

Keeping the Torch Burning: The missing chapter - Protest and dissent at the London 2012 Olympics

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Introduction

Before the London 2012 Olympic Games started, the Guardian published my book: "Keeping the Torch Burning: Terror, Protest and the Games". It is an alternative history of the Olympic Games, one that focuses on the social and political events that have defined each competition. From a protest at the exclusion of women from the very first modern Olympiad in 1896, through the Black Power Salute, Munich terrorist attack, cold war boycotts and the Atlanta bombing, the book looks at 20th & 21st century history through the prism of the Olympics. It is based on [a series of blog posts I wrote in 2008](#), supplemented with contemporary reporting from the Guardian & Observer archives.



Of course, one vital chapter was missing - the chapter about the politics and dissent that took place at the 2012 London Games themselves. So here it is...

Opening ceremony

“Last night’s Olympic opening ceremony was stunning. A glorious jumble of references and spectacles, mixing globally-popular elements with winking in-jokes for the British viewers. It spoke in enormous mile-high symbols of our history and life – not just in the bombast and belligerence of Bond and the Queen arriving by parachute, but also in the careful choice of the Brookside lesbian kiss and the Tardis noise materialising during Bohemian Rhapsody. These are huge chunks of culture, full of their own meaning and carrying their own symbolism; forging them into an event that had its own identity and was not overwhelmed by its parts is an incredible achievement. Danny Boyle should be proud.” - [Mary Hamilton](#)

Danny Boyle’s opening ceremony was broadly well received in Britain and abroad, if perhaps a little puzzling to those without strong ties to the UK or British culture. There was certainly a political element to it, with the very public championing of movements like the [Suffragettes](#) and [Jarrow Marchers](#), and a tribute to the NHS.

[Alex Wolff](#) wrote for [SportsIllustrated.com](#) that:

“Artistic director Danny Boyle smuggled into the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics a worthy and important thing. He gave us a chance to celebrate protest and dissent. Four years ago the rest of the world had a moment of collective sadness for the London organizers. No way could the staggers of the next Olympics possibly equal Beijing’s lid-lifting spectacle. But tonight we learned that if the guy in front of you zigs, it’s best to zag. Boyle spent almost four times less money and deployed roughly one-tenth as many people. But he outstripped the previous Olympic host city by flaunting what the Chinese actively suppressed.”

Not everybody was impressed. Conservative MP Aidan Burley [tweeted](#):

“The most leftie opening ceremony I have ever seen – more than Beijing, the capital of a communist state! Welfare tribute next?”

He followed that up [with](#):

“Thank God the athletes have arrived! Now we can move on from leftie multicultural crap. Bring back red arrows, Shakespeare and the Stones!”

Toby Young leapt to his defence on Twitter, [saying](#) “I think Aidan Burley’s account may have been hacked”, which only served to underline how damaging the message Aidan was sending was. [As Nicholas Watt put it in the Guardian](#):

“The tweets will be toxic for the prime minister who has been praised for his handling of the preparations of the Olympics. Burley’s outburst will fuel suspicions that some members of the Conservative party have unreconstructed views which fail to recognise the pivotal contribution to society made by black and minority ethnic Britons.”

Aidan Burley is no stranger to controversy. In 2011 he was sacked as a parliamentary private secretary after he was caught on film attending a Nazi-themed stag party complete with Nazi-style salutes and a toast to “the ideology of the Third Reich.”

Burley argued [his tweet had been misunderstood](#), stating in a BBC interview that “I wasn't having a go at multiculturalism itself, I was having a go at the rather trite way, frankly, it was represented in the opening ceremony...we had all these rappers – that is what got me to the point about multiculturalism. Is that what we are most proud of culturally?”

[Brendan O'Neill wrote for the Telegraph](#) about the irony of criticism of Burley:

“The ceremony celebrated the openness and diversity of modern Britain and has been hailed as a wonderful spectacle of ‘inclusion’. Yet it seems our celebration of diversity does not extend to allowing any criticism of the ceremony itself; our inclusiveness does not mean we will include dissenting views on Danny Boyle’s vision of the New Britain. When it comes to the opening ceremony, you must conform and celebrate, or risk being cast out (of polite society).”

Writing for the Mail Online, Rick Dewsbury also took issue with the opening ceremony, particularly the portrayal of a happy family of mixed racial origins. In a paragraph that was [subsequently excised from the article](#), before the piece was removed from the web altogether, Dewsbury wrote:

“But it was the absurdly unrealistic scene...showing a mixed-race middle-class family in a detached new-build suburban home, which was most symptomatic of the politically correct agenda in modern Britain. This was supposed to be a representation of modern life in England but it is likely to be a challenge for the organisers to find an educated white middle-aged mother and black father living together with a happy family in such a set-up.”

Later in the Games, after Jessica Ennis had taken the gold medal in the Heptathlon, an image circulated on the internet, contrasting Dewsbury’s assertion with the family background of Ennis.



This image circulated widely on the internet after Jessica Ennis won gold for Great Britain

[International viewers had some other issues](#) with Boyle's take on British history. Ranga Mberi tweeted from Zimbabwe: “#OpeningCeremony segment supposedly showing the people who built modern Britain. But I don't see many immigrants. OK Britain, we see you flaunting your history. Where's the bit in which you invade, loot, kill and plunder?”

Television coverage

Criticism of NBC

NBC's television coverage in the US came under considerable fire. In an "always on" connected world, they continued to opt for showing the Games on television "as live" on a delayed feed in the evening, to maximise prime time audiences and advertising revenue. This was roundly criticised in new media circles, not least for a decision not to show the men's 100 metres final live. Megan Garber for The Atlantic put [the culture clash into some perspective](#):

"There are, actually, two versions of the Games this year. There are the events as we see them on TV, highly produced and heavily narrative and ad-filled and time-delayed; and then there are the events as they play out online, through live blogs and live tweets and athletes' [Instagrams](#) and [full, nearly real-time recaps](#). These two versions of the Olympics are the same thing only in the sense that, say, quiche and custard are the same: They take the same basic ingredient and, through cooking them differently, create two completely separate products."

