and political influence between Northern England and Southern England. To illustrate, a pint costs £5 in London and £2 in Durham (England's northernmost county). While there are many prosperous and cultural cities in the north of England, none of them compare to London on an international level. Breaking London's political monopoly would distribute cultural, economic, and political power more evenly across Britain. In turn, this would make Britain's other cities more desirable, thus alleviating the demand for housing in London, slowing the rise of house prices, and reducing economic inequality. Most importantly, it would cut commuting times for Johnny, as he could finally afford to live in the city.

This process is known as devolution, or decentralisation, which is the transfer of power from

a central government to more local administrations. To this end, devolved legislatures were famously established in Scotland and Wales in 1997, and in Northern Ireland in 1998. While parliament remains sovereign, autonomy over many departments - including education and health - was granted to each legislature. Notable omissions are tax and immigration policy. The effectiveness of devolution is a major point of contention, as Scotland still seeks greater independence. It set a precedent nonetheless, and other regions like Greater Manchester and Sheffield City have recently gained devolved powers.

All of this may be moot after Brexit, anyway: if the UK loses access to the European Single Market, it will probably cease to be an economic superpower, and so London will cease to be a global city. As such, an unexpected upside of Brexit could be that the gap between London and the rest of the country will narrow. Until then, we must resist the lure of London's bright lights, and create culture elsewhere in the country. The rest will follow.

## Notes

1. The Guardian. (2017, March 14). 'End the London-centricity': Young people on the future of politics. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/14/end-the-london-centricity-young-people-on-the-future-of-politics>
2. Russia Today. (2014, August 28). 'London-centricity is unsustainable': 200 business leaders back Scottish independence. *Russia Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/business/183304-200-business-leaders-scotland-independence/>
3. Department for Communities and Local Government. (2017). English housing survey: Headline report, 2015-16. Retrieved from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/658478/2015-16\\_EHS\\_Headline\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658478/2015-16_EHS_Headline_Report.pdf)
4. Office for National Statistics. (2016, October 26). Annual survey of hours and earnings: 2016 provisional results. Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2016provisionalresults>