

## Olympism and internationalism

*Transcript from oral presentation at:*

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Jude Kelly

**[In her position as Chair of the London 2012 Culture and Education Committee, Jude Kelly discusses her vision for a cultural and educational programme leading to the London 2012 Olympic Games that links with creative people around the UK and encourages international engagement with the rest of the world.]**

[The Olympic plan and the ambition of creating a new Olympic park in the East End of London] is probably the biggest 'formal' regeneration project that London has ever seen. I would like to compare that situation with Ghana, for instance. This weekend I have been in Ghana. I was there for two reasons.

First, as an artist discussing with the Ghana government issues around modernisation and tourism in Accra, the capital of Ghana. The authorities there are beginning to look at how artists and creative thinking have

contributed to shifting the physical and psychological sense of Accra and Ghana as a whole. I have also been there because the African section of the Olympic Movement were meeting and the five bidding cities were presenting.

And [so] on the one hand you have London talking about the phenomenal benefits that this Olympic [new] park could bring for one of the most neglected parts of London – a quarter of the capital city would be changed forever in complex ways. And on the other hand, you have this backdrop in Ghana, one of the wealthiest African countries but nevertheless, extremely poor. And it is interesting to see this discrepancy in the Olympic Movement between huge builds [towards competing host cities] and nations who at the moment could never afford to do it.

Now, during my time there, the president of Ghana was planning the 2007 celebration of 60 years of independence plus 200 years since the abolition of slavery; and

also building a set of celebrations joining with South Africa, where they will have the World Cup. And for them, these events were setting stones, moments in time when you could locate a psychological possibility for a nation to head towards a change of infrastructure, a change in approaches to partnership, which are critical for building a new Ghana and a new subcontinent.

And it was interesting for me to notice that even though there are so many contradictions within the Olympics, where most people's view of the [Games] is that it is about sponsorship, sport and medals, that at grassroots levels, in the African National Olympic Committees (NOCs), in Togo, in Gambia, a lot of the work that the NOCs do, makes no distinction between sport, culture and education. They are actually mechanisms for mobilising communities.

[In fact], in many of those NOCs, there are agreements to guarantee peace [between groups in conflict]. There are provisions for health, education and other policy discussions as a frame to the sport preparations and competitions, there are also dance and ceremony and ultimately, agreements not to be affected by local wars to actually held peace-time. And this is actually a literal realisation of what the Olympic Movement intended to be and in some sense still is.

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When Pierre the Coubertin set himself to reinventing the Olympics at the turn of the 19C, it was literally a stretch of the imagination. Some may want to compare him to a Bob Geldof [*smiles*], deciding I will bring the world together, through one stage, on one day, to say that the world should live in harmony, and deciding to use sport, culture and education as a metaphor to the idea that competition is possible without strife, without war and that the Olympic torch will symbolise this.

What we have with the Olympic Movement is a realisation of all of this at a certain level. And every single nation, bar very few, do come through the same door together to symbolise the idea of friendship and peace. And even if a country has absolutely no money, still it will send some athletes [for that symbol to be realised].

And so I would be very nervous of stepping back from a world movement that has been created for principles and noble purposes and say I am not really interested. I felt, when the possibility for London to place an Olympic bid came about, that to say 'what has this to do with me' was too ungenerous a remark to make to the dead Pierre de Coubertin. I felt we had an obligation to keep this movement 'moving'. A movement would not be one without moving forward. And as Patricia [Ferguson] said, that the movement would not only be about sport. For instance, the last time that London hosted the Olympics, in a post war Europe and post-war world [1948], they still offered medals for the arts.

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It is still possible for the Olympic Movement to work towards something that says to countries, continents, the world, here is a festival that celebrates humanity. And celebrates it in a number of contexts. It celebrates it in sublime sporting achievements,

but also celebrates it in the years leading up to the event, and after the event, with a whole set of cultural exchanges that bring better world understanding.

We all need these networks and connections, connecting intelligently and emotionally, not only through policy driven initiatives, but as individuals and nations with an emotional position. And because the Olympics are essentially illogical, if you see what I mean, its purpose is so hard to fathom and yet it excites and stretches people's imaginations, it [provides an excellent possibility as] one of the methods of cultural transfer.

You may be interested to know that Pierre de Coubertin died a most frustrated man. He was an educationalist more than a sportsman, and one of the things he wanted the Olympic Movement to take seriously was the idea of learning about world culture. He felt that for global peace to be a possibility, people needed to have a much better understanding of the cultures of others. And he did not only try to introduce culture and education; he also wanted to set up academies for people to learn languages, and the basis of where a language comes from etc.

So if any of you sitting in this room is thinking, what has the Olympics got to do with me, then I would say it has the same as a

democracy has to do with us. It is there to be shaped and changed and argued for, for the values that we believe in. And I do not believe that if we say this is a celebration of humanity, [we should accept the claim that], by the way, it is only sport. I think it is up to us to say no, it is not just about sport, it is also about all of these cultural stories [surrounding it].

