Two Futures for London

Lord Adonis

I want to look at London's more recent history, over the last 350 years since Christopher Wren, and ask the question: what next?

My title is "Two Futures for London" and my argument is this. As our population grows by 100,000 a year, with intense pressure to expand towards 10 million over the next two decades, we face a choice. The choice is between patch and mend, or radical reform to make a city of 10 million possible and desirable.

It is clear to me that when London has expanded successfully in the past, there has always been a plan. There's this notion that we English don't do big time planning. Paris has its Hausmann; Barcelona its Gaudi, but London's piecemeal, even where the results are individually dramatic, like St Paul's, or Tower Bridge, or Canary Wharf. Which is why – goes the argument – we've got an international airport in the wrong place, railway termini which don't join up, a North Circular but no real South Circular, tall buildings at random, and, in amenities, a city of parishes and boroughs yielding one postcode lottery after another.

But I don't think this story is the right one. Rather, from Wren to Ken, when London has expanded successfully and dealt with its problems, it has been driven by reformers with big plans. By contrast, when it has failed- be it the slums of the past, or the overcrowding of today, reformers have either been absent or powerless, and it's been patch and mend at best.

Three periods of reform are especially striking: after the Great Fire; the century before the First World War; and the last 25 years. In each era the big challenges were met by big reforms.

We all know that after the Great Fire, Wren's St Paul's rose like a Phoenix. What I hadn't realised was that after the fire of 1666 – which destroyed an incredible 12,000 homes, making one in five Londoners homeless – a debate about the rebuilding of the City raged almost as intensely as had the fire itself. Wren proposed a complete redesign. Wide radial streets superimposed on a grid; not just a new Cathedral and churches but new institutions galore, all built in brick or stone, not wood; and a huge new quay fronting the Thames.

This made London, in Wren's own words, "the most convenient city for trade in the world." Wren's mentor, the royalist John Evelyn, proclaimed Charles II a second Augustus who would make London a new Rome with Wren was his Vitruvius. Positively Boris-esque in grandiosity!

Parliament rejected Wren's full scheme as too costly and too dictatorial. But in rebuilding the City, much of Wren's planning was adopted. As well as St Paul's and more than 50 new churches, all the rebuilding was in brick and stone; the streets were widened and paved; gradients reduced and the waterfront raised. So Wren succeeded. And London entered the 18th century as one of the most convenient cities in the world for trade.

Moving on to the century before the First World War, London's population rose at an astonishing rate from a million to 7.5 million. That's only a little below today's level, almost a century later. Best known are the national railway pioneers: Brunel, Stephenson, et al. And by the way, London's unconnected rail termini were actually planned that way: by a Royal Commission no less, which in the 1840s banned main lines from the centre.

However, when it comes to the development of the capital itself, it is four other bold reformers who stand out. John Nash is famous for his stucco terraces and the Regent Street curve, but I hadn't realised that these were but part of a vision to rebuild and extend central London on an imperial scale, which was largely implemented. Twenty-five years later, Joseph Bazalgette was less ostentatious than Nash but equally transformational. The sewers are the most extraordinary part of the story, but Bazalgette was also responsible for Victoria Embankment, reclaiming 37 acres from the Thames and including a road above ground, space for the District Line below ground, and a main sewer below that; also the Chelsea and Albert embankments; dozens of new central London streets and thoroughfares, including Northumberland Ave, Shaftesbury Ave, Charing Cross Road and Southwark Street; three Thames crossings – Tower Bridge, the Blackwall Tunnel and the Woolwich ferry; and parks including Battersea Park and Finsbury Park. Then there were two extraordinary Americans: George Peabody, whose Trust invented modern social housing; and Charles Yerkes, who forged the London Underground.

To the third and final reform era – the last 25 years, in many ways the Ken and Hezza show. London has grown by 2 million, entirely reversing the post-WWII decline. Ken's legacy, in staccato. Crossrail. Oystercard. Overground. Congestion charge. The reinvention of London's buses. Modernisation of the tube. A bold approach to new buildings – the Gherkin, the Shard and Heron Tower. Championing the rights of gay

people and ethnic minorities in this city long before it was politically mainstream. Ken was the only member of his own team who supported introducing the congestion charge in 2003. The others all thought he should drop it, or put it off until his second term, when it wouldn't have happened.

Since Ken, Boris has sold London as never before, but his policies are largely a continuation.

As for Michael Heseltine, like the inscription on Wren's tomb: "Just look around you." None of Canary Wharf was here before.

But big problems are still here; especially the challenges of growth and poverty. This is the score.

We're building barely a third as many new homes as London needs. Yet there is no credible plan for the other two-thirds, an extra 40,000 homes needed a year. In 17 boroughs the average rent is now more than half the average wage, and the typical first time buyer is 32.

Peak congestion remains unbearable on much of central London's rail, tube and bus networks. Try getting on the Northern line at Clapham any weekday morning. Our major international airport is full with a sign outside: "Closed for new business." Yet there is no transport plan for London after Crossrail opens in four years time.

