

Prospect

Revelatory Games

By Paul W. Bledsoe
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The London Olympic Games were a revelation. Who knew that the British could be such splendid, inspirational athletes? Or even more astoundingly, that the average Briton, when he or she chooses to, could be overwhelmingly friendly—and even happy?

While American myself, I am married to an Englishwoman, and so I have seen inklings of these capacities among her tribe before. But only the confluence of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics could have brought about such a widespread miracle of enthusiasm across this nation.

London is perhaps the most multicultural city in the world. Walking even in previous years in Covent Garden, say, or along the south bank of the Thames, one routinely encountered a dizzying multitude of languages found in no other place on the planet. With the end of the empire largely accomplished, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of cheap air travel, and as learning English has become a critical advantage in the global economy, London has, despite its problems, become the World City. So it seems fitting that after four years of difficult economic times, the world came here to celebrate the young, strong and purposeful. And after a long period of whingeing, the majority of Great Britain embraced the celebration.

This may explain why Mitt Romney's criticism of the organisational competence of the London Games was greeted with such condemnation. It seemed petty, and conspicuously out of step with the sudden wave of Anglo-ardour. David Cameron dryly noted that perhaps it was a bit easier to put on games "in the middle of nowhere," a thinly veiled-reference to Romney's role in the Salt Lake City Winter Games of 2002. Not to be outdone, Boris Johnson led chants lampooning Romney at a rally of 60,000 in Hyde Park.

Many Brits had a similar reaction to Romney's remark. An English friend commented: "We demonstrated a few organisational abilities running the empire and fighting the second world war." Quite right.

Of course a good many of the British athletes are originally from elsewhere, like the engaging Somali-born 10,000 metre champion Mo Farah, who after claiming gold said “if it hadn’t been for the crowd I don’t think I’d have won that race.” Some, like Jessica Ennis, the heptathlon champion, have one parent from a former colony—her father is from Jamaica. And even Americans are being embraced. Will Claye, a US long-jumper, enthused: “I’m not from this country—but they made me feel like I am.”

Forgotten, seemingly, is the fierce British anti-immigrant strain, which was so pronounced just five years ago when a more than half a million Poles and other eastern Europeans finally had just enough money and freedom to come to London. After flirting for a few years with nativist rhetoric and policies, Cameron has toned it down, perhaps in part because many eastern European visitors left after feeling unwanted. Indeed, Cameron called London the world’s “most diverse” city.

So now all is forgiveness and forbearance. But Britain’s role as a former imperial power is still seen here as both a responsibility and special privilege. Many Brits feel deep kinship and a sense of shared history with peoples around the globe who gathered for the Games—Indians, Caribbean peoples, West and East Africans, Americans and dozens more. During the Games, the 50th anniversary of Jamaican independence was widely celebrated by the hundreds of thousands of émigrés from Jamaica who are now proud British citizens. Usain Bolt’s stunning repeat wins in the 100 and 200 metres added indescribable delight to these festivities. Such events can never repair the injury of the slave trade and the worst of the empire, but they can bring countries together now.

The 19th-century historian Thomas Macaulay declared that the end of British rule in India would be “the proudest day in English history” provided that Britain left behind its language and the “imperishable empire of our arts and morals, our literature and our laws.” In effect, Macaulay was describing what is now called “soft power.”

That is a British empire made to last, and one that has perhaps finally found its mature place in the world during these Games. It is a lesson American leaders, as we manage the evolution of our own type of empire, would do well to remember.