

Hard Newcap or Soft Newcap? A Christmas Fable

With the Tories in meltdown, Prime Minister Milliband looks all set – so long as he can solve the one problem we're all obsessed with. Since the British people voted last June that London should no longer be our nation's capital, there's only one question. Soft Newcap or Hard Newcap?

It had all started in 2014. "Politicians have a responsibility to explain why 45% of voters in Scotland backed independence." Ed Milliband told the conference. "The UK nearly broke up, but people who voted to leave were just trying to improve their lives. The Tories get this; they're promising a referendum to leave the EU. That won't help of course. But their false promise will speak to the millions who've been left behind. It's time to offer something better, something real.

"Whoever's in power, all the money and all the bright people and all the jobs go to the southeast. That's the real problem. Everywhere else, from Greenock to Great Yarmouth, the shops are payday lenders, betting shops or just boarded up. Compared with London, the schools are dismal, and the NHS is barely coping. And it's not just the Tories. I've said it before that this party of ours has been too much Hampstead and not enough Hull. That must change, and it will."

The audience rose to their feet, even MPs who lived in Hampstead clapping dutifully. As it died down, Milliband gnawed his lip. He took a deep breath. "There is something we can do, and which other countries have done. Why should a country's political capital be in the same city as its commercial capital? Washington, Ottawa and Canberra work fine," he said, pausing to let it sink in. A few London MPs shot each other panicky glances. No, surely he can't...

"If the British people want to vote in a referendum that will really reboot Britain, the Labour party is the only party that can give them that chance." He gulped down the old reflux. Just nerves. Go for it now. He gripped the lectern. "The next Labour government will hold a referendum on one single question: that Britain's capital should move out of London."

Pandemonium! This wasn't a standing ovation; this was a riot. Tom Watson punched the air with a whoop while the London MPs who hadn't been briefed started screaming at the few guilt-faced ones who clearly had. It was three minutes before the audience came back to something like order and Ed could plod through the rest of his speech. But nobody paid any attention to that. Front and centre of the British conversation now was that if we voted Labour in May 2015, then in June 2016 we'd have a real chance to poke the whole bloody London Mafia in the eye. How could the Tories' silly vote to leave the EU even compete? I mean, who the hell cares about curly bananas? Brussels, schmussels. Sticking it to our very own 'unelected officials' is way more fun.

So come the election, David Cameron just came second. Nicola Sturgeon wasn't too pleased either. She'd hoped to hold the balance of power, but now Labour was back with a story to tell. "We listened," Gordon Brown had roared at Clydeside. "We get it. London is too mighty, and we're going to fix that not just for Scotland but for everyone." Elegant Morningside ladies tottered down to the ballot box to vote Labour for the first time since that nice Mr Attlee.

Prime Minister Milliband had to fight to control the ‘bastards’, the MPs who felt their lives would be ruined if we left London. He gave them complete freedom to campaign against Newcap in the four months before the vote. They predicted the end of civilisation if bankers couldn’t take the Chancellor to lunch. The City and much of the CBI agreed. Why should we waste a trillion pounds moving all the civil servants and nice tame quangos out into the bush somewhere? They might well go feral. The prim grim leader of the opposition, Theresa May, said that having written down the pros and cons on a piece of paper she was “70% in favour” of remain but only appeared at three rallies. The tabloids had swung behind Leave. Speculating about Newcap sold an awful lot of papers, it was all a good laugh, and it’s a brave Tory leader who takes on the Mail. Boris Johnson started out chortling that Boadicea herself had tried to abolish London and failed. Then came the shocking u-turn, while he still had five weeks to go as London’s mayor. “I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “Look, I have to wrestle with this stuff every day. London’s full up. Nous sommes farcis! The real problem facing Londoners isn’t a shortage of jobs, but a shortage of space. Our kids can’t find a place to live. So let all the bloody civil servants bugger off to Bolton. Then I might be able to get on the second Victoria line train, rather than the fourth one.” Come the vote, 42% of Londoners agreed with him. In most of the rest of England, Leave won by a street; Remain had to satisfy itself with London, Oxford, Cambridge, Brighton and Scotland – where SNP bloggers explained that the referendum was a sinister Sassenach trick to make the path to independence even steeper.

