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Our future city

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As well as repairing the physical damage caused by last December’s storms, our ‘divided city’ should re-imagine itself and re-invest, writes Dr Stephen Gibbs, a senior lecturer in global leadership and chair of Carlisle Flood Action Group.
A multi-cultural mass of interlocking towns and cities where industrial capitalism was born. And it has had to renew itself still. A new spirit is re-energising the northern corridor; with small engineering firms successfully entering Indian and US markets after their management vision was refreshed by investment capital. Most of these bright businesses are woven into the profusion of universities across the region, and whose research groups act as catalysts and enterprise hubs. Mill towns have won awards for converting their factories to lecture rooms and providing state of the art laboratories that businesses can hire by the hour, keeping capital flowing in the business.

From the city of culture, Liverpool, to Manchester, the Northern Powerhouse, with its sacred temples to industrial capitalism, to Leeds, going at faster speeds, they are creating metropolitan spirits to rival London, shifting the centre of gravity politically. Don’t patronise the North with ideas of a Northern Powerhouse, says Huddersfield MP Barry Sheerman, in a Geldof moment; just give us the investment money now.

But what of Carlisle? What of Cumbria? Where does this city’s future lie? What does it want to be? Who do we, its people, wish to become? Some traditional provincial Cumbrian values bump into globalisation. Rampant expansion of the Middle Class in the North, and their desires, shaped by interlinked global supply chains, hanker after products with no country identity. The world’s barriers to markets have fallen away, but northern
Britain has its walls, socially and physically. At the end of my street is a massive one. Reminding us of who we were.

My grandfather worked for K Shoes before the last world war, and the death throes of this once dominant British industry led eventually to mother escaping to the women’s army via Carlisle Castle’s recruitment office, never to return. When I came back 20 years ago it was clear Cumbria is a stakeholder county. It works differently to other places as there is a stake in the region not found in the South East, that amorphous region which has little shared sense of its self, but has benefited from trade with the Continent, and from London’s overspill. Dormitory towns feed off the heaving metropolis. But this region and Carlisle also share a symbiotic relationship. Carlisle and Cumbria has the people, location and capability to attract major investment. The region and the Eden Valley are a vast space in which to reimagine Carlisle, Cumbria and the tentacle towns that link this epic area.

The finely balanced ecosystem of economy and natural landscape offer something unique. A central point in the British Isles to trade at low cost, with high social value.

For all its crassness and vacuity America does some things brilliantly well. It fixes business problems. It recovered, in its own indebted way, from the 2008 crash a long time ago. It rejigged taxes here, shifted communities to over there. It drove over the top of its barriers. It goes to work. It can create new towns out of the dirt. Why? It has business leaders and a service ethic second to none. Now, we don’t want this level of risk here. For one thing we have tried it before and we got burnt. And being European is infinitely preferable to free market America, as its social ills and education system testify. But we do need its scale of thinking. It thinks expansively and confidently about what might and should be. America is less a single nation at times than an idea and movement, undergirded by codified values that re-emerge in grassroots dialogue, acting as a drive-belt.

For Carlisle and Cumbria to reimagine itself its vision has to be global. A global region competing for businesses to relocate, invest and enjoy an ecologically advanced business ecosystem that is a model for Europe and the world. A low cost trading environment, a value society, based on cute objectives, offering community-based relationships that build social capital as well as shareholder value. An alternative society, attractive to new investors, that takes the lead in destroying the residue of industrial and patriarchal feudal capitalism. But not lacking in the animal spirits of creativity or competitiveness. Remember that when companies go head to head they can destroy both corporate and social value. Look at the simultaneous success and failure of supermarkets in the UK from a community perspective.

So the picture for Cumbrian growth is a complex one. Lazy simplism, the left or right debates, manufacture or services, have cost the UK economy so the time is to engage in the hard yards of dialogue and vision. Learning new language, new patience with hard realities, dragging parties into the room, maybe kicking and screaming.
Unlearning as well as learning. Attacking the icons of ‘how we have always done things’. Learning that being the practical ‘just do it’ selves has to be balanced with the subtle and attentive. Acknowledging the issues are multifarious, and that extended dialogue, into the dark corners is where mature leadership really is, and charisma and heroics are probably better left for the movies. For example the reason London boomed centuries ago was simple. Transport. Business loves access. We live in a global economy where capital flies at the speed of light, and hates barriers. Where once canals and trains moved wool from London to Manchester, and merchants took a slice, fibre optics transfer monies, ignoring country barriers. We are a global village. If Cumbria, and its key hubs, wish to keep pace with the other economies it has to revisit all barriers, social, physical and consider its glocal (sorry for the jargon) potential. The insurance industry, or more so the insurance premium payer, will invest £1 billion to £2 billion in the region as a result of floods, the government a few million. The ultimate false economy. Piecemeal investment passes the problem down the line. The wall at the end of my street needs to come down. My friends are beyond that wall, and I find it madness. But the bigger barriers are political and spiritual. I propose we do not just repair, we Reimagine : Reinvest : Regenerate. But this needs a concentration of effort, a shaking of the pillars of institutions locally as well as in Westminster.

The finely balanced ecosystem of the past, with its river keepers, who cleared the weeds, allowed the water to flow, and the artisans who read the seasons, husbanded the land around communities and worked in harmony with it, plus were shaped by it, never recovered from the power of the corporation and the rush to urban dwelling, with its barriers. Adam Smith never imagined monopolies and institutions having such power, restricting the ecology of markets.

Dr Stephen Gibbs is Chair of Carlisle Flood Action Group, and also a Senior Lecturer in global leadership and change at The Business School at The University of Huddersfield.

‘Carlisle was, and partly still is, of course, a walled city. As some of these outer defences fell into disrepair, new barriers appeared’: Dr Stephen Gibbs photographed off Warwick Road for Carlisle Living