
off the fence

The recent *Times* article proposing a 'Brain Belt' between Oxford and Cambridge is behind the game and wide of the mark in identifying obstacles to visionary innovation, says David Lock

brain belt – nice idea, shame about the diagnosis



The Times has published an article by Simon Wolfson, the Chief Executive of Next, in which he floats the idea that the arc between Oxford and Cambridge could become Britain's version of Silicon Valley – or 'Brain Belt' as he calls it.¹

The article is interesting for several reasons. The first concerns the author. Simon Wolfson became Chief Executive of Next in 2001 at the age of 33, the youngest of any FTSE 100 company. He donated to David Cameron's 2005 leadership campaign and, according to *The Times*,² has given a further £238,000 to the Conservative Party since then. Simon became Baron Wolfson of Aspley Guise (near Milton Keynes) in June 2010. He is close to Chancellor George Osborne (having signed the business leaders' letter demanding the national deficit be cleared in one Parliamentary term), and co-chaired the party's Economic Competitiveness Review. So he's said to be influential.

The second reason concerns the subject matter. Readers of this journal may find the idea of a Silicon Valley for Britain to be stale buns. Professor Peter Hall has been writing about it for over 20 years, and it is well documented. It developed in the 'Western Corridor' (aka the 'M4 Corridor'), where, as was the case with the real thing in the USA, government research contracts were liberally dispensed to universities and institutions such as Aldermaston. Without public money such phenomena do not occur. Further, a second wave is well known to have begun to develop from there at various nodes in a crescent from Reading through Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cranfield, to Cambridge.

It is no reflection on Simon Wolfson that he doesn't seem to know any of this – after all, he has been running a chain of shops and co-chairing a committee on competitiveness for the Tories – but it is a reflection on the editors of *The Times*. Their geographical synapses must have been clogged up since the 1980s.

Third is the way in which the obstacles to the idea are addressed. It takes nasty pokes at planning.

'David Cameron asked me why Britain didn't have a Silicon Valley. Half joking, I replied that if the idea were mooted in Britain it would never get planning permission.' Ha Ha.

Later he says: 'Now you might be cynical about the ability of Whitehall to complete a big infrastructure project [his exciting futuristic vision is of a motorway around the arc] in timely fashion, and your scepticism would be well placed.' Hee hee. 'A chronic lack of urgency combined with painfully slow planning processes seem to affect our grand designs [a motorway?] more than most other countries.' Ho ho ho.

Then the old deceit: 'It took longer to get planning permission for Heathrow's fifth runway that it took to build Hong King's entire new airport, the man-made island upon which it is built, and the roads and rail network connecting to the city.'

'This sort of table talk about planning in England is common at the moment, and I'm fed up with smiling politely so as not to offend'

This sort of table talk about planning in England is common at the moment, and I'm fed up with smiling politely so as not to offend. The fact is that it is Tory politics at local and regional levels that have held back the blossoming of Britain's 'Brain Belt'. It is the Coalition that has now slashed away the regional and sub-regional planning forums in which it could even be discussed. It is the residents of places like Aspley Guise that have fought the expansion of Milton Keynes in the middle of the 'Brain Belt', after numerous public inquiries. And I believe the story about Hong Kong airport not only to be untrue as a matter of fact, but childish: Chinese methods of planning and implementation, of consultation and compulsory land acquisition, and of financing development are simply not relevant.

Fourth is the overlooking of the 'Oxford to Cambridge Arc' project, or 'O2C', which is rather embarrassing, as it is what Simon Wolfson now

outlines. Again, no reflection upon him, but upon *The Times*, for whom a most cursory web search would have thrown up the knowledge. Wikipedia notes:

'The Oxford to Cambridge (O2C) Arc initiative was launched in 2003 by three English regional development agencies (RDAs), EEDA, EMDA and SEEDA. The aim of the initiative is to promote and accelerate the development of the unique set of educational, research and business assets and activities that characterise the area and in doing so, create an 'arc' of innovation and entrepreneurial activity that would, in time, be 'best in the field'. Indeed, the supporting RDAs have stated that they wish to see the O2C Arc evolve into Europe's premier knowledge-based economy with aspirations to be world-leading.'

David Cameron's Government has abolished the three RDAs, and that, Baron Wolfson, should be the focus of your ire.

Last is Baron Wolfson's wonderful idea that to make all this happen, the Government could 'compulsorily purchase 10,000 acres of agricultural land (at double its market value) at a strategic point within the Brain Belt, say near Bedford or Bicester'. Not, you will note, anywhere near Milton Keynes, because that's too near Aspley Guise!

working at for nearly 20 years. It is the people using the planning system that have slowed things up, not the planning system per se, which is capable of stimulating growth and great creativity if used constructively instead of defensively. Realisation of the shared dream of O2C has been obstructed by Conservative constituencies, by NIMBYs of all political persuasions and none, by an acute shortage of public investment (for that is what it is – it *will* yield a return), and by weak strategic planning, now totally abolished.

Oh, and Wolfson's 'motorway' mostly now exists (there are inexcusable gaps around St Neots and between Milton and Bicester), but it does need a railway down the central reservation with stations at the major intersections. That's visionary. Go north or south from Perth in Western Australia and you'll see what I mean!

● **David Lock CBE** is Chair of planning and urban design consultancy David Lock Associates, and is a Vice-President and Trustee of the TCPA. The views expressed here are personal.

Notes

- 1 'Silicon Valley? Britain can have a Brain Belt'. *The Times*, 13 Apr. 2011
- 2 *The Times*, 20 Apr. 2011

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I like the way the Wolfson vision depends upon a great public sector intervention, although I fear it isn't very Tory of him when Mr Pickles has almost completely destroyed the capability of the public sector so to act. But, more than that, compensation for CPO'd land has long included hope value, thanks to some Lands Tribunal decisions. Simon Wolfson must learn that these days government needs to joint-venture with private landowners – which means sharing the risk as well as the upside.

So where does this take us? The Brain Belt is an excellent idea, and one that people have been