[NBC researchers claimed](#) that knowing the results in advance increased the number of people watching the delayed broadcasts. The AP reported that:

"NBC chief researcher Alan Wurtzel says that two-thirds of people who said they knew the results ahead of NBC's tape-delayed telecast said they would watch the events anyway. People who watched the events earlier in the day via computer stream watched the tape-delayed broadcast for a longer time than those who hadn't."

Of the delay to showing the opening ceremony, NBC themselves said:

"We are live streaming every sporting event, all 32 sports and all 302 medals ... The opening and closing ceremonies, however, are entertainment spectacles. Our award-winning production team will present them on a medium that best demonstrates their grandeur and majesty, and at a time when friends and family are able to gather together to watch, which is in primetime."

The delayed showing of the opening ceremony [still generated 5 million social media mentions](#) when it was played in the US, making it, according to one source, the third biggest entertainment event in social media history. Although, presumably, if you counted the mentions during the actual live event, that figure would be a lot larger.

Figures showed that despite the complaints of the vocal minority, NBC's approach was reaping commercial rewards. [The Financial Times reported](#) that the company "should break even on its coverage of the London Olympics, thanks to better than expected viewership and ad sales" after predicting a \$200m revenue shortfall. This would be a significant financial improvement on the economics of broadcasting the previous couple of Olympic Games in the US.

Removing the 7/7 tribute

NBC also attracted criticism for a decision not to broadcast the opening ceremony's inclusion of a tribute to victims of the 7/7 bombings in London and other loved ones who could not be there. Instead, NBC showed an interview with Olympian Michael Phelps, conducted by American Idol's Ryan Seacrest. One could only imagine the furore if the BBC had decided to opt out of a tribute to 9/11 victims that was part of any US hosted Olympic ceremony.

Twitter ban for UK journalist

The curious incident of the silenced British journalist, Guy Adams, also involved the broadcaster. LA correspondent for The Independent, Adams had his Twitter account suspended, apparently for criticising NBC's coverage of the Games. The tweet that seemed to have got Adams into hot water posted an email address of an NBC executive, urging people to complain to him about Olympic coverage.

[The Independent carried this account](#) of the exchange of emails between Adams and Twitter:

"Your account has been suspended for posting an individual's private information such as private email address, physical address, telephone number, or financial documents,' the company informed Mr Adams. 'It is a violation of the Twitter Rules.'

In response, Mr Adams wrote: 'I didn't publish a private email address, just a corporate one, which is widely available to anyone with access to Google and is identical to one that all of the tens of thousands of NBC Universal employees share. It's no more 'private' than the address I'm emailing you from right now.

'Either way, [it's] quite worrying that NBC, whose parent company is an Olympic sponsor, is apparently trying (and, in this case, succeeding) in shutting down the Twitter accounts of journalists who are critical of their Olympic coverage.'"

[Dan Gillmor wrote for the Guardian website](#) suggesting this could be a defining moment for Twitter:

"Once again, we're reminded of a maxim when it comes to publishing on other people's platforms: we publish at their sufferance. But there's a corollary: When they take down what we publish, they take an enormous risk with their own futures."

Criticism of the BBC

In the host nation, television [coverage was also criticised](#). In particular the coverage of the men's cycling road race attracted complaints for having on-screen graphics explaining the split times so vital to understanding the progress of the race. [The BBC defended their coverage](#), firmly handing any blame over to OBS who produced it. The BBC man in charge, Roger Mosey, himself [tweeted](#): "On road cycling, the BBC team shares the frustration about lack of graphics/info from the organisers."

[Brid-Aine Parnell reported for IT website The Register](#) that ultimately telecoms network O2 were to blame - as the GPS units on the athletes bikes were unable to get a signal out to organisers, because the data network was saturated by spectators using their smartphones. Presumably mostly using them to try and find out what the elusive timings were.



Roger Mosey
@rogermosey

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On road cycling, the BBC team shares the frustration about lack of graphics/info from the organisers. But exciting finish ahead.

[#BBC2012](#)

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite

108

RETWEETS

3

FAVORITES



3:09 PM - 28 Jul 12 via web · [Embed this Tweet](#)

Protests and disruption

Critical Mass of cyclists

On the opening night of the Games, London's regular pro-cycling Critical Mass event was targeted by the police as the cyclists themselves targeted the Olympics. The police claimed that the group breached the regulations for the event. [Alexandra Topping reported for the Guardian](#) that Critical Mass had made this statement on their website in advance of the ride:

"Most London cyclists will know about the regular monthly Critical Mass ride this evening. Many will also know that the police seem concerned about it, because of all the Olympic traffic. It might be assumed that, as usual, the mood of Critical Mass will be to peacefully assert the right of cyclists to travel safely wherever they want in London. But in case the police – who normally leave Critical Mass alone – were to decide to intervene this month, it would be good to have lots of people prepared to be peacefully assertive."

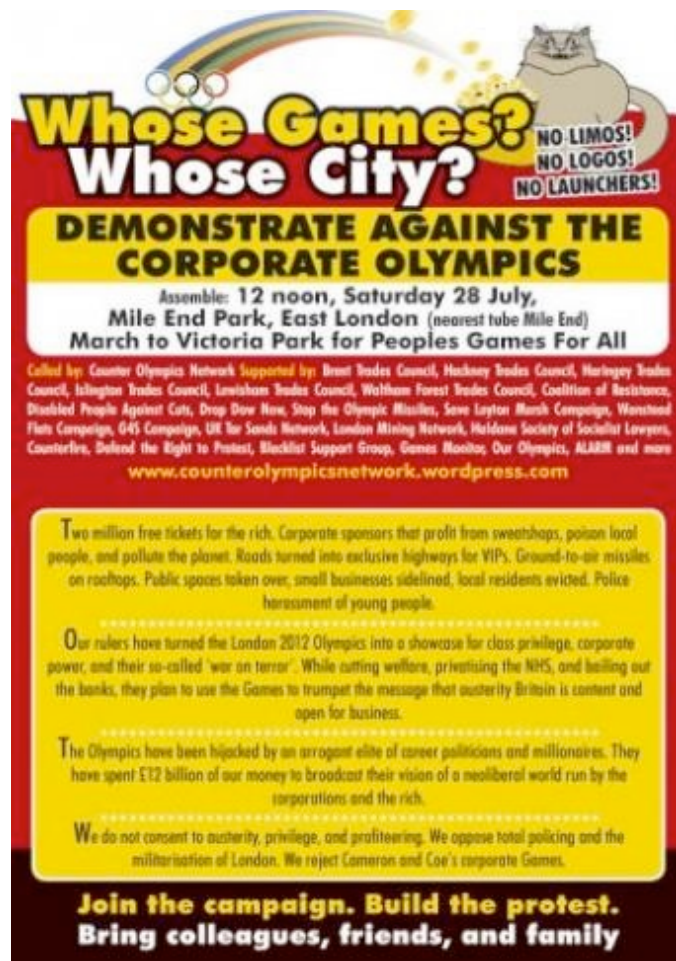
The BBC stated that [over 130 of the cyclists were arrested](#), and [the Guardian put the number at 181](#). These included Malaysian Aedewan Adnan who had cycled over 9,000 miles from India to be at the Games, raising funds for the Malaysian Olympic team and for charity. [The Guardian quoted Adnan's account of events](#):