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It is bizarre in Ghana to have Paris, London, Madrid, New York and Moscow, five of the richest cities representing five of the richest countries in the world, clearly feeling that if they got the Olympics that would do their nations a great deal of good.

We should consider why they do think that. [And understand the case of] Athens, the impact on Greece, on realising once again that they could close this gap between classical Greece and modern Greece. This was an incredible psychological moment for Greece.

And although Barcelona benefited enormously from hosting the Olympics, it was also Spain as a whole which benefited.

Now it is quite interesting that nations as wealthy as America or indeed the UK can actually admit that they also need psychological change, on the scale we can observe happening in Australia after the Sydney Games. But I think we do need that change. I think the Games are not just going to do some good to East London. The effect of inviting the world is going to be much larger. Ultimately, what each of these bidding nations is acknowledging is that they need a different relationship with the rest of the world.

I think Britain does [need to acknowledge this]. Britain has to relocate itself. It has to dump the idea of its colonial past. It has to dump the idea of being London-centric or English-centric. It has to change its relationship to its own communities. And it is very hard to make those changes on a nation. This is why we tend to aspire to these [special] moments, a tipping point that somehow, almost gives us permission to speak of things [in more aspirational ways], and create partnerships that are appropriate.

If we win the Olympics, one of the purposes of winning would be to try to use it as a platform to try to make people change the way they think about the Games.

Because if it remains sponsorship, medals, architecture - and possible white elephants - that is not going to help us to take the Olympics into the 21C as an intelligent movement. And so one of those bidding cities must be rich enough and wise enough to change the message of the Olympics and return it to an imaginative place. And this cannot be done without culture. Because culture is the mechanism, it is the space in which thoughts, imagination occur.

There are lots of things I could say about the benefits of hosting the Olympics in a tangible, objective way. [I have the example of the conversation I had with] the taxi driver bringing me here from the airport. He told me, what has it to do with me, and I said, well, if the 13 year old down your road ever has thought of being a sprinter, what it would be like if the Olympics was in their own nation. Because the training would also be here in Scotland, [for Scottish kids] that could then go and compete in front of a home crowd.

Very often, as it tends to happen in the arts, where we may be discussing policy and forget about the artists themselves, it is the same case in sport, where we may forget about the athletes. But there are thousands of athletes from all over the world that will be coming for the very first time to the UK. And they will not

think we are coming to London. [They will think] they are coming to the UK. And for the athletes from around the UK, who are now in their early teens, that is an incredible journey that may change the nature of sport in this country forever.

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And all the nations competing for the Games will need to train in climates, which are similar to London's. Which means that they will be coming to Scotland too. So just in terms of partnerships, tourism and inward investment it will be massive.

But [we could also be] joining up the idea that historical cultural studies, and modern cultural studies are part of the journey to 2012, which should provide a focus and the possibility of changing the way in which we think about globalisation. [This prospect has informed] some of the ideas [we have been discussing within the London 2012 Culture and Education team].

We have thought of working towards a cultural festival that explores the idea of building on the Friendship motive, a motive that has gone through many festivals [in the UK today]. It is the idea of a ship [a Friend-Ship] that will sail the world during four years [starting in 2008, at the end of the Beijing Games], as an expression of who we are, building on all the cultural institutions in the UK.

And it will return back to Britain [in time for the 2012 London Games] and then join in a Festival of World Culture, where every nation in the world is invited to bring their own culture with them. We are also thinking of a World festival of Youth Culture, to re-engage with what is the imaginative basis of young people's views of the 21st century, through all the versions of youth culture we can think of. Including youth parliaments, relationship with the environments, and exploration of civic responsibilities.

And we are also looking into a 'Five Rings' Olympic exhibition, which actually is an opportunity for galleries, museums, visual arts spaces to find common spaces to come together and share practices.

But, in a sense, a core outline for the cultural programme for 2012 is to create an umbrella to say that if the world is coming to our door, it is up to all of us to

respond imaginatively, and [to reflect about] how we will use that possibility. This is not about London celebrating, it is about the opportunity to say, in the seven years we have, how are we going to have conversations between ourselves and with the rest of the world.

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And the reason why I am here today is because, win or lose, these conversations need to happen anyway. And if we do not have them for the Olympics, let's have them because we believe in them anyway, but let's not *NOT* have them. Because that would be a waste.

And if we do win on the 6th of July, I do not want to start from London outwards. It has to be fanning in from all directions. And you are cultural practitioners, and policy makers and people involved in the building of Scotland. And it is essential that Scotland comes to advise and help.

And even if you want to come to contribute on behalf of the rest of the world, bypassing London, that is your prerogative. Because London is just hosting it, it is not owning it. It is hosting the Games on behalf of the Olympic Movement.

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So it is not up to London to decide what to do, [it is up to all of us who may care about moving forward with cultural ideas and aspirations to contribute to the Games and stage them] on behalf of the Olympic Movement.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Proceedings from the seminar: *Exploring Internationalism: Scotland responds to London's Olympic vision for culture in 2012*. Seminar organised by the Centre for Cultural Policy Research, University of Glasgow, in association with London 2012 Culture & Education.