

Overview

GREAT BRITAIN

The case for a new capital city

In light of the increasing centralisation of wealth in London, imagine the prosperity that a new political capital city in the centre of the country could bring, writes *James Dunnnett*

This year, 2011, marks the centenary of Britain's most recent venture in building a capital city. On 12 December 1911, the King Emperor George V announced at the Delhi Durbar that the capital of the British Indian Empire was to be transferred from Calcutta to Delhi, and a new city built to accommodate it. He laid a foundation stone, and New Delhi – a real garden city – was duly inaugurated 20 years and one World War later in 1931. Is it time to consider emulating this feat? The reasons for moving the Indian capital were many, but the aim to achieve greater geographic centrality was certainly one – especially in relation to pre-partition India. This consideration was also important in the building of most other recent new capitals: Brasilia, Islamabad, Abuja. It would, *prima facie*, be a first reason to consider relocating the British capital, London being tucked in the south-east corner of the country and eccentrically placed in contrast to capitals of comparable European countries.

London is, in fact, composed of two distinct cities – the Cities of London and Westminster, the centres of commerce and government respectively – and it is arguable that they should be further separated. In the 11th century, King Edward the Confessor established his palace-cum-monastery of Westminster on a marshy island in the Thames at some distance to the west of the commercial city of London, which stood on higher ground near the best crossing point in the river. Westminster became the base initially for a peripatetic administration. As the government gradually became fixed there, major medieval cities such as Norwich and Bristol grew to provide a regional commercial counterbalance to London. With the Industrial Revolution, the Midlands and the North, South Wales, Central Scotland and Northern Ireland experienced dramatic development and surges in population. By the end of the



Foster + Partners' Thames Hub vision offers an integrated transport strategy for London

19th century, the wealth and population of the country was fairly widely and evenly distributed, balanced between government and commerce in the South East and industry in the North and West.

In the 20th century, industry began to decline as a result of a variety of factors until today, when the overwhelming economic power in the land lies in the South East, with large areas in the formerly wealthy North and West in serious decline. This process can only be exacerbated by the convergence of the British economy with that of the rest of the European Union across the Channel. Recent figures put the average price of a home in London at about £450,000 and in the North at about £150,000 – a threefold difference. The town centre of West Bromwich near Birmingham is reported to be the most depressed in the country, with almost 45 per cent of retail floor space vacant. Meanwhile, development pressures in the South East are intense: a major new shopping centre with almost 2 million square feet of retail floor space has just opened in Stratford, east London, prompted by the forthcoming 2012 Olympic Games nearby; the tallest tower

in Europe, the Shard, is nearing completion in Southwark opposite the City of London; and, although Heathrow is already the busiest international airport in the world, there is intense study of the options for much increasing London's airport capacity (such as Foster + Partners' Thames Hub vision, which was launched at the start of November). This amounts to quite a lot for one corner of the country.

The government has for many years sought to spread its spending outside the South East by moving certain departments to the regions, such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to Swansea and HM Revenue and Customs to Newcastle upon Tyne, and has now persuaded the BBC to move many of its operations to Salford near Manchester. But it should go further and consider moving itself, shifting 'Westminster' out of the South East, leaving behind the City of London. Nothing less will carry sufficient weight to significantly alter the balance in wealth between the South East and the rest of the country. Whether this move should be to the West Midlands, perhaps the centre of gravity of the country in terms of population, or further north,