"At 7pm, we left Waterloo Bridge, we just followed wherever the group went. Towards the end of the ride, we ended up at Stratford. Me and my cousin thought it would be okay as he lives near Barking and it is not far from Stratford. Me and my cousin didn't know what was going on ... there was word going around that we would be arrested for protesting against the Olympics. I told [the police] I was a tourist and I'd cycled to London for the Olympics. I guess that must have had an impact as I was released without any conditions."

Other cyclists had bail conditions applied to them that prevented them attending Olympics tickets for which they had previously obtained tickets.

Corporate Olympics protest march

On the first day of Olympic competition, a march against the "Corporate Olympics" was [held in London](#). It was attended by between 400 and 1,000 people - depending on whether you trust figures from the police or the organisers.



The Counter Olympics Network, who co-ordinated it in association with 35 other organisations, [described the protest as](#):

“An event which symbolically ‘reclaims’ the Games, a party to which everyone is invited. It will present a truer and more optimistic vision of Britain than the officially promoted one of a militarised and austerity ridden country that is content to be hijacked by millionaire politicians and their corporate friends.”

Tamil hunger strike

On 31 July the London Evening Standard reported a protest near the Olympic park in support of the Tamil population. [Shekhar Bhatia wrote](#):

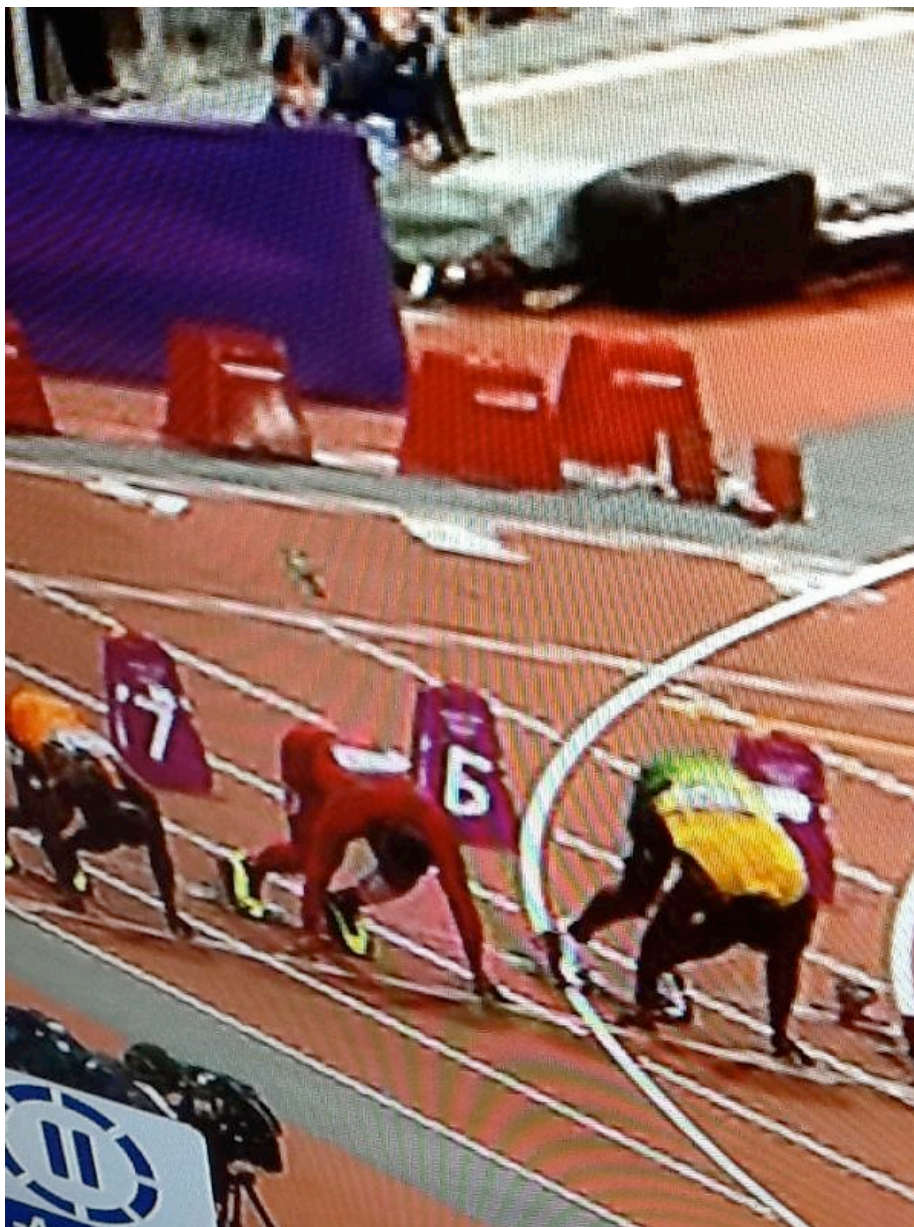
“Scotland Yard was today monitoring a protest by Tamil activists close to the Olympic park where a demonstrator is staging a hunger strike.

Gobi Sivanthan, 31, has a tent in Burford Road near the Olympic Stadium and has refused food for nine days. He plans to fast until the Olympics are over in protest against Sri Lanka’s participation, claiming the country should be banned for war crimes against Tamils in its long civil war.

About 200 Tamils were dispersed after trying to gather close to the park on hearing rumours that the Sri Lankan president was there.”

