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them and us

Britain and the European city

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Abstract

Here's a policy paradox. We have long admired the best European cities, but haven't learnt enough from them. Recent UK urban policy has been heavily influenced by the US, often via the Chancellor. However, European cities seem to do a lot better than American ones, and the UK government is now turning its attention to the most successful European city models.

This is good news. Comparisons are often helpful, and it's important for policymakers to be open to new ideas. But we need to be careful. First, there is no 'European city' – and no single model to draw from. Second, great care is needed with comparisons. There are big data holes, and UK cities may be doing better than we think. Third, there are a lot of promising areas where Britain could learn from the best in Europe – such as governance, leadership, transport, public space and innovation. Again, careful research and policy transfer is required. Some US policy imports have not been successful – US 'enterprise' policies being one example. Urban 'policy tourism' in Europe will need to be smarter.

Introduction

Here's a paradox for British policymakers. On many measures, European cities seem to perform better than American cities. But we have tended to look to the US for policy inspiration, and learn little from the Continent.

British attitudes to European cities – like so much else European – are conflicted. We fly to Rome, Barcelona, Paris or Berlin for romantic mini-breaks. We like loft living, café culture and iconic architecture. We admire shiny urban tram systems, and trains that run on time. We hanker after European standards of city living, public space and urban style (without, of course, the willingness to pay continental levels of tax for them).

So how about bringing some of this back home? When it comes to serious policy transfer, the British policy establishment has looked across the Atlantic, not across the Channel. Labour's urban regeneration policies are heavily Americanised – clearly seen in the New Deals, innovation policy, clusters or the Chancellor's preoccupation with 'enterprise' in deprived areas.

But have we been looking in the right place? While many American cities perform well economically, they are often divided, unequal and sprawling. Compared to their Continental rivals, many American cities don't provide the kind of urban environment that British policymakers are keen to deliver. They seem much less good at being cities.

Things are now starting to change. Policymakers are beginning to look more seriously at the best European cities. Ministers

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worry that British cities do not work as well as many of their Continental¹ counterparts. And the Government is starting to take European policy models seriously, particularly the need to give UK cities greater devolution and strategic autonomy (HMT *et al*, 2006; ODP, 2006b; SURF and CUPS, 2006). We need to develop these agendas, and take a harder look at the European experience.

This article provides a travel guide for aspirant policy tourists. To help show the way, it asks three big questions. First, what is the ‘European city’? Second, how are UK cities actually doing, compared with their European cousins? Third, what serious ideas can we import from the Continent? And what – if anything – can the continentals learn from us?

Who’s special now?

Britain has a special relationship with America, and so has the British policy community. Over the past 30 years or so, policy-makers and thinkers have consistently looked west for inspiration. The last Conservative administration was heavily influenced by American New Right thinking – with its focus on cutting bureaucracy, welfare reform and promoting ‘free enterprise’.²

Some of these ideas have been embraced by New Labour, and are now considered mainstream. The new public management paradigm, for example, largely emerged from 1980s US thinking about the shape of government, but has become the standard template for thinking about public sector reform in the UK (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Stoker, 1999). It is now being challenged by broader, more sophisticated ‘public value’ frameworks – as pioneered by US academic Mark Moore (Kelly and Muers, 2002; Moore, 1997).

New Labour has been particularly keen on US urban policy. The Chancellor is a well-known admirer of the States – and much of

this falls within his Whitehall domain. Look over the Government’s cities agenda, therefore, and you will find an extraordinary level of American influence. Under this Government, American ideas – and American decision-makers – have played a consistently strong role in British urban policy development and implementation.

Labour has looked repeatedly to the States for ‘fast policy’ – importing ideas and key figures to rapidly draw up and roll out a version for the British market. For example, the *State of the English Cities Report* and the Government’s ‘mixed communities’ agenda draw heavily on the Brookings Institution’s Bruce Katz and Alan Berube, respectively. Over the past nine years, Cay Stratton has been a central figure in the Government’s welfare to work and business engagement programmes, which have a disproportionate impact on urban areas.

