

# London Calling Brexit: the UK's capital is one of the most overlooked issues in the debate



*'London Calling Brexit' is a new series that will appear on the Brexit blog over the next few months. In this introductory post, the series editor, [Tim Oliver](#) (Loughborough University London), outlines why what Brexit means for London and what London means for Brexit is a central but overlooked issue for understanding Brexit. As he shows, with London as the UK's most distinct and important region, the way Brexit and London interact will have important implications for wider UK politics.*

It did not pass unnoticed that in the EU referendum of June 2016, the inhabitants of the UK's capital city voted to Remain (60% of Londoners who voted did so for Remain) while the UK as a whole (52% Leave), and the rest of England especially (55.4% overall, excluding London), voted for Leave. Nevertheless, in the debates and research that have followed, the focus has been on Scotland and Northern Ireland, with Wales and the rest of England (especially the topic of English nationalism) receiving some attention. Compared to other areas of England, London has not been entirely overlooked. But as so often in the study of UK politics, the focus has been on developments in the areas of London known as Whitehall, Westminster, and the City.

London is far more than Her Majesty's Government, the Westminster Parliament, or the City. As a political space London is distinct. Its 8.7 million inhabitants (a population larger than that of Scotland and Wales combined) are the most diverse of any UK region or nation. Non-white and non-UK citizens make up a larger proportion of London's population than anywhere else. London's economy towers over the rest of the UK. From 13 per cent of the UK's population, London generates about 23 per cent of UK GDP from which HM Treasury derives an equally large chunk of its tax receipts. Its economy is as diverse as its population, reflecting London's English, British, European and international links. London is more than the big banks of 'the City'. It is a global media, tourist, transport, IT, research, design and legal hub. The metropolis's urban geography means its needs and policies – in housing, transport, policing, energy, education, immigration, race relations, the environment, physical and mental health, welfare and so forth – are on a scale and sometimes very different to those of any other region in the UK. London's internationalism contrasts with the nationalist politics found in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and increasingly in other areas of England. The metropolis might lack the formal devolved powers found in parts of the UK such as Scotland, but the power of London comes instead from its sheer economic and demographic size, and the influence of the wealth of political institutions based there: UK government, the Court of St James, the Supreme Court and large legal community, the Mayor and GLA, 32 boroughs, most of the UK headquarters for UK media, business and civil society, and numerous universities and most of the UK's think tanks.



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While we should always be careful not to overplay the differences, London has regularly been accused of growing apart from the UK, or as the title of a BBC TV series presented by Evan Davies neatly captured it: [Mind the Gap: London v the Rest](#). While many have focused on the growing differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK, the capital city itself has become something of an undiscovered country hiding in plain sight. Brexit itself might have revealed this some more. In voting Remain, a majority of Londoners who voted registered a different political outlook to large swathes of the rest of the UK, and especially England. The Leave vote elsewhere in the UK could, to some extent, be explained not only as a backlash against a distant elite in Brussels, but against a capital city – whether in the form of the UK elite in Westminster or as a metropolis where large numbers of its citizens seem to win from globalisation – that has seemed increasingly privileged, distant and alien. That said, London retains strong British and English characteristics and traits. London is also a tale of two cities. 40 per cent of Londoners who voted in the referendum did so for Leave. The metropolis has some of the highest levels of inequality in the developed world. Not everyone in London wins from or feels comfortable with the current setup of Britain, Europe or the world. Furthermore, London's size can exaggerate its differences. Some other UK cities and towns are also very diverse places and also voted Remain.

Nevertheless, if only because of its size, what Brexit means for London and London means for Brexit matters. For example, if Brexit weakens London's economy – the UK's economic heart – then the ramifications would be felt across the country. If London's needs shape Brexit more than any other area of the UK, then it could reinforce frustrations and anger elsewhere in the UK that London always gets its way.

To better explore the topic of Brexit and London, over the next few weeks the 'London Calling Brexit' series will publish blog posts on a range of issues, each written by an expert in the field. The posts will explore such questions as—

1. What do Londoners think about Brexit and how does this fit with their views about the rest of the UK and London's own politics?
2. How do the rest of the UK, and especially the rest of England and areas that voted Leave, view London?
3. What might Brexit mean for the City of London?
4. What could Brexit mean for the rest of London's economy?
5. What has Brexit meant for London's place in debates about the UK's political economy and attempts to reshape it?
6. Is there a 'London bubble' and if so does it warp political and especially media views of the rest of the UK?
7. Has Brexit changed the way the rest of the EU view London?
8. What role is London – either proactively or as a consideration – playing in the Brexit negotiations?
9. What does Brexit mean for London's British and non-EU citizens?
10. What does Brexit mean for citizens from elsewhere in the EU living in London?
11. What does Brexit mean for London's young people?
12. What could Brexit mean for London's place in the UK state, its governance and constitutional order?
13. Will Brexit change the role London plays in Britain's international relations?
14. What do London's Leave and Remain campaigners think Brexit will mean for London?

Discussing London always draws complaints that London is already discussed too much. As this series will show, the way we discuss London can often be too narrowly focused. A broader discussion that looks at the whole of London helps reveal not only some of the key issues surrounding Brexit but also help understand the fuller implications of Brexit for UK politics.

*This article gives the views of the author, not the position of LSE Brexit or the London School of Economics.*

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