Disorder in the stadium

In what wasn't a protest, but more an act of drunken delinquency, someone from the crowd threw a bottle onto the track just as the men were getting into position to start the showpiece 100m final. The moment was [screen captured by Jon Gripton](#).



A bottle lands on the Olympic track prior to the men's 100m final

Dutch bronze medal winning judoka Edith Bosch [tweeted that](#) "Een dronken gast voor mij gooit een flesje op de baan!! IK HEB HEM GESLAGEN.... Ongelofelijk!!" - which roughly translates as "a drunken spectator just threw a bottle at the track!! I HAVE BEATEN HIM".

[In interviews afterwards she said:](#)

"There was a lot of commotion. I was just there to watch a fantastic event. I'm an athlete and a person who loves sports. Somebody came around who was having behaviour problems and was disrespectful in a big way. I did what any other person would have done and corrected it. I said 'Man, you're crazy. What are you doing?'

It's because we are here for Olympic heroes, people performing on the highest level and we have to honour them and not disrespect them. The other 80,000 people were cheering for the athletes and that's the most important thing. The worst thing is that due to all the commotion and this guy I missed out on the 100m. I could ask Usain Bolt to run it again but I don't think he's going to do that."

Athlete Justin Gatlin, controversial bronze medal winner in 2012 despite previously serving two drugs misuse related suspensions, said he had noticed it. "I didn't know what it was, but when you're in those blocks and the whole stadium's quiet you can hear a pin drop."

Police arrested Ashley Gill-Webb in the stadium on "suspicion of causing a public nuisance", and he was charged the following day.

Protest on the pitch

Park Jong-woo of the South Korean men's football team was forbidden from collecting his bronze medal after holding up a political sign in a semi-final match-up with Japan. The sign alluded to a territorial dispute between the two nations.

Racism at the Games

Racism on Twitter

Before the Games even started, [Greek triple jumper Voula Papachristou was expelled from the national team](#) after making a racist remark on Twitter. After the reported appearance of Nile-virus-carrying mosquitoes in Athens, she tweeted: “With so many Africans in Greece, at least the mosquitoes of West Nile will eat homemade food.”

She issued the following apology:

“I would like to express my heartfelt apologies for the unfortunate and tasteless joke I published on my personal Twitter account. I am very sorry and ashamed for the negative responses I triggered, since I never wanted to offend anyone, or to encroach human rights. My dream is connected to the Olympic Games and I could not possibly participate if I did not respect their values. Therefore, I could never believe in discrimination between human beings and races. I would like to apologise to all my friends and fellow athletes, who I may have insulted or shamed, the National Team, as well as the people and companies who support my athletic career. Finally, I would like to apologize to my coach and my family.”

The Greeks were also on the receiving end of a Twitter controversy. [German Olympic flag bearer Natascha Keller appeared to tweet](#): “The Olympic Village is filled with barefoot Greek athletes. As soon as we see them we are afraid that they will ask us for loans.” The German National Olympic Committee immediately dismissed it as “cowardly fake”, and the athlete appeared to close all of her social media presence.

Swiss footballer Michel Morganella also made an early exit from the Games on account of a racist tweet. Swiss Olympic team chief Gian Gilli said Morganella had “discriminated against, insulted and violated the dignity of the South Korea football team as well as the South Korean people” with his tweet. It used the derogatory slang term “trisos”, used to describe people with Down’s Syndrome.

German rower Nadja Drygalla left the Olympic village early after competing as part of the women’s rowing eight team, after it was [revealed she had links to a far-right extremist group](#). Her boyfriend, it was reported, had stood for state elections for the National Democratic Party, and was reputedly a member of the “Rostock National Socialists”

Racism in the crowds

Racism was also in evidence in the stands. During a Lithuania - Nigeria basketball match a 32 year old man was arrested on “suspicion of a racially aggravated public order offence”. A group of Lithuanian fans were reported to be making monkey chant noises at the Nigerian team, and one fan was pictured seemingly aiming a Nazi salute at black stewards on duty within the arena.

Sexism at the Games

“There's ‘the football’ and ‘the [women's football](#)’; there's the Benny Hill theme tune played in the stadium for the beach volleyball; and if aerodynamics are so important, why do male runners wear long shorts and female runners wear knickers? If a named male athlete doesn't get a medal then ‘maybe we'll get a medal in the women's’. Empty seats? Let's give them to ‘the lads’ in the military who have lost their holidays – even though many of them are women. And how long do you have to watch women's sport in public (whether at work or down the pub) before you hear comments about ‘is she a woman or a lesbian?’ etc.” - [Cathy Meadows, Letter to the Guardian](#)

Cathy Meadows' contribution to the Guardian “Letters to the editor” page was an eloquent list of many things that were wrong in the treatment of women at the Games. The issue of sexism in the treatment of women athletes was raised before the Games started, as the Guardian's [Esther Addley looked at the travel arrangements of the teams arriving in London](#). The Japanese sent their World Cup winning women's football squad over in economy class, whilst the rather less decorated men's team relaxed in business class.

Australia also sent some of their men business class, whilst the women had to make do with the rear of the plane. In this case the athletes were from the basketball squads. You would think that the extra leg-room would come in handy for both genders who play that particular sport.

A legal challenge to LOCOG

British champion canoeist [Samantha Rippington took up a court case](#) to test whether LOCOG had failed to meet the standards of British equality legislation in promoting a Games schedule that featured many more men's Olympic canoeing events than women's. In total men competed for five C-Class golds and six K-Class golds, whereas women could take part in five K-Class events and no C-Class races. The legal principle being tested was whether LOCOG were carrying out “a governmental function” in organising the Games, and therefore failing to comply with the 2010 Equality Act. Her move echoed one of the very first Olympic protests - when Stamata Revithi agitated for the inclusion of women athletes in the 1896 Athens Games.

Sporting equality & universal representation

There were some clear gains for female competitors at the Games however. In Beijing Boxing had been the only exclusively male sport, but in London, the bout between Russia's Elena Savelyeva and North Korea's Kim Hye-song was the first time that boxing for women took its place at the Olympics.

Also of note was that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei all sent women athletes for the first time. Every nation at London 2012 was represented by athletes of both sexes - an Olympic first. Wojdan Shaherkani's participation at the Games had sparked a bitter row in Saudi Arabia, and nearly didn't happen, when at the last moment a dispute erupted over what type of head-covering she was allowed to wear whilst competing.