Similarly, Labour’s thinking on enterprise and clusters is based – almost exclusively – on analysis by Harvard guru Michael Porter. (Porter’s US consultancy firm, the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, has also helped design and implement City Growth in the UK.) John Prescott’s enthusiasm for New Urbanism is shared by Hank Dittmar, who runs the Prince’s Trust. And last – but by no means least – Ken Livingstone drafted ex-CIA agent Bob Kiley to run London’s Tube and bus networks. The list goes on and on.³

Britain imports a few European managers too – Sven Goran Eriksson, Arsene Wenger and Rafael Benitez being obvious examples. But it is hard to think of a European figure masterminding a serious piece of British policy – let alone urban policy. P-Y Gerbeau at the Millennium Dome, anyone?

Of course, there is some European policy networking and transfer. New Labour’s interest in social exclusion is one example, imported from France. But the concept has been tied to some very Anglo-Saxon policy objec-

1. For the purposes of this article, and writing from an island perspective, we use ‘European’ and ‘Continental’ interchangeably.

2. With one important difference. American New Right thinking has a strong emphasis on devolution to state level and below, while the last Conservative administration strengthened the centre at the expense of local government.

3. Think tanks also do their bit for US policy imports. The Centre for Cities currently has two US researchers on a total staff of eight, including one of the authors.

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tives, such as ‘welfare-to-work’. More specifically, urban policy networks like EUROCI-TIES and COMPETE help spread ideas around. But relatively speaking, they are low-profile and not hugely influential.

In general, the British attitude to European cities has been at best inconsistent, at worst superficial. Under New Labour, urban strategy has tended to look admiringly at the ‘European City model’, as embodied by cities like Barcelona. The first Urban Task Force report and subsequent Urban White Paper were full of references to compact form, high density living and café culture (DETR, 2000; Urban Task Force, 1999).

Some of these ideas made it into policy form – in particular, through changes to the planning system. They have helped produce phenomenal growth in city centre living across the UK – Manchester’s city centre population rose 286 per cent over the 1990s, for example (Nathan and Urwin, 2006).

City centre living is a success story – which also illustrates the limits of our European understanding. We have not brought Barcelona to Britain. Provincial city centres in the UK are full of young, single people who don’t stay long. We have imported the built form of many European cities, but not the lifestyles that go with them (ibid).

In any case, government tends to see city centre living as a largely symbolic achievement (ODPM, 2004). And in practice, the Sustainable Communities Plan and subsequent planning reform put the emphasis on market-led, lower density growth around the edge of cities, rather than moving people back into city cores (ODPM, 2006a; 2003).

Similarly, this government now routinely compares British cities with the best in Europe. But the tone alternates between cheerleading for urban renaissance, and fretting about UK cities’ long-term underperformance. For example, Labour’s 2005 manifesto document ‘Strong Economy, Great Cities’ stated proudly that:

There is no more powerful symbol, no more compelling evidence, of the progress our country has made over the last eight years than the success of our cities. (Labour Party, 2005)

In the same vein, the Government’s ‘progress report’ on the Core Cities argued that:

the Core Cities have turned a corner. People are coming back to cleaner, greener, safer cities. (ODPM, 2004)

However, research for ODPM – published the same year – concluded that:

the cumulative weight of evidence provides a very consistent picture about what shapes urban competitiveness and where the Core Cities stand in the wider European Scene. It is clear that despite their relative renaissance in recent years...the Core Cities still lag behind their European counterparts in terms of competitiveness. (Parkinson et al, 2004)

The authors went on to highlight disparities between big British cities and many of their European counterparts on population growth, educational achievement, connectivity, business attractiveness – and quality of life. Most strikingly, the study suggested that British cities’ economic performance was particularly poor. On GDP per head, London ranked twenty-third in Europe, at less than half the level of top performer Frankfurt (Table 1, next page). The other Core Cities lagged a long way behind the capital (Parkinson et al, 2004).

