

Has the Left forgotten the world?

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Has the centre-left forgotten the rest of the world?

Luke Martell

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Post-Olympics reflections have been in full-flight. The games are one of the most international events the planet gets to see. Athletes of the world travel to a common place to compete. The competitors, media and watching public are exposed to the globality of the human race. There's no better chance to be aware of others beyond our national boundaries, or even to feel a global consciousness.

But what has happened? The UK media focused on British athletes, their events, and their medal ceremonies, rather than an even-handed range of competitions. There was a wave of patriotism and national pride at the management of the London games and the success of Team GB.

You might expect the left to bring a different perspective. It's concerned about equality and the poor. This is what makes it different, and should direct our attention to the rest of the world, mostly poorer and more powerless than the UK. The left has been, in strands, more internationalist than the traditionally nationalist right. Shadow minister Kerry McCarthy wrote days ago that MPs should be concerned about international as well as local issues¹.

Yet the left has managed to respond to a global event, and the opportunity for global empathy, with a remarkable display of inward-lookingness. There has been ample self-congratulation about the UK's multiculturalism. Inclusive recognition of plurality is really important. But the response to the international backgrounds of British athletes has been to look at Britain rather than the international aspect.

Mo Farah came from one of the most violent, poor and failing states in the world. In his moment in the limelight he was put forward as an example of British multicultural achievement. But when was the chance to discuss the desperate circumstances of Somalia taken advantage of? Didn't the African runners, excelling over distance despite enormous disadvantage, make left commentators think of writing about the countries they came from? We've been lucky this year if their attention strayed as far south as Greece.

There's been a lot of Olympics-related naval gazing about British identity, whether it's multicultural or not, what multiculturalism means, and whether it should be welcomed, from David Goodhart² to John Denham³, and the 'progressive patriotism' of others. Lefty blogs, thinktanks and columnists, liberal newspapers and magazines, and the twitterati have discussed what one of the most global events this country has seen in recent times, and its UK multicultural gold medals, mean for Britain⁴. They've been more concerned about pride in their country when under the scrutiny of the world, than in learning about the rest of the globe that had come to visit.

If Danny Boyle's opening ceremony had raised Britain's record abroad, imperialist and otherwise, as well as its shape at home, this might have helped counter the turning of an international event into self-reflecting introspection.

The Marxist left have a better record of internationalism. Its writings feature the travails of the dispossessed and repressed of the world. Workers are seen as workers and exploited whatever country they come from. The British far-left not only maintained a focus on Syria throughout the two weeks of sport, they even managed to spend the time tearing themselves apart about the rights and wrongs of the uprising there.

Yet centre-left hacks are unremittingly domestically focused, with the odd European turn or glance to the US. Even trade unions have learned to highlight the experiences of their brothers and sisters globally. And greens have always combined acting locally with thinking globally.

It's telling that McCarthy's internationalist piece had to be mostly about why local and national issues are her first priority. And other Labour figures who have celebrated the multiculturalism of Olympic Golds will argue afterwards for restricting immigration more tightly, without seeing the inconsistency, not to mention glossing over migration's proven benefits for Britain.

There's a tradition in political philosophy which explains why we should care about the needy beyond our borders, as well as our own. Ecological problems threaten humanity, especially those in poorer countries. Global solutions are failing. 2.5 billion people out of the planet's 7 billion exist on less than \$2 a day. 85% of the world's population live in developing countries. In several of them life expectancy hovers around 40. There is a global food crisis.

Yet you would not know it if you looked at the foci of the centre-left, meant to be defined by a passion for equality and social need. Blair didn't pay much attention to foreign policy until his feet had been under the desk at No. 10 for a while. And we know what happened then. Miliband needs to widen his radar earlier on. After the globalism of the Olympics, the centre-left should recognise there's life beyond its own borders.

Thanks to Katie Powley for her advice

¹ <http://labourlist.org/2012/08/constituents-come-first-but-mps-should-be-concerned-about-national-and-international-issues-too/>

² <http://www.demos.co.uk/blog/the-british-are-the-new-irish>

³ <http://shiftinggrounds.org/2012/08/rebuilding-britain/>

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/19/tim-southphommasane-labour-olympic-spirit-new-britain>