Body image

Zoe Smith set a British weight-lifting record at the Games, but also was the subject of a lot of abuse about her appearance following a television documentary about women who lift weights. Responding to what she described as the “obvious choice of slander” about her appearance being described as “unfeminine” by men, [she blogged a blistering put-down of a response](#):

“What makes them think that we even WANT them to find us attractive? If you do, thanks very much, we’re flattered. But if you don’t, why do you really need to voice this opinion in the first place, and what makes you think we actually give a toss that you, personally, do not find us attractive? What do you want us to do? Shall we stop weightlifting, amend our diet in order to completely get rid of our ‘manly’ muscles, and become housewives in the sheer hope that one day you will look more favourably upon us and we might actually have a shot with you?! Cause you are clearly the kindest, most attractive type of man to grace the earth with your presence.”

Metro in the US poked fun at the coverage of Beach Volleyball, where all the photography seemed to focus on the tiny bikini bottoms of the athletes. They published a gallery of asking [“What if every Olympic sport was photographed like beach volleyball?”](#) - with a tight focus on the nether-regions of a host of male athletes. Some of the comments underneath suggested that people were quite happy with this new type of view, and Zoe Williams wrote for the Guardian declaring an amnesty on being able to [“ogle the athletes”](#) for the duration of the Games.

Doping

London 2012 organisers and the World Anti-Doping Agency claimed that anyone cheating at the Olympic Games would be caught. 6,250 tests were due to be carried out, and half of the athletes, including all medal winners, were due to be tested for 240 banned substances. By the end of the Games, 12 athletes had been expelled for doping irregularities.

Chinese swimmer drugs row

Ye Shiwen, the Chinese 16 year old who won gold in the individual 400m medley, aroused the suspicions of American John Leonard, executive director of the World Swimming Coaches Association. After posting a final 50m freestyle time that was quicker than Ryan Lochte, [Leonard said](#):

"We want to be very careful about calling it doping. The one thing I will say is that history in our sport will tell you that every time we see something, and I will put quotation marks around this, 'unbelievable', history shows us that it turns out later on there was doping involved. That last 100m was reminiscent of some old East German swimmers, for people who have been around a while. It was reminiscent of the 400m individual medley by [a young Irish woman in Atlanta](#)."

Leonard said that Ye "looks like superwoman" and stated that "Any time someone has looked like superwoman in the history of our sport they have later been found guilty of doping."

In London's Evening Standard, British gold medal winning swimmer Adrian Moorhouse sprang to Ye Shiwen's defence, and was [quoted as saying](#): "It is sour grapes. I think it's quite insulting actually. She's just in good shape. The other thing is there are a lot of people in China and actually the base of their pyramid is so wide that if they train thousands and thousands of their kids they've got more to draw on."

In their Evening Standard report, Peter Dominiczak and Nicholas Cecil also quoted Dr Chen Zhanghao, part of the Chinese medical team at several previous Olympic Games, as saying: "The Americans are very bad. They do a lot of evil. But they don't talk about themselves. America's Phelps broke seven world records. Is he normal? I suspect Phelps, but without evidence, I have to recognise we should be grounded in facts."

Later on in the Games, the 800m freestyle event was won by 15 year old American swimmer Katie Ledecky, who had appeared to have made even greater personal progress than Ye Shiwen, having shaved some twenty seconds off her personal best in the space of a few months. No American coaches cast any doubt on the legitimacy of her achievements.

Taoufik Makhoulfi & Steve Cram

1,500 metres gold medal winner Taoufik Makhoulfi had a torrid Games. Having been entered for both the 800m and the 1,500m, he walked in his 800m heat to ensure he did not qualify. The schedule of the Games made it very difficult to compete in both. He was duly expelled for "not trying hard enough". Having produced medical evidence that he had

done so because he was “injured”, he returned a couple of days later to romp to victory in the final of the 1,500m.

BBC commentator and Olympian Steve Cram was vocally suspicious of the performance: “Where on earth did he get that from? He’s never done anything like that before in his career...He won it in a manner that many will find surprising ... there’s a slightly perplexed Seb [Coe] just wondering quite what happened there.”

The author of the A Runner’s Guide blog [analysed the tactics of the race and concluded](#):

“The facts can only suggest either a phenomenal breakthrough race (in which case, expect to see him dominating middle distance running for the next four years) or another Ramzi [*who was stripped of Gold in the 2008 Olympics for doping*]. If it’s the former, good on him, we’ve seen the rise of a new legend. But if the latter, not only has he stolen gold from Monzano, but he also destroyed the race in the process, flipping it on it’s head so that the favourites missed out even on the minor medals. For now, I’ll say “good on him”. I believe in innocent until proven guilty. It was a dream race for him and he must be stoked. He taught the world’s best a lesson in kicking off a reasonable paced race and has reignited Algerian middle distance running.”

A level playing field?

Three gold medallists at the Games had previously served bans for drug offences - Alexandre Vinokourov (Men's Road Race Cycling), Tatyana Lysenko (Women's Hammer) and Asli Çakir Alptekin (Women's 1,500 metres). After losing to Asli Çakir Alptekin, British competitor Lisa Dobriskey said “I’ll probably get into trouble for saying this, but I don’t believe I’m competing on a level playing field.”

Asli Çakir Alptekin served a two year ban for a doping offence which was discovered in 2004. Dobriskey has been [outspoken about suspected drug usage by her opponents before](#).

In the year 2020...

Current drug testing regulations allow for samples to be kept and re-tested with newly developed techniques for up to eight years after they are taken. Which means we might not know the true veracity of the medals awarded at London in 2012 until after the Games in 2020. Indeed, before the 2012 Games closed, [American cyclist Tyler Hamilton was stripped of the gold medal](#) won at Athens in 2004, and one day after they finished the result of the 2012 Women’s Shot Putt was changed after [Nadzeya Ostapchuk of Belarus failed a test](#).

Sporting disputes

Sit-down protest at the fencing

South Korean fencer A Lam Shin was involved in one of the most emotional protests of the Games, when her semi-final descended into controversy. In an incident reminiscent of [the infamous 1972 basketball clash between the USA & USSR](#), a reset clock snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. At 5-5, she was set to reach the final, but an additional unexpected second let Germany's Britta Heidemann snatch victory.