In fact, this data is much weaker than it looks – as the authors acknowledge, and as we will discuss below. But it suggests a serious problem, and over the past year, has helped trigger a shift in the Whitehall mindset. Policymakers now believe that successful cities on the continent combine high growth, good social outcomes and sustainable development. American cities’ performance is more uneven: higher rates of growth are undermined in many places by the negative economic consequences of segregation, social exclusion and sprawl.

And some US policy imports have performed less than brilliantly. The New Deal for Young People has been a modest success (Riley and Young, 2000; Blundell et al, 2003), but the Government’s myriad enterprise policies have had only limited impact on

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Table 1: GDP per capita in selected European cities, 2001

City	Euros per capita	City	Euros per capita
Frankfurt Am Main	74465	Dortmund	26548
Karlsruhe	70097	Rotterdam	26227
Paris	67,200	Leeds	25619
Munich	61360	Turin	25042
Stuttgart	53570	Toulouse	24852
Copenhagen	50775	Rome	24766
Amsterdam	38203	Berlin	23428
Stockholm	35733	Birmingham	22069
Helsinki	35322	Manchester	22099
London	35072	Newcastle-upon-Tyne	20499
Milan	32122	Lille	20191
Bristol	29437	Barcelona	18449
Lyon	28960	Liverpool	16466

Source: Barclays 2002, quoted in Parkinson *et al* (2004)

Note: data presented is a sample from the full survey of 61 European cities

deprived areas (Troni and Kornblatt, 2006).

All of this has helped trigger a change in the policy climate. The Government now accepts that ‘we need to learn from successful cities abroad ... in Europe and beyond’ (ODPM, 2006b). Rather than just admiring the paintwork of the best European cities, ministers are now starting to look under the bonnet.

Entente cordiale?

Are these international comparisons helpful, though? Cities are complex systems. Surely each is a product of its own history, trajectory and national circumstances? This is true, up to a point. And the priority for policy must be to improve their own cities’ economic, social and environmental performance – not to move up imaginary league tables.

But there are at least three good reasons to compare cities across countries. First, competition matters. Many businesses make international comparisons to inform investment decisions. This does not mean cities can ‘compete’ with each other in the way firms do. Fundamentally, cities are interdependent, tied into larger urban systems (Sassen, 2006; Urwin, 2006). Many firms are not mobile. But some can make location choices, and will weigh up the assets of different cities in the process. So it is important to compare urban offers, and to think about how some can be

improved.

Second, policymakers can learn lessons from elsewhere. As we will see, with the right approach and caveats, cities can transfer ideas and strategies – and make them work locally. Third, politics is inescapable. Like it or not, ministers and city leaders like to compare, and like to boast. Cities are visible symbols of national progress (or decline). We can’t wish this away.

So it is good to see the British policy establishment looking seriously at the European urban experience. But there is a risk of falling back on ‘lofts and latte’, rather than proper policy fixes. Similarly, there is a danger of importing European solutions wholesale, without checking for suitability, context or fit.

How should we proceed? The first step is to get a better idea of what we’re looking at. What – if anything – is the ‘European city’?

The ‘European city’: myth and reality

Over 80 years ago, Max Weber set out a set of features common to all European cities, including specific institutional structures, tax systems, and notions of citizenship (Weber, 1921).

Nowadays, however, it’s not that simple. Today’s urbanists argue that it’s overly simplistic to lump European cities together into a single model. As Bagnasco and Le Gales

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have noted, ‘any attempt to identify the common traits of the European city would seem to be a risky exercise’ (2000). Dematteis (2000) is even clearer:

The idea that the cities of Europe might constitute a single system is relatively recent and still remains largely to be demonstrated.

Cities are path-dependent: their economic, political and cultural positions are shaped by a wide range of historical, geographical and economic factors (Le Gales, 2002). And cities’ paths of development are so distinctive that they make simple generalisations impossible. American cities aren’t all sprawling, twentieth-century monocultures, and European cities also defy neat definitions.

With this in mind, what are the key similarities and differences between Europe’s cities – and what do they mean for Britain?

Comparative research and typologies

One vein of research looks at European cities in comparative perspective, slotting cities into a range of typologies and frameworks.

