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Should parliament move out of London?

Faced with a £3bn repair bill, is the Palace of Westminster still the best place for MPs to meet?

Danny Dorling and Chris Mullin

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Is the sun going down on the Palace of Westminster's time as Britain's seat of power? Photograph: Alamy

Danny Dorling, professor of geography at Oxford University

A sensible time to debate moving parliament out of London is when you are faced with a £3bn repair bill to make the Palace of Westminster fit for purpose. [This is the speaker's estimate](#) and these are always underestimates. He suggests temporarily decanting from London. For a fraction of the cost, the palace could be turned into a permanent museum of democracy, rather than just looking like one. As Russell Brand noted: [“The whole joint is a deeply encoded temple](#)

[of hegemonic power.](#)” It should attract enough visitors and it already has the cafes and bars needed. The cost of the repairs could easily be met from the profits made by selling some prime Whitehall real estate that would no longer be needed when parliament moves out. The time to sell property in zone 1 is when London becomes the most expensive large city in the planet’s history, which is now. Downing Street would make a very nice boutique hotel. Of course, when relocating to another site in England, there is no need to reproduce the entire panoply of government in its current form. Not all ministries need to be clustered so closely around the law-makers, but they might make better laws if they did not need housing allowances and so many second jobs to survive in the capital. But where to move to?

Chris Mullin, writer and former Labour MP

Hmmm. The fact that Russell Brand has to be deployed so early in the discussion suggests the case for moving out of London is flimsier than I had supposed. All I will say at this stage is that the precedents are not encouraging. Louis XIV decided to move his capital out of Paris in 1682 and we all know how that ended. There is nothing absolute monarchs or life presidents like better than setting up new parliaments in capitals as far removed from the people as possible. Astana in Kazakhstan and Naypyidaw in Myanmar are recent examples that come to mind. For a glimpse of what the future might hold under, say, His Excellency the Life President Mr Russell Brand, I recommend a little video entitled [“Welcome to Myanmar’s empty capital city”](#). For those interested in the architectural possibilities, [I commend a glance at pictures of the new Astana](#). More relevant for our purposes, perhaps, is the insistence of the French on retaining the European parliament in Strasbourg. Every month a convoy of pantechicons sets out from Brussels carrying the paraphernalia

required to enable the Euro MPs to conduct their business in a soulless monstrosity 300 miles from the institutions they are supposed to be holding to account. Hundreds of Brussels-based officials and 750 Euro MPs follow in their wake. Is the European parliament any more loved than our own? I think not.

DD I had not realised that the UK parliament is that much loved, the one former MP who only claimed for a black-and-white TV licence on expenses excepted, Chris. There are many successful examples of the executive not sitting in the largest of cities. Among English-speaking nations the UK is a little odd. Consider the US (Washington DC), New Zealand (Wellington), Australia (Canberra), Canada (Ottawa). But how would the UK go about planning to move parliament out of London? The first thing it would have to do is budget to build a very fast train line so that MPs from London and the south-east of England could get to the new parliament quickly. Then they would have to plan further fast train routes down from Leeds, Sheffield and Nottingham to the new parliament building and across from Manchester and Liverpool. Oddly such a high-speed train plan exists, it is called HS2, and all the lines converge near a village called Water Orton, just east of Birmingham near where the new M6 toll road and the M42 join, which also just happens to lie very close to Birmingham airport. The sitting MPs would, of course, be far nearer the population centre of the UK, and there is some very affordable property for them and their families in nearby Small Heath, Yardley and Sparkhill, while those older members who are a little more minted from their London property swaps could easily afford Solihull. What's not to like about the Midlands?

CM Of course parliament doesn't need to be in the capital, but it does need to be alongside the principal institutions of government and, whether we like it or not, those are in London and (unlike the examples cited) they have been for 1,000 years or so. The primary purpose of parliament is to hold the government to account. That requires constant interaction between ministers, officials and elected representatives, which would not occur if parliament was based elsewhere. Although, for reasons we all know about, its present reputation is not high, the rise of select committees and other reforms in recent years have actually made parliament more, not less, effective. Moving it out of London is a recipe for creating a hollowed-out, ineffectual talking shop even more despised than at present. And don't let anyone suggest that such a move would be a cheap option. The cost of junking 1,000 years of heritage and starting again from scratch in Birmingham, Liverpool or Manchester would prove enormous. How long before our media is filled with stories of profligacy and waste, pouring scorn on the whole enterprise?

DD Parliament has moved about before, although the last time part of it came to Oxford, in 1644, it did leave a mess. I'm proposing that the principal institutions of government be moved with parliament. In 1086 the Domesday book revealed that England was split by a north/south divide. Moving parliament and its main institutions to sit on that divide might be part of what it takes to end it. The cost of HS2 is enormous, but we could reduce that bill by selling the government's prime London real estate. MPs would no longer need housing allowances. Civil servants would not need London-weighted salaries. Parliament would be nearer to the people. It could be cost-neutral, generate thousands of jobs, decentralise power and reduce pressure on the capital. If even the royal family can contemplate leaving Buckingham Palace, "turning it into a kind of grand official

centre for events, an art gallery and public use”, surely our elected representatives can be a little more imaginative about their palace and our government?

CM As you say, Danny, 1644 is not a good precedent. Let’s not go there. If you are serious about moving, not only parliament but the main institutions of government as well, to some unspecified brownfield site north of Watford, then we really are in cloud cuckoo land. Astana, here we come. If it is cost you are worried about, rest assured yours is far and away the most expensive option. Saving a few million on London salaries won’t begin to compensate. It is also massively disruptive and would make us an object of ridicule around the world. And what makes you think parliament would be “nearer the people”? There are more people in London than in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester added together. What’s more, the Palace of Westminster is readily accessible to citizens who want to see how our democracy functions. As for decentralising, that’s best done by returning powers to regional parliaments and local government. There may well be a case for moving out of the Palace of Westminster while essential repairs are undertaken, but there are other buildings within a stone’s throw – the Queen Elizabeth Centre, Methodist Central Hall, Church House – that might provide temporary alternatives, without uprooting the entire government. Such half-baked, populist nonsense should be left to Russell Brand and his playmates.