No-one anticipated the civil war that trashed the Conservative party. Teresa May was hounded from office by a baying pack of home-counties MPs. But in the run-off between George Osborne and Boris Johnson, the shire Tories followed the Daily Mail. The only way to fix their local schools and hospitals was to force Sir Humphrey Appleby’s kids to use them – and it was all London’s fault anyway for stealing all the jobs and all the money. So Boris yomped it, and the party’s been in civil war mode ever since. Zac Goldsmith was incandescent at Boris after losing the mayor’s job, and he’s just one of a hundred sullen, grieving MPs who snarl and snap at the Boris whip. So the voters want us to live next door to unemployed steelworkers rather than bankers? Sod that! And as for the Tories in the Lords, they won’t even answer Boris’s emails.

The Prime Minister moved quickly after the referendum, appointing a new MP as Secretary of State for the New Capital. Sir Kier Starmer has been ordered to find the real estate for Newcap and get a bill through parliament by 2020. It’s a good job he’s a former prosecutor and all-round hard bastard, given the fire-hose of lobbying. As well as the regional MPs and landowners, there are civil service unions whingeing about their London weighting, and corporate titans insisting that Newcap be an easy commute.

This “Soft Newcap” crowd say no further than Birmingham. Maybe somewhere like Tamworth where the HS2 could stop? Only 43 minutes from Euston, it’d also be handy for Leicester and even commutable from Nottingham and Derby given a few more miles of motorway. Tom Watson as a West Bromwich boy is rubbing his hands. “Nobody ever gave a monkey’s before about whether Brummies could drive to Derby quickly, or even at all!” But ‘real’ northern MPs say Tom’s a sellout and even accuse Milliband of cynical self-interest. Soft Newcap will be great for the Milliband family as Justine can keep on earning half a million a year as a London QC – and she being a Nottingham lass can smile and wonder what the fuss is about.

But will we get the real economic and political benefits if we just spend half a trillion pounds over the next twenty years in stretching London all the way up through Nuneaton?

So for the ‘Hard Newcap’ crowd it’s Gateshead or bust. “Durham, surely”, the elegant Newcap permanent secretary was heard to mutter – an allegation instantly denied by Starmer as false and malicious. He explained that if we go for the ‘Northeast Option’, a minor investment in railways could enable ministries to be distributed equitably from Morpeth to Durham, with a really fat juicy one for Sunderland whose voters first signalled the Decision of the British People. Boris retorted that we voted to move the capital, not chop it up into a handful of dog treats.

Meanwhile the unlikely alliance of George Osborne and Andy Burnham is promoting Wigan as a compromise between a hard Newcap and a soft one. As it’s between Manchester and Liverpool, and closer in train time than either, what’s not to like? Even with today’s creaky Victorian track it’s under two hours from London (just). Well, Billy Connolly and Jeremy Clarkson are getting their teeth into that one. Wigan jokes will be really big at the Fringe.

The rumour now is that Sir Kier’s mulling over a second referendum: a single-transferable-vote choice between Gordon Brown and Nick Brown’s ‘Northeast Option’, the Burnham-Osborne ‘Northwest Option’ and the PM’s ‘Central Option’. His civil servants are slaving away, it’s said, with town planners and transport engineers, cooking up some numbers for the green paper.

And the recriminations are already starting. How dare the Prime Minister, asks Nigel Farage, yes how dare this Oxford-educated London elitist rebrand Nuneaton as ‘Central’? The new HS2 will make it fourteen minutes closer to London than Oxford. “Nuneaton’s just a bloody London suburb in my book!” Morecambe was much closer to the geographical centre of Britain, but Gateshead would do in a pinch. As for the very idea of giving ‘remoaners’ a second bite at the cherry, by letting them vote to not even move the capital as far as Birmingham, that’s just a cynical plot to frustrate the Decision of the British People.

So when a London fund manager brought a court case for an Act of Parliament or a further referendum to decide the location of Newcap, arguing that the Royal Prerogative cannot override the many Acts of Parliament that mention London, the Mail pilloried the judges as corrupt London elitists. And when the Canadian ambassador jokingly remarked that the site for Ottawa was chosen by letting Queen Victoria stick a pin in a map, Jacob Rees-Mogg archly sneered that it was not appropriate for the royals to get involved in politics, while an angry troll told the ambassador to go back to Canuckistan. The police declined to prosecute him for this wicked hate crime, but from then on the diplomatic corps kept its head down and concentrated on scouting out real estate. The Royals too; Charles was overheard talking to a New York developer with strange hair about selling a ‘draughty old Victorian pile with 2500 radiators’ for the cash to build a proper modern palace. Meanwhile the markets may give us some truth; the pound may be down a few cents, but the FTSE 500 is up, led by construction. Apprenticeships are up, too.

... and then I woke up, and lo! It was just a dream. Or a parallel quantum universe, perhaps. Anyway, a happy Christmas to all, and here’s hoping that 2017 brings more harmony.

Ross Anderson