Urban governance has featured prominently in many of these analyses (inter alia, Kleinman, 2002; John, 2001; Hesse 1991; Batley and Stoker, 1991; Newman and Thornley, 1996). Although final typologies differ from study to study, one thing is clear: national boundary lines demarcate very different types of urban governance in Western Europe. Overall, there are four competing models:

- *Anglo-Saxon*: United Kingdom and Ireland
- *Napoleonic*: France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Greece
- *Germanic*: Germany, Netherlands, Austria
- *Nordic*: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland

So cities in the British Isles are administered differently to cities on the Continent – but the Continent itself is riven with divisions. The substantial independence of Nordic cities, for example, contrasts sharply with high levels of national intervention in countries like France, where central direction

has historically been more prominent.

These contrasts are not limited to governance alone: ‘European’ cities also differ across a range of other indicators. Some observers point to the contrast between low- and high-density urban areas, and the substantial variation that exists between Continental countries (Burdett *et al*, 2004). Similar differences are visible in urban planning: witness the ‘highly constrained growth patterns’ of cities in northern Europe, versus the ‘freer pattern of suburbanisation’ seen in recent years in the South (Hall, 2003; Newman and Thornley, 1996). The physical ‘footprint’ of the Dutch city, for example, has more in common with British cities than Spanish or Italian ones.

Urban hierarchies

A second workstream examines the functional relationships between cities. This research has both European and global dimensions – classifying cities across wider urban systems.

A number of studies have examined a possible European urban hierarchy (Hall and Hay, 1980; Brunet 1989; Kunzmann and Wegener, 1991; Equipe PARIS, 1993), while others have examined the role of European cities in the global economy (Sassen, 1991; 1994; Veltz, 1996; Taylor, 2003). European cities have a range of different specialisations – manufacturing, tertiary services, government – and interact with each other in complex ways.

Again, this research finds no simple, clear-cut distinctions between British and Continental cities. In economic terms, for example, Paris and Frankfurt seem to have more in common with London, New York and Tokyo than they do with Marseille or Bremen (Taylor and Hoyler, 2000). The emergence of ‘global cities’, trading across specialised international networks, makes it harder than ever to refer to European cities as a single, monolithic group.

These studies also stress that national distinctions still matter. National urban systems are different: they shape cities’ physical forms, economic roles, and their political independence (Pumain, 1999; Taylor, 2003; Hall, 2002). The fact that there are growing cross-

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boundary links between continental cities does not mean that they are becoming more alike. Although places like Barcelona, Munich and Lyon have European roles, they remain very different because they are embedded in their respective *national* urban systems.

So what drives national differences? First, and most importantly, national economic trends matter. Over the last ten years, Britain and Spain have prospered, while Germany, France and Italy have seen slower growth – with important consequences for investment in each country’s cities. National prosperity has fuelled substantial investment in cities in the UK and Spain, while new development has lagged behind in the continent’s slower-growth economies.

Second, physical differences are important. Whereas Dutch, Italian and German cities are clustered close together – like British cities – the Spanish and French urban systems are more dispersed. Physical differences between and within cities play a substantial role in determining how each country’s cities look and perform.

Third, policy decisions play a crucial role. Welfare policies (see Lehto, 2000), spatial strategies (Newman and Thornley, 1996), and central government investment decisions shape the urban system in every European country. Varying levels of devolution from the centre to regional and local government also affect cities’ economic, political and cultural roles (Green and Marshall, 2005).

Vive la différence

So what does three decades’ worth of research tell us? For starters, it puts paid to the popular myth of the ‘European city’ – a monolithic concept that has dominated British policymakers’ thinking for years. There is no one ‘European’ regeneration model, ‘European’ local government system, or ‘European’ spatial planning rules. Cities on the other side of the English Channel are more different than they are similar.

This means British policymakers need to avoid reductionist thinking when they look at ‘European’ cities – and especially when they consider whether policy transfer (see, for

example, Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996) is an option. Urban policies that work in a highly-devolved context, for example, may not suit cities used to central prescription. Rigorous assessment – not just ministerial enthusiasm – should be the key tool of would-be policy-importers.

