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The Games Come to London

This chapter will give a brief account of how the Games came to be awarded to London. The decision to bid for the Olympics of 2012 was taken by a few people at the commanding heights of the governing British Labour Party: Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Tessa Jowell, in consultation with a small number of senior staff and confidants. This reflected an established pattern of decision-making in the government of the time, described as ‘sofa government’ in the media and criticised in the Butler Report of 2007.1 The chapter will also discuss the implications, real and purported, for the East End of London, where the Games were staged. And it will comment, given the controversies generated in the last three decades by Olympic bids, on how little visible political opposition there appeared to be to the staging of London 2012.

‘We will help you get more out of life’

It’s an axiom now that the Labour Party which took office in the United Kingdom in 1997 had abandoned many of even its most vestigial commitments to combating material inequalities in British society; the party had been ‘re-branded’ as ‘New Labour’ and the pamphlet New Labour, New Life for Britain, published the previous year, is generally seen as an embrace of market economics – ‘Thatcherism’ in the British political lexicon. In their manifesto for the General Election of 1997, Labour

had eschewed their traditional undertakings in the realm of sport and leisure. While in the 1950s and 60s the party had promised plentiful public provision – playing fields, swimming pools and grants for youth centres\(^2\) – now the pledges were more modest and ephemeral: in the broad field of sport and leisure, Labour now said that: ‘We will help you get more out of life’, an example of which was that the party, if elected, would ‘Back [a] World Cup bid’. This acknowledged a trend in the British government’s address of sport and leisure which was already well under way: ‘sport for all’ – the promotion of sports participation for its intrinsic benefits (a policy adopted by governments of all political stripes across the ‘developed’ world) – was being phased out in favour of an emphasis on elite sport. In 1995 John Major’s Conservative administration had issued the policy document *Sport: Raising the Game*, calling for competitive sport to be placed at the heart of the state school curriculum.\(^3\) This policy was reaffirmed in *Game Plan*, a further policy document issued in 2002. This document had been concocted by the government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport in conjunction with its Social Exclusion Unit (established in 1997, on the accession of the first ‘New’ Labour government). The thrust of *Game Plan* was that competitive sport should bring sport itself closer to the centre of national life and, as such, become a means to ‘social inclusion’.\(^4\) The term ‘social inclusion’, as I have argued elsewhere, was (and remains) ill defined\(^5\) – perhaps intentionally so. In the case of *Game Plan*, it was possible to infer that ‘social inclusion’ meant (a) that the success of sportspeople, who were often from working and lower middle class families, would, via (invariably televised) international competition, be a highly visible token of an open, ‘inclusive’ society and (b) that the great mass of the general public would share in this inclusiveness via the ‘feelgood factor’ promoted


