

London 2012 and the triumph of British diversity



In one evening Mo Farah did more for multiculturalism in this country than the rest of us do in a lifetime. He did it with mental commitment and a glorious display of the potential of the human body. But more than anything he did at a press conference last night when some bright-spark journalist asked him if he would have preferred to win the medal for Somalia, a country he left under asylum when he was eight. "Look mate, this is my country," he replied. "This is where I grew up, this is where I started life. This is my country and when I put on my Great Britain vest I'm proud." The Daily Mail's pre-Games campaign focus on 'plastic Brits' — a dangerous and unpleasant phrase — seems like a bad dream now, an echo of a harsher, nastier time. Farah is a testament to the millions who came to this country - sometimes looking for work, sometimes escaping danger - and continue to believe in it despite the daily torrent of resentment churned out by tabloids and pub-bores.

Just before Farah capped the most successful night in the history of British sports, the beautiful and telegenic Jessica Ennis beamed joy and emotion across the stadium. The cameras cut to her parents. Her father, a self-employed painter and decorator originally from Jamaica, and her mother, a white social worker, radiated pride.

A comment piece in the Mail last week suggested such achievements were impossible. "This was supposed to be a representation of modern life in England," a commentator wrote of Danny Boyle's opening ceremony, "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."

The snide, inward-looking humbug of the anti-multiculturalism lobby looks more irrelevant by the hour. Aidan Burley's nasty tweet, that the opening ceremony was "leftie multicultural crap" shows not how decrepit his thinking is, but how out of touch he has become with a country he is supposed to represent.

Multi-culturalism is not, as its detractors claim, an ideology. It is simply a fact. It is not an aim, but a description.

London has 300 languages spoken inside its vast boundaries. It gets along, by and large, without any particularly violent consequences from this unparalleled amalgamation of cultures. Anyone who reads newspapers everyday will think it is a disastrous misjudgement. But anyone who lives in London knows it is one of the great experiments of mankind and a profoundly successful one at that. It is a city

teeming with life, commerce, creativity and fashion. It is the reason we won the bid in the first place. It is the reason London is such a suitable place to welcome the world: because the world is already here.

Danny Boyle recognised this in his witty and remarkable opening ceremony, by using multi-racial performers in every section. It was attacked by conservatives, of course, as 'politically correct'. The representation of a country as it truly is is not politically correct. It is simply correct.

If the opening ceremony represented what we have become to the world, our athletes have cemented that impression on the world. Diverse, happy, warm and ambitious; well-to-do rowers mingle with former asylum seekers. Beaming girls squeal to each other that they will be on stamps. Exhausted runners embrace their family. As one, they weep when the Union Jack is raised. The feeling that crowds in London are driving our athletes on to victory has made it a shred experience.

It is not just a riposte to those who oppose diversity and colour, but to the nationalists north of the border who would split us apart. Alex Salmond laughably tried to pretend Britain didn't exist at the start of the Games, speaking only by using the ghastly phrase 'Scolympians'. Now he stays under cover. Sport brings an emotional reinforcement to ideas around belonging which most people cannot articulate. It is far more powerful than politics. The present moment is a uniquely dangerous one for the nationalists.

It is fitting that the national flag has become ubiquitous over recent days. We reclaimed it from racists many years ago, but that process has been definitively reign forced over the week, in a manner not dissimilar to what happened in Germany when it held the World Cup.

Our national flag is uniquely well placed to represent a diverse country. It is one symbol representing many. The first multiculturalism was the unity of the tribes of the British isles. It has not always been a pleasant or peaceful story, but it has created a vibrant, surprising, modern, successful kingdom. Those of us who whined and complained about the Olympics have to eat a substantial serving of humble pie. It's proving a delicious meal.

By Ian Dunt / Talking Politics – Sun, Aug 5, 2012

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