How well are we doing?

So now we understand the context. But how are British cities actually performing against counterparts in Europe, and in the US? How are they doing on the key economic, social and environmental outcomes – output, employment, deprivation, quality of life?

Let’s pick just one – output. Even here, it is very hard to say for sure. Problems with collecting and comparing data cause all kinds of problems for urban researchers and policymakers.

This is partly a product of cities’ basic complexity. Cities are dynamic economic and social organisms, evolving over time and subject to a number of interacting, interlocking forces. It is often hard to understand these forces, let alone measure them. For example, many commentators argue that ‘innovation’ is a key driver of cities’ economic performance (Parkinson *et al*, 2004; Simmie 2004). But it is not at all easy to capture the different aspects of innovation as they relate to cities, or to quantify these in a satisfactory way (Gordon and McCann, 2005).

There are three other big problems with data on city performance, particularly in an international context. First, there is no agreement on the key indicators, and the key economic, social and environmental outcomes that cities should care about. Second, there are holes in many datasets. For example, output data for cities is often not available on a Purchasing Power Parity basis. Simply put, this means we are unable to control for differences in national exchange rates, making it almost impossible to compare the real performance of cities in different countries.

Third, there is no standard international definition of a city. This means that there is no standard set of city boundaries, making it very hard to compare like with like. The New York Metropolitan Standard Area (MSA),

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used to measure economic trends and indicators, covers the conurbation plus surrounding suburbs. In the UK, meanwhile, statistics for Birmingham cover only a single local authority – which is just a fraction of the wider city-regional economy. This ‘underboundedness’ in many British cities gives a distorted view of their true performance, and can make it look as if they are doing worse than they really are.

Apples and oranges

All of which plays havoc with attempts to quantify the relative performance of British cities. Michael Parkinson and colleagues’ research for ODPM – quoted earlier – is a case in point (Parkinson *et al*, 2004). The authors acknowledge the limitations of the data:

At the outset we add a series of health warnings ... only a limited amount of comparable city-level data is available on a trans-national basis.

The best available data they cite is from Barclays Bank. It suggests that compared with many European ‘competitors’, big British cities lag well behind. The best-performing urban economies are those of German cities like Frankfurt, Munich and Stuttgart (Table 1, above).

The Government and other key stakeholders have broadly accepted this analysis. It is duly reproduced in the monumental *State of*

the English Cities Report (ODPM, 2006b), and is cited repeatedly by Ministers. Take a closer look, however, and a number of problems appear. Several results are counterintuitive, to say the least. Can London really be the twenty-third most productive city in Europe? And how does the obscure German city of Karlsruhe come out ahead of Paris?

For starters, the numbers – which measure GDP per capita – are probably tracking the wrong thing. GDP is a poor indicator of international productivity, because taxes and benefits are included in the GDP measure, and the tax burden and generosity of the benefit system differ across countries. A better – and simpler – measure is Gross Value Added (GVA) – but this is not yet available on a pan-European basis. Measuring output *per head* – as opposed to output *per worker* – also risks distorting results in favour of smaller cities.⁴

More seriously, much of the recent comparative research does not compare like with like (Cheshire, 2005). Some studies compare single UK local authorities with wider city-regional and regional units in other countries. Others use NUTS3 units: though these are roughly equivalent to sub-regions, they are defined differently by government statisticians in each EU member state. This helps to explain why 13 of the top 20 cities in the Barclays sample are German.

Other commentators have highlighted the definition problem (Freeman, 2004).

Table 2. Growth in European cities: different views

City	Supplier 1	Supplier 2	Supplier 3
Frankfurt	69,000	78,000	44,000
Munich	76,000	47,000	41,000
Stuttgart	61,000	63,000	37,000
London	32,000	62,000	25,000
Birmingham	30,000	52,000	–
Manchester	28,000	48,000	–

Source: GLA Economics

Note: Output per employee, measured in Euros, 1995 constant prices

4. Smaller cities are often the location of high-value industry, but have fewer residents. Output per worker is a better measure of the value created within the city. For example, Karlsruhe is a small German city northwest of the regional capital Stuttgart (2005 population 283,000). According to the Barclays data it appears to outperform its much larger neighbour (population 590,000), as well as outgunning the French capital.