Last month I spent a week on London's buses – 100 buses in five days, a whole day stationary on Oxford Street. I got chatting to other passengers. Generally young. Some out partying. But most of them going to and from work: bar and restaurant staff; cleaners; shop workers; nurses; some of Heathrow's 30,000 early shift workers on the N9. Almost all of them had moved to London – from other parts of the country or from abroad. All of them loved London and basically what they said was this: great city with the hope of a better life, but a constant struggle to make ends meet which could easily fail.

So again, in our generation, we face a choice. A choice between action and inaction to tackle the big problems of today – housing, skills, congestion, jobs. In some ways it's harder to be bold than in the past. We aren't in the wake of a Great Fire or a cholera epidemic, or eradicating the slums after wartime bombing. But how we act or fail to act in the decade ahead will decide whether London becomes one city or two, world city or declining city, the capital of congestion or the capital of opportunity. Two futures for London

Now, I'm a professional optimist. Let's say we go for bold reform, then here's London: 2030.

New city villages are London's growth story. More than a dozen village communities of between 5,000 and 20,000 homes, each of them a good mix of houses, mid rise and high rise flats, typically half for rent, half for sale, creating vibrant affordable communities across London, complete with schools, shopping, parks and leisure, cultural attractions, NHS hubs. And a new generation of care homes. Each of them distinct, reflecting local history and institutions; but all of them walkable, built around the bike, the bus and the train, not the car. And all made possible by new or improved rail links putting them within half an hour of the centre.

Woolwich Arsenal was the model for these city villages – part conversion of the old barracks, part Riverside new build, which took off when Crossrail 1 was built with a new station at Woolwich Arsenal. But as a movement, the city villages weren't spontaneous. They came out of the great house price explosion of the mid 2010s when house prices in London literally doubled over five years, yet home building increased by only a few thousand a year while successive Mayors and Chancellors vacillated and wrangled.

It was when the average London house price reached £600,000, and the newly launched TV channel London Live raised its famous petition of 2 million Londoners demanding a million homes by 2030, that action followed. Within a month, the Mayor and Prime Minister Ed Miliband agreed the 2016 Growth Deal for London which gave the Mayor and the boroughs more of London's property and development taxes in return for a commitment to 1m homes and London undertaking to pay for most of the transport and other infrastructure needed to support them.

Many of you now live in Old Oak Common, Park Royal, Chessington View, Euston Park, Alexandra Palace Heights, Hackney Marshes, Hackney Wick, Upper Lee Valley, Lower Lee Valley, Royal Docks, Barking Reach. Most sought after of all are the award winning Christopher Wren and Joseph Bazalgette city villages at the Abbey Wood end of Crossrail 1, developed by the Peabody Trust after knocking down much of the godforsaken Thamesmead estate, which the very old amongst you may remember was backdrop for the dystopian film Clockwork Orange, a byword for urban disaster 60 years ago, right back in the 1970s.

Old Oak Common and Euston Park, which include HS2 stations, are hot spots for commuters to Birmingham and the north, particularly since the House of Lords moved to

Leeds and the MOD to Liverpool. The Scots are buying them up too now that HS2 is being extended to Scotland.

Education is world class. Stratford Science City, with its new Imperial, UCL and Queen Mary extension, is a buzz of academics and entrepreneurs. London's cultural scene is richer and more cosmopolitan than ever. The huge new arts and theatre quarter at Kings Cross, around the iconic Gas Tower. The stunning new gallery at St James's Palace, which the King gave to the nation as a permanent exhibition of the Royal Collection. Kensington Palace, an amazing new concert venue. The Museum of Migration in the Olympic Village now with more visitors than Tate Modern. Buckingham Palace Park, open to the public as an ever changing exhibition by the Royal Horticultural Society.

All this is why London is Newsweek's 2030 Capital of the World. This is what Newsweek says:

"The City and Canary Wharf dwarf Wall Street; Oxford and Regent Street excel Milan and Paris for shopping; Shoreditch and Hackney compete with Cannes and LA as the international home of the film community; iCity and Tech City are right up there with Silicon Valley for technological innovation.

The most cosmopolitan metropolis in the world. And when people from all over this world think of a land of opportunity, they no longer think of the Statue of Liberty, but of Big Ben."

Not that everything has been a success. The decision on Heathrow's fourth runway rumbles on. Cost overruns on the central London tram are horrendous. Boris's extension of the cable car to Downing Street was a security nightmare. And it probably wasn't a good idea to try and extend Greater London's boundaries to Southampton and Northampton; better to have stopped at Ebbsfleet and the four other new garden cities.

So London 2030: what shines through is the spirit of the Olympics – London leading the nation and best in the world, a spirit of unity, urgency, change.

When Christopher Wren put his plan to Charles II, this is what he said: "Nothing will more Discover abroad the Weakness of our Government … [than] That having an Opportunity in their hands of doing one of the greatest Benefits that can be done to the Publick, They are unable to bring it to Pass, or unwilling to be at the trouble."

That was the challenge then. It is the challenge now. It is our choice.