

Do the Benefits of the London Olympics Justify the Costs of £9.3 Billion?

The Benefits and Costs of The Olympics

The most acerbically enjoyable view of the London 2012 Olympics has come from the Robin Lane Fox, gardening correspondent for the Financial Times ('The real team GB', Financial Times, House and Home section, August 4 and 5, 2012, p. 10). He dedicated his piece to the allotment holders whose cherished allotments have been destroyed by the Olympic park, and to the thousands of friends of Greenwich Park who have seen it ruined in order to create an equestrian obstacle course. He addresses what has been foregone as follows:

"The total Olympian cost of £9.3 billion could build at least 30 new hospitals or nearly 500 schools or fund three universities in perpetuity with endowments as big as Oxford."

He also took aim at the opening ceremony:

"Why was there not a hint of Charles Darwin, the British mastermind who changed the world?"

And missing also were: the British geniuses who have changed many trillions of lives – Marie Stopes and her birth control, Fleming and penicillin, Crick and Watson and their DNA and Cicely Watson and her vision of proper pain control and a dignified hospice in which to die.

If economists had been asked to advise on the benefits and costs of the bid before proceeding (and they were not..), they would probably have estimated the willingness to pay by the British public for the Olympic experience; if these substantially exceeded the costs, then they would have approved. But the outcome would depend very much on how the choice was posed. Context is crucial: If what is foregone – the opportunity costs as outlined by Lane Fox – were presented as part of the question, the outcome would be much less favourable than if the choice was presented in isolation. But there are other considerations. The games give us insight into the evolution of national characteristics and culture.

A true but incomplete image of Englishness comes from George Orwell:

"The English have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic world view. What endures is the addiction to hobbies and spare time occupations, the privateness of English life. We are a nation of flower lovers, but also a

nation of stamp collectors, pigeon fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon snipers, darts players, crossword puzzle fans.”

The Olympics widens the view to include a ferocious competitiveness and professionalism, especially in cycling and sailing, but it also engenders a sense of sharing and community. A character in one of Ibsen’s plays observes

“A community is like a ship; everyone ought to be prepared to take the helm”

– for these two weeks, the riots of yesteryear are forgotten – London is like Ibsen’s ship.

And of course China’s talents continue to surprise and impress. Chinese journalist and personality Hung Huang observed:

“We want people to really acknowledge our accomplishments. But by nature, the Chinese are conspiratorial. They don’t like to show their cards. They want to keep something hidden.”

The Olympics are the perfect antidote to this combination of need for acknowledgement and what in Ireland we call cute hoorism – Chinese talents in diving and many other fields that were hidden are given full acknowledgement on a world stage.

Acting and Olympic sports are two platforms where women are given (almost) full parity of esteem with men. Annalise Murphy (sailing) and Katie Taylor (boxing) are Irish Olympic stars in a country where women’s accomplishments in Gaelic games, rugby and otherwise are hardly acknowledged.

Finally, the Olympics creates a sort of inclusiveness, a place where the extraordinary achievements of countries and people that are often ignored – Kazakhstani wrestlers and the fastest man in the world from Jamaica (Usain Bolt) – are at the centre of the world’s stage.

So do the benefits exceed the costs?

Not for Robin Lane Fox, or the (former) allotment holders in what is now Olympic park, and not for all of those who seek refuge in Lyric Radio and other sports free zones for the duration. But for the rest of us, the calculus works, especially since the UK bears most of the costs, and the rest of us garner the benefits.