Shin was left in tears on the piste while an appeal against the decision was launched, and with her stranded in the arena awaiting the result, the bronze medal and final contests were delayed. Under the rules, if she had left the piste, she would have been deemed to have accepted the result. In the end, after 90 minutes in the centre, she had to accept the injustice, and prepare herself for the bronze medal match-up, which, despite having captured the popular support of the crowd, she lost.

[Afterwards she said](#): "I think it's unfair. The one second was over – I should have won. The hour was really difficult, but I thought if I got a yellow card [for leaving the piste] I might not be able to fight for bronze. I'm very sorry for the spectators. They spent a lot of money and I just don't understand how this could have happened."

Self-sabotage in the badminton

The women's doubles badminton content was plunged into controversy when players were accused of trying to throw their games. The structure of the tournament was such that pairs knew a defeat would leave them in an easier section of the draw for the subsequent stages. First Yu Want & Wang Xiaoli of China and Jung Kyung-eun & Kim Ha-na of South Korea, then Ha Jung-eun & Kim Min-jung, also of South Korea and Indonesia's Meiliana Juahari & Greysia Polii played out farcical contests where they repeatedly deliberately hit the ball into the net or missed the court. They were threatened with disqualification on court, as the crowd booed them. In the end, after the matches had finished, all eight athletes were disqualified and expelled from the Olympics.

Chinese officials were unimpressed. [The state People's Daily newspaper said](#):

"In ruling on infringements, making accusations of poor sportsmanship and raising suspicions about a genius competitor, there are double standards that have taken aim at the Chinese team and its athletes. This unfortunately is hard to explain as inadvertent mis-steps, it might be closer to the truth to see it as deliberate attacking and interference. Though there can be different understandings of the rules of competition, the Chinese delegation nevertheless voiced its respect for the punishment. Yet some Western media still seized upon this to deliberately disparage the Chinese athletes and delegation."

These types of accusation are not a new experience for the British when running the Games. In 1948, at the conclusion of the "Austerity Games", the Manchester Guardian reported the Hungarian official news agency saying that "The Hungarian Olympic successes were obtained under difficult circumstances - after five years of war and the misery of inflation, as well as in a hostile atmosphere in London with biased judges."

The paper also quoted Yugoslavian sources in 1948 saying that many results at the Games had been arrived at “by earlier agreements or other underground methods which had nothing to do with the spirit of sport.”

Team GB and the judges

Other host nations have notoriously intimidated judges and officials so that every knife-edge decision goes their way. Not so the British. Despite the security shortcomings of G4S meaning that Olympic venues were stuffed full of the military, they clearly didn't have the kind of intimidating impact that Nazi troops or the Red Army did in Berlin or Moscow. A successful appeal by Japanese gymnasts relegated the British men's team from silver medal to bronze, and huge medal hopes Victoria Pendleton and Jessica Varnish found themselves disqualified from their cycling event.

Commercial impact

Transport warnings and lost trade

For weeks running up to the Games, Londoners on the city's public transport network were bombarded with bombastic recorded messages from Mayor Boris Johnson [warning of impending travel chaos](#). Several days into the Games, and it looked like the tactic was too successful. Non-sporting tourists were staying away in their droves, and businesses in the centre of town were being affected. Tower Bridge said it was seeing less than 50% of the visitors they would expect at this time of year. Under pressure from business groups, the warnings were dropped.

Small businesses in Greenwich were specifically aggrieved when, instead of an influx of additional custom, they found that [security barriers prevented Olympic visitors to the Equestrian events from accessing their stores](#). The News Shopper website reported the frustrations of one trader, Lara Boyle:

"My blood is boiling over this, it's an absolute disaster. It won't ruin us but there are some traders in the town and the market who will go to the wall over this. All of us have employed extra staff and bought in lots more stock because obviously we were preparing to have tens of thousands of Olympic spectators in town. Then suddenly overnight before we arrived here on Saturday morning the Olympic security people had erected these large metal barricades and they were shepherding people all the way from Greenwich station to Greenwich Park inside them. They did exactly the same thing at the end of the events. No one was allowed to step outside of them so the town centre was like a ghost town. We're all devastated and we feel totally betrayed because we had to put up with enormous disruption during the run-up to the Olympics but we were appeased with the promise that our businesses would boom during the games when all these thousands of people turned up."

In the US, the New York Times ran [a profile by Barry Bearak of Weymouth](#), venue for the Sailing events, depicting a town that was emptier than normal for the time of year.

"The Olympics [were supposed to fill the town](#) with a record number of visitors. Many of the hoteliers on the esplanade believed it. They saluted the coming Games by doubling their rates, a move predicated on presumptions of high demand. Instead, many front windows now display hastily posted 'vacancy' signs. Rooms are offered at a discount."

The piece quotes Jed Marson, who had rented space at the Bayside Festival, an area for events and retail in the evening during the Olympics: "Our government is overprotective and overbearing, and it is their warnings about health and safety that has kept people away."

Entertainingly Barry also quoted Zara, "the 'renowned' palm reader and clairvoyant with a hut on the beach". "They hyped this Olympics way too much" she said. "Why hadn't she seen it coming?" asked Barry.

The brand police

In the run-up to the Games there was a great deal of criticism of the way that Trading Standards Officers and the LOCOG “Brand police” were heavy-handed in forbidding small businesses to celebrate the arrival of the Olympics with ring-themed window displays and unofficial bunting and the like. One company saw [a PR opportunity though](#), and so wine merchant Oddbins announced that they would be giving a discount to customers drinking Pepsi, wearing Nike, or using Mastercard - the collective nemesis of the official Olympic sponsors Coca-Cola, Adidas and Visa.

Another brand to get past the vigilant eye of LOCOG was Dr Dre's Beats headphones. A lot of athletes were seen wearing them during their warm-up sessions, especially in the swimming, after the brand had distributed pairs free to Olympic competitors in advance.

War on Want's anti-Adidas campaign also made an appearance at the Games, with [a projection of their #notOKanywhere hashtag and slogan](#) on a building near the Olympic park.