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Different data suppliers and statistical organisations tend to define cities in their own way, and produce dramatically different results. The recent EU Urban Audit (CEC, 2004) has attempted to set some common standards – but it’s still hard to compare EU cities and draw consistent conclusions. Depending on whom you talk to, in other words, big German cities are either doing much better than big British cities, a little better – or more or less the same (Table 2, above).

Getting the measure

So what do we know, and where do we go from here?

The stylised facts are these. Looking west, big American cities tend to perform strongly on economic measures. US ‘core cities’ like Boston or Washington DC – each with a population of about 600,000 – tend to have twice the number of jobs as an equivalent British city, and higher productivity rates. But American cities often do much worse than British cities on social cohesion, environmental measures, and quality of life. And in the States, ‘weak market cities’ (such as Buffalo, Cleveland, and Baltimore) are often very weak, with a combination of low output and earnings growth, low employment, population loss, poverty and race-driven differences in educational achievement and life chances (Katz, 2006).

Looking east, many – but not all – big European cities seem to have higher population growth, educational achievement, quality

of life and attractiveness to investors when compared to their UK counterparts (Parkinson *et al*, 2004). Remember that European countries are at different stages of the urbanisation process: cities in Spain are still gaining population; cities in Germany are experiencing suburbanisation, since the two countries are at different points in their respective economic cycles.

What about us? Well, there are tentative signs that British cities are doing better than we think.

Cities are the building blocks of national economies, and should have a greater share of measures like output and employment than the national average (which includes rural areas). Sure enough, on a simple output score, most UK urban areas heavily outperform the European and British average (Table 3, below). But even in this most basic, imperfect comparison, in 2001 three major UK conurbations – Liverpool, Sheffield and Tyneside – *underperformed* both the European and British average.

It is also possible to do some direct comparisons, despite limitations on the data. So far these suggest that some British cities are doing fine. GLA Economics’ World Cities programme is collecting robust, internationally-comparable economic data for a select group of UK, European and US cities (Freeman, 2004). Preliminary productivity results suggest that cities like Dublin, Stockholm and Helsinki tend to score consistently highly, while British cities like

Table 3. UK cities’ GVA per capita compared to EU and UK average, 2001

City	EU score	UK score	City	EU score	UK score
London*	166	242	Leeds	127	117
Edinburgh	162	154	Cardiff	122	111
Nottingham	155	144	Birmingham	114	106
Belfast	152	142	Liverpool	95	92
Glasgow	151	135	Sheffield	93	88
Bristol	140	133	Tyneside	92	87
Greater Manchester S	137	118			

Source: ONS

Note: EU 15, UK average = 100. Data refers to NUTS3 areas, and is workplace-based. *London data refers to Inner London NUTS2 area

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Manchester and Birmingham appear around the middle of the group.

Much of this feels intuitive. But it is not easy to prove these suggestions, and much more comparative work is required to see how American, British and European cities really stack up. The EU's *Urban Audit*, published in 2004, was an important attempt to give urban policy-makers a comparable Europe-wide data set (CEC, 2004). While the Audit is a major step forward, national differences mean that its results need to be treated with care. Further development work is required before we can confidently compare the economic performance of cities across national boundaries – much less between continents.

It is also important to think about ‘performance’ in the right way. We have picked a single measure to make a point. But in general, we should steer away from league table approaches and single indicators. The Government knows this, but has a tendency to revert to easy football metaphors: then-Communities Minister David Miliband repeatedly talked about moving British cities into the ‘European Champions’ League’.⁵

Successful cities should perform well across the board, with strong economies, viable communities, low levels of deprivation and a good quality of life. Good economic performance underpins all of this, but it is not all there is.

Where next?

So what does all this information tell us about ‘European cities’ – not to mention the prospects for lesson-drawing and policy transfer (Kleinman, 2002) from the Continent to the UK?

