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Cities of the West are a bulwark against right-wing Nationalism, experts say



In London Mayor Sadiq Khan's Britain, anti-immigrant sentiment and the campaigning of far-right populist politicians led in part to the country's June vote for a Brexit, or quitting the European Union. (Leon Neal/Getty Images)

By Ishaan Tharoor

Toward the end of October, Sadiq Khan, the first Muslim mayor of London, addressed an event that commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street, a famous street protest in the British capital that saw an alliance of local Jewish residents, Irish dockworkers, and other laborers and leftists thwart a planned fascist march.

The clashes at Cable Street, which took place at a time when Nazism was on the rise, are remembered as a historic turning point in Britain's fight against the

politics of division and hate, a powerful moment when people from disparate communities defended their city and found strength together.

“This story of solidarity and social integration has inspired many people over the last 80 years and should continue to inspire us now,” Khan said. “London today is more diverse than ever before and on the whole is a shining example of how people from different backgrounds can live side-by-side.”

But his remarks were delivered under a cloud. In many countries in the West, the agenda of ultranationalists seems to be outpacing those of politicians such as Khan, who represent vast, multicultural cities.

The modern-day inheritors of the legacy of 1930s fascism — what the heroes of Cable Street rose up against — are in the ascendancy. In Austria, a presidential candidate from a party founded by former Nazis stands on the brink of victory in elections in early December. In France, Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front, a party long associated with neo-fascism, is a key player in presidential elections next year. In the United States, the roots of Donald Trump’s appeal stretch back to the 19th-century Know Nothings, but his shocking triumph has been cheered by fringe neo-Nazis as well as the Ku Klux Klan.

In Khan’s Britain, anti-immigrant sentiment and the campaigning of far-right populist politicians led in part to the country’s June vote for a Brexit, or quitting the European Union. The stunning electoral verdict was framed by analysts as a rejection of cosmopolitan elites.

“There are people in New York that feel closer to people in London and in Berlin than they do to people in Kansas and in Colorado,” Stephen K. Bannon, the ideologue tapped to counsel Trump in the White House, grumbled at a meeting with European conservatives two years ago. “And they have more of this elite mentality that they’re going to dictate to everybody how the world’s going to be run.”

Trump’s campaign harped on the supposed evil of “globalism,” rhetoric that helped win him the support of disaffected rural white voters. The detached liberals of the big cities were going to get their comeuppance.

Watching the U.S. election from afar, Le Pen’s chief strategist, Florian Philippot, chortled on Twitter: “Their world is crumbling. Ours is just being built.”

But “their” world — that of multiculturalism and the metropolis — isn’t quite crumbling. In the United States, a host of mayors from major cities have signaled their willingness to push back against the proposed policies of the president-elect, including Trump’s stated intent to round up and deport millions of undocumented migrants.

Bill de Blasio, the mayor of New York, has insisted that municipal authorities will refuse to cooperate should the federal government under Trump seek to obtain information on undocumented people listed on city databases.

“We are not going to sacrifice a half-million people who live among us,” de Blasio said. “We’re not going to tear families apart. We will do everything we know how to do to resist that.”

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti made similar statements.

It’s not just on issues of deportations where cities and the Trump administration may clash. If a conservative Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, cities can defend the abortion rights of their residents. And in the face of policy paralysis on a national level, cities are pushing through larger progressive reforms: Seattle recently approved an ordinance for a \$15-an-hour minimum wage, which is more than double the federally mandated figure; local politicians, including former New York mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, are leading the political fight on climate change even as climate-change skeptics enter the White House.

No matter the ascension of a certain brand of nationalist politics, the reality in much of the West is that countries are becoming both more urban and more diverse. Cities aren't just bastions of jet-setting Davos men: They are home to the fullest range of a nation's diversity. The politicians at the helms of cities such as New York or London have to act on a set of concerns — be it addressing income inequity, reckoning with housing shortages or defending inclusive societies — that echo across borders.

“Increasingly, nation-states look parochial and backward, and cities are actually cosmopolitan and much more broad in their understanding,” Benjamin Barber, one of the premier theorists of the global city and author of “If Mayors Ruled the World,” told WorldViews.

Everywhere, cities are the engines of the economy — worldwide, they contribute about 80 percent of global gross domestic product. More than 80 percent of the American population lives in urban areas. And the populations in medium-to-large cities overwhelmingly tend to vote against the platforms of right-wing populists. Yet because of the nature of federal elections — including the weighted system of the Electoral College — the agenda of cities can get sidelined by right-wing populism.

“There’s a fundamental asymmetry between what cities represent and what they are able to accomplish politically,” Barber said.

But if reactionary national politics puts the progress of a city at risk, then there’s the chance we’ll see more resistance from mayors. Citing powers already afforded to mayors in the United States, Khan has sought more authority in the wake of the Brexit vote, which he thinks jeopardizes London’s economic future.

That includes greater control over tax revenue. **“London’s population is the same size as Wales and Scotland combined, but we have far less control over how our capital is run,”** Khan said in September.

Barber points to the growing clout of a number of forums in which municipal authorities are coordinating on a global scale. This includes the C40 Group of cities mobilizing around climate change, chaired by Parisian Mayor Anne Hidalgo, as well as the Global Parliament of Mayors, a body Barber helped found that seeks to be something similar to a United Nations of cities.

Globalization has its crises, but Barber insists that the desire of ultranationalists such as Trump to throw up walls and hide behind borders flies in the face of the forces shaping an interconnected world.

“These reactionaries,” Barber said, “are the last wave in a series of political attempts to pretend that sovereign states still work.” The nation-state isn’t about to disappear, he cautioned. But Barber envisions a future where there will be a “rebalancing of the relationship” between nations and cities that will enable greater local governance.

“The right-wing nationalism of the Trumps,” Barber said, “will become not so much toxic obstacles to history, but an increasingly obsolete expression.”