Empty Seats and Ticketing website

Empty seats at supposedly sold out venues caused a great deal of upset in the early days of the Games. The organisers moved to change the allocation of seating, reducing the numbers reserved for the “Olympic family”, and redistributing those to be available for sale to the general public. Empty seats at venues were not a unique problem to London 2012 - in fact it is possible to find news stories on the internet bemoaning the vast expanses of empty seats at both [the Beijing](#) and [Athens Games](#) that preceded them. Plenty of seats are reserved for Olympic officials and other competing athletes, but there is no guarantee that they will actually be used on the day. The Tokyo bid for hosting the Games in 2020 has suggested that [a mobile-based technical solution of virtual ticketing](#) might solve the problem in Japan.

The ticketing website came in for a lot of criticism for the way it was developed. Users had to search for an event which showed it had “tickets available”, then choose the number of tickets they wanted and at which price. Only at this point did the system then actually look to see if the tickets were still available - causing a great deal of frustration.

Sebastian Coe defended the website on BBC television, saying that the website “wasn’t crashing” but that it was simply being overwhelmed by demand. LOCOG said that over two million people a day were searching for the few tickets that were becoming available.

Terrorism and security

Remembering Munich

The greatest tragedy to hit the Olympic movement was the 1972 terrorist atrocity, when eleven members of the Israeli Olympic party were murdered in a gun fight between German police forces and Palestinian terrorists. Since then there has been a constant struggle to try and get the IOC to provide a fitting moment to remember the deaths. A hastily arranged memorial service during the 1972 Games themselves was marred by some nations being allowed to refuse to fly their flags at half-mast, and by IOC President Avery Brundage making a clumsy link between terrorism and the peaceful protests against Rhodesian participation in the Games.

In 2012 there was a concerted effort to get the IOC to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Munich attack. Several memorials have been held at the fringes of the Games, but nothing official in the opening or closing ceremonies. The London memorial was held at Guildhall, and organised by the Israeli Olympic Committee. At it, Ankie Spitzer, widow of one of the victims, was [vocal in her condemnation of current members of the IOC and LOCOG](#):

“Shame on you IOC, because you have forgotten 11 members of the Olympic Family. You’re discriminating against them only because they are Israelis and Jews. We will come back until we hear the words you need to say because you owe them. Those who forget history are bound to repeat it. Sometimes I wonder if I am the last person left who believes in the Olympic ideals. Is the IOC only interested in power, money and politics... did they forget they are supposed to promote peace, brotherhood and fair play? My husband Andre was chosen to go to the Olympics, probably with the same dreams as Jacques Rogge and Seb Coe when they went to the Games... the only difference is our loved ones came home in coffins. But they were members of the same Olympic Family and that is why we want them remembered as such. Not here in this beautiful Guildhall, not in the Hilton Hotel in Beijing, not in the backyard of our ambassador in Athens, but within the Olympic framework.”

A trouble-free Games

[All through editing “Keeping the torch burning”](#) and in preparing this extra chapter, I had been dreading having to collect together press reports of a terrorist attack or security incident at the London Games. In truth, given the distribution of venues, the number of related “soft targets” and the size of British transport infrastructure, I found it very difficult to imagine how the Games could pass off without an incident. After the Atlanta bombing in 1996, some 30 hoax calls were made about bombs in the space of the next few hours, and someone even attached a fake device to an Olympic transport vehicle. With London’s experience of terrorist attacks by Irish Republicans and Islamic Jihadists, I couldn’t see how massive disruption wouldn’t be inflicted.

Thankfully I was wrong.

The failure of G4S to fulfill their contracts caused a great deal of security concern before the start of the Olympics, but in the end security forces only made [a handful](#) of publicly-known anti-terrorism arrests before the Games. Channel 4 news reported that the total number of arrests during the Games was 276. This included one under anti-terrorism

legislation - a 17 year old male arrested “on suspicion of collecting/recording information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism” on the opening day, near Stratford Railway station. He was later released without charge.

The closing ceremony

“It was a boot in our face”

The closing ceremony of the Games was not greeted with the almost universal chorus of approval that the opening ceremony had received. One of the harshest critics of the event was Chris T_T, whose blog post [“Not just shit but also dangerous: Kim Gavin’s Closing Ceremony”](#) reached a wide audience. Chris argued that:

“It was a numbing, disheartening disaster. The biggest floating turd we ever did whiff; reducing, demeaning and re-squishing Britain, at the very moment we’d felt shifted long-term for the better by these liberating Olympic Games. In one fattened pig of a gong-show, Gavin forced us back into clunky shackles that Boyle and Boyce briefly, tantalisingly freed us from, only a month ago. Far worse than just being bad, what unfolded was – I think – proper fucking dangerous. You know that phrase: the banality of evil.”

In particular Chris criticised two specific elements that also caught my eye - where the opening ceremony had a togetherness about multiculturalism, the closing ceremony present the Indian dancers as an exotic comedy interruption to Eric Idle. And after two weeks of admiring women for what they had achieved, the main showcase for women in the closing ceremony was as objectified zero size clothes horses in the fashion section.

“What Boyle’s Opening Ceremony had done was open up the doors; a box of delights; the best of what we are and what we can be in Great Britain, how we built this motherfucker. Showing us our truthful crazy-beautiful spirit and heralding in two weeks of sport in such a way that we felt something could be reclaimed and changed. We repaid him by being the best athletes, volunteers and audience in history.

“What Gavin’s Closing Ceremony has done is to throw Britain back in the box and slam it shut; fiercely and unquestioningly placing current hegemonies back in charge; re-infantilising and re-exoticising all that Boyle had tried to unlock for us; a revenge for the otherness and the hierarchy and the celebrity-for-its-own-sake, just as these bullshit Cowellian things had seemed to be proven unneeded. It was a boot on our face. I wonder how we’ll repay him.”

Conspiracy

Or maybe it was all just part of a massive “psy-ops campaign”, since, [according to Ishtar Babilu Dingir](#): “They can’t programme our unconscious minds if we don’t watch what they put on our screens. So they needed us to be present and engaged ~ and I would say they’ve succeeded massively in drawing most of us in to be a part of their occult offering to the gods.”

If this diagram doesn’t convince you the whole Olympics was one massive Zionist freemason plot to... erm ... do ... erm ... *something* ... then I don’t know what will.