First, there is no such thing as a ‘European city’ or ‘European urban policies’ (or an ‘American city’, for that matter). The physical form, social cohesion and economic performance of cities are shaped largely by history and the interventions of national govern-

ments, rather than common ‘European’ characteristics. This means that British policy-makers will need to work harder if they are to understand the different types of European cities.

Second, UK policymakers need to break out of the simplistic ‘European cities good, British cities bad’ mentality. The data suggests that, despite their many challenges, some UK cities might not be underperforming their continental cousins as much as some studies suggest.

But it is hard to tell. Third, therefore, city leaders and Whitehall policymakers need more detailed local knowledge if they want to adapt continental ideas to the British urban context.

So, on our European policy holiday, what could we consider bringing home?

- *Metropolitan governance and spatial planning*: many cities on the continent use formal and informal institutions to ensure that planning and investment are consistent across the real geography of cities – rather than local authority districts alone (Kleinman, 2002). We should look at the positive and negative aspects of the *communautés urbaines* of Lyon and Lille, and the metropolitan authorities of Bologna and Brussels, for example, as the debate on city-regions in the UK continues to evolve (Marshall and Finch, 2006).
- *Leadership*: across the Continent, cities have mayors – some directly-elected, as in Rome, and others indirectly-elected (for example, Paris, Berlin). Regardless of the specific governance arrangements, strong executive leadership is visible in most big cities – a clear contrast to the UK.
- *Public transport and connectivity*: Par Berlin and Amsterdam – for example – are leaders in integrated, affordable, and reliable urban transport systems. Continental city mayors, together with regional governments, have a great deal more freedom to plan the strategic development of their transport networks. In

5. See for example Miliband (2006). By contrast, the Government's State of the English Cities Report takes care to present a range of data on economic, social, environmental and delivery performance.

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France, for example, the *versement transport* – a payroll tax collected and distributed by regional governments – has enabled large and small cities alike to build tram networks envied across the UK.

- *Public space and mixed-use development:* cities like Amsterdam, Berlin, Barcelona and Valencia show ways to combine good public spaces, high-density urban living and a wide range of other uses – in inner urban locations.
- *Innovation:* cities like Stuttgart and Helsinki have built up excellent local innovation systems, and have touted their offer to research-intensive businesses – unlike the UK’s more laissez-faire approach.

And what might some continental cities learn from their counterparts in the UK?

- *Cultural difference:* big UK cities have a strong track record of managing multiculturalism, and integrating people from racial and ethnic minorities. Following the recent ethnic riots in suburban France, the UK’s experience could be instructive.
- *Planning controls:* many UK cities have been successful in combating sprawl and large-scale suburbanisation through the use of planning controls, green belt restrictions, and so on. Some European cities – particularly in the fast-growing South and East – could learn from their experience.
- *Congestion charging:* London’s successful city-centre road pricing scheme is already being examined carefully by many other large cities – and may be the forerunner of schemes elsewhere in Europe.

These are all sites for further research. Not all of them will work out. Translating basic ideas from the continent into the UK policy context – and vice-versa – requires a lot more profound thinking. Where policy transfer has worked, it has taken account of historical differences, local political structures, the availability of information, and other key factors

(Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996). Sometimes, therefore, it will not be possible to copy success from elsewhere.

In order to grab the best ideas from European cities, British policymakers need to be better-informed – and better linked in to EU-wide networks and debates. Urban leaders on the continent are starting to get a feel for British and American cities – and are beginning to ‘cherry-pick’ important lessons, like Business Improvement Districts, to help them bolster their economic performance.

Conferences on cities and regions across Europe are littered with presenters from the UK and the US, suggesting that pan-European audiences have a strong appetite for Anglo-American urban ideas as well as continental ones. Yet a cursory glance at conference delegate lists usually shows little participation by UK cities and towns. Similarly, the European urban policy networks that do exist tend to be poorly attended by Brits. We need deeper networks, as well as more of them.

British decision-makers need to get to know Continental cities a lot better. That means deeper thinking, richer data – and a lot more policy tourism. Have a nice trip!

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