Photo by Jeffrey Borresson. Masonic comparison by Ishtar Babilu Dingir

Brian May and the badgers

The most notable possible display of protest and dissent within the closing ceremony came from Queen guitarist Brian May. He wore a jacket that featured a badger motif, which was interpreted in some quarters as a display of his opposition to the UK government policy of culling badgers in an attempt to reduce TB in cattle.

[The Western Daily Press](#) quoted [Jill Grieve](#), head of communications of Countryside Alliance, as saying:

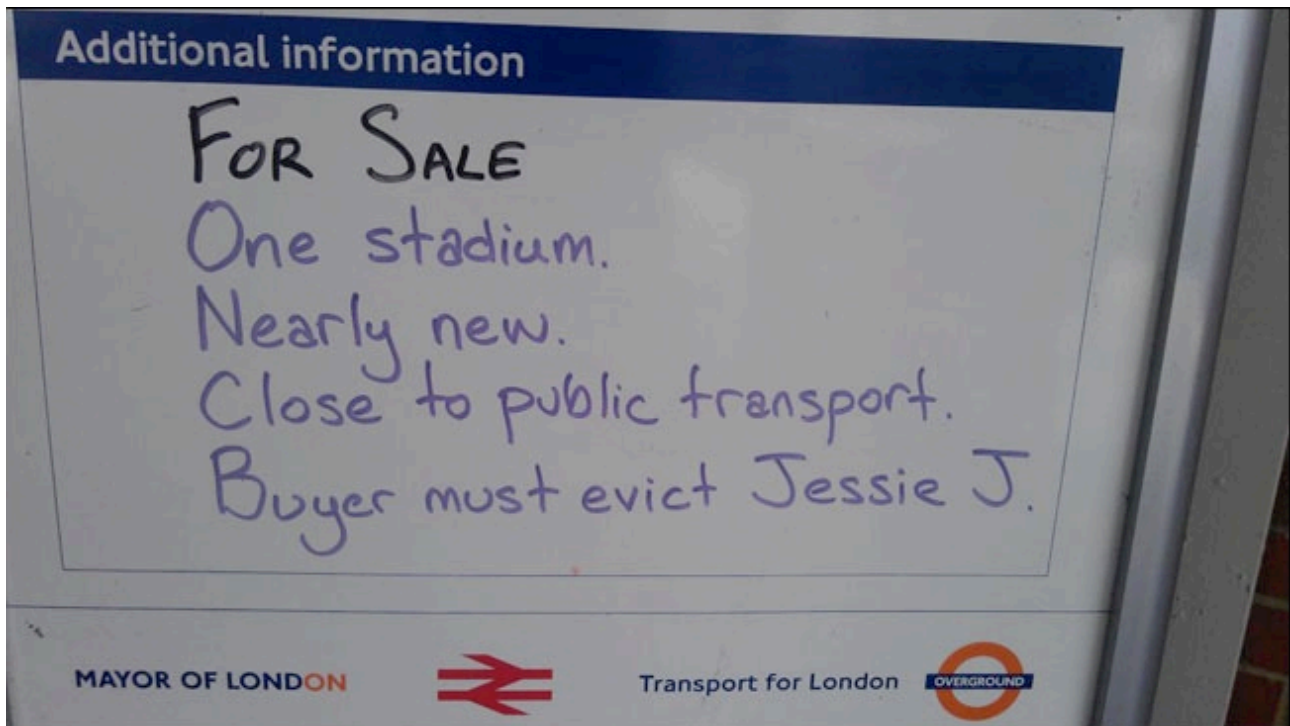
“Brian May’s attempt to turn his performance at the Olympic closing ceremony into a political statement was inappropriate for various reasons. Whatever the rules on political campaigning at the Olympics, Mr May was in poor taste, trying to turn a celebration of our nation’s greatest athletes into a sideshow for his own extreme views. Many around the world would surely have missed the point he was trying to make, but to the farmers struggling against bovine TB and fox predation, a millionaire rock star using a global sporting celebration to undermine their way of life really stuck in the craw.”

However, an official spokesman for May [subsequently tried to clarify the design of the jacket](#), stating that the jacket features other animals like a snake and a hedgehog, and claiming that:

“Brian’s Jacket designed for the Olympics was in keeping with a core theme that ran through the opening ceremony. The UK is world renowned for its green countryside and the rich wildlife that inhabits it. It has inspired both books and songs internationally. Brian is well known for his passion for wildlife and it was a natural step to add these creatures to his jacket.”

That famous British sense of humour

Someone was [on good form at Hackney Wick station](#) the day after the ceremony, where it was clear which artist had been over-exposed and out-stayed their welcome during the closing ceremony.



Onwards to Sochi and Rio

On a personal note I must say that I have absolutely loved London hosting the Olympic Games. I wrote in the introduction to “Keeping the torch burning” that:

“I sometimes feel like associations with the Olympics have been following me around most of my life. For a while I worked on the site of the stadium that hosted the 1908 Games in London, and my home borough of Waltham Forest is hosting them in 2012. I lived in Greece, the birthplace of the Games, and when visiting Athens I saw sites that had hosted Olympic action not just in 2004, but in 1896 and 1906 too. And by coincidence I was visiting China during the build-up to the Beijing Games of 2008.”



Visiting the Berlin Olympic stadium in 2006

It is seven years since London was awarded the Games, and at the time I was working for the BBC on running their web homepage.

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The BBC homepage when London was awarded the Games in 2005

Travelling around the city over the last couple of weeks, and getting to watch the Women's Cycling Road Race and the Men's Marathon has been the fulfillment of a long-held ambition to watch the Olympics. And, by joining in [a crowd that booed FIFA President Sepp Blatter](#) before the medal ceremony at the Women's Football Gold Medal match, I even got to participate in some Olympic protest and dissent myself.

From Danny Boyle's opening ceremony, through the brilliant success of Team GB, and in the atmosphere of the city itself, it has been a brilliant time to enjoy being British, being a sports fan, and being a Londoner.

When can we host it again?

Keeping the Torch Burning: Terror, Protest and the Games ebook

'Keeping the Torch Burning' is an alternative history of the Olympic Games, one that focuses on the social and political events that have defined each competition. Nationalism, separatism, feminism, racial equality and human rights ring loud in this Guardian Short, written by Martin Belam and uniquely told through first-hand reporting from the Guardian and Observer.

[*Buy now for Kindle for just £2.99*](#)

