

**JANUARY 2012**

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**LONDON  
OLYMPICS**

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**TIM BLACK**



DEBATING MATTERS  
**TOPIC  
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**MOTION:**

**“THE GREATEST  
SHOW ON EARTH  
IS WORTH IT”**

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## KEY TERMS

Legacy

Olympics Games

# INTRODUCTION

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When the news was announced [Ref: [BBC News](#)] on 6 July 2005 that London was to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games, the response, as people thronged Trafalgar square in celebration, was near universal excitement. Then prime minister Tony Blair called it a ‘momentous day’, his opposite number Michael Howard declared himself ‘absolutely delighted’ and the Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy simply said it was ‘fantastic’. The *New Statesman* summed up the public mood: ‘For once, the sceptics and cynics should step back and allow the country to savour success.’ [Ref: [New Statesman](#)]. But the ‘sceptics’ and the ‘cynics’ did not step back for long. ‘The real question’, [Ref: [Economist](#)] asked the *Economist* within days of London’s victory, ‘is whether hosting the Olympics will actually be good for Londoners. Past experience and current plans suggest that London 2012... might not be.’ Since then, the criticism levelled at London 2012, centred in the main on its cost and what it will really do to benefit the capital, has only grown in volume.

### A waste of money?

So, is the greatest show on earth worth the expense? There is no doubting that the amount of public money budgeted for 2012 is significant. Originally costed at £1.8billion in 2003, by 2005 this figure had been revised upwards to £3.4billion [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Then, in 2007, the budget was revised again, this time up to £9.3billion [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Added to this is the fact that the ever increasing outlay on London 2012 comes at a time when the government is cutting back on public spending elsewhere. 'Closures of swimming pools, ordinary sports facilities and libraries', wrote Libby Purves, 'are hard to disentangle from the billions of pounds spent on elite games' [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Furthermore, the experience of past host countries does not auger well, critics argue. Once the Olympics is over, host cities are left with unused stadia and facilities, that is, so-called white elephants: 'I've looked at Athens where there is this beautiful Olympic site, stunning architecture in a fabulous setting', argued writer and prominent London 2012 critic Iain Sinclair, 'and it's falling apart, nobody is using it, there are feral dogs and grass growing through everything'. Yet those championing 2012 have consistently defended the expenditure on the basis that 2012 is not merely about sport, nor even the sports stadia. Rather, it is about the Olympic legacy - the new homes, the new jobs, the higher rates of sports participation. As then Olympic Delivery Authority Chief David Higgins put it in 2006, London 2012 can be viewed as a 'sporting overlay for the biggest regeneration project in Europe' [Ref: [London 2012](#)].

### A force for regeneration?

To a greater extent than all previous Olympics, London 2012

has been characterised by its organisers' focus on using the games to realise a whole host of social and economic objectives. As then London mayor Ken Livingstone put it in 2005, London 2012 'would not only be a celebration of sport but a force for regeneration'. In 2008, the Department of Culture, Media and Sport outlined the social and economic objectives. London 2012 would principally: 'make the UK a world-leading sporting nation'; 'transform the heart of east London'; and 'inspire a new generation of young people to take part in volunteering, cultural and physical activity'. Head of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) Lord Sebastian Coe has argued that, contrary to critics' claims, 75 per cent of the 9.3 billion budget was not being spent on the sport itself, but on the Olympics as a means to regenerate an area, to attract investment, to build homes and to create jobs [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Yet the Olympics legacy has also accrued an army of critics. 'Every Olympian knows', wrote one columnist, 'that legacy is grass growing over defunct velodromes, cracked concourses and ghost villages' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Others have picked holes in the specifics of the Olympics legacy. Leader of Newham Council (one of the Olympic boroughs) Sir Robin Wales has argued that plans to regenerate East London look likely to come to nothing because of spending cuts [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and that locals will not benefit from the new housing [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. None of this surprised Andrew Gilligan who argued in the Spectator that, 'building a big swimming pool is a silly way to create homes and jobs' [Ref: [Spectator](#)]. As for trying to raise participation levels, particularly among young people, the government has actually been forced to abandon its target of increasing the number of people participating in sport by

## THE LONDON OLYMPICS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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1million [Ref: [FT](#)]. Still others have criticised the very idea of having a legacy at all, such as Professor Gavin Poynter from the University of East London. He argues that politicians should not be using sport to achieve political objectives [Ref: [spiked](#)]. We need, he argues, to separate sport from that which is being done in its name.

### The spirit of the Olympics

Is it possible to simply savour the Olympics for its own sake, regardless of the debates over cost and legacy? Certainly, as this Guardian editorial from the summer of 2011 shows, the Olympics is meant to be something exceptional: 'a fortnight of a kind never before seen in the capital' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. And besides, as James Woudhuysen points out on [spiked](#): 'Even £10 billion or more is not a lot for Britain to blow on a month-long Games for the whole planet: it amounts to well under half the annual budget of the Ministry of Defence' [Ref: [spiked](#)]. Too often, some of its champions suggest, the attempt to attribute a monetary or social value to the Olympics misses its real value in and of itself, as 'the greatest sporting spectacle on Earth'. The Olympics, after all, is a celebration of physical achievement, a display of *citius, altius, fortius* [Ref: [London 2012](#)]. That is what people find inspiring. And that is why so many people applied for tickets. And besides, '[n]o matter how hard politicians may try', notes Owen Gibson, 'it is hard to get the population whipped up over contentious promises of inward investment and boosted tourism' [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. What does whip people up, however, is sporting achievement, the sight of someone breaking a record in a final, or displaying unimaginable levels of endurance. As Oliver Holt at the Daily Mirror asserts: 'The time for carping about

costs, faults and problems is over. This is the time for dreaming' [Ref: [Daily Mirror](#)]. Yet for critics, such as the Daily Mail's Robert Hardman, there is little to be dreamt about. No amount of talk of sport, and the intrinsic value of sport, persuades him. 'We have been treated like imbeciles', Hardman argues, 'by those who believe they have a divine right to squander other people's money in the name of sport' [Ref: [Daily Mail](#)].

## ESSENTIAL READING

How the costs of delivering the Olympics have changed  
*Telegraph* 5 December 2011

Let the games begin

Tessa Jowell and Iain Sinclair *Guardian* 22 July 2011

London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

London 2012

## FOR

Forget the money, the commerce and the promises: sport is all that matters here

Rick Broadbent *The Times* 14 January 2012

Jeremy Hunt: 'The London Olympics is Britain's moment and we are going for it'

Robert Winnett and James Kirkup *Telegraph* 30 December 2011

In this age of anxiety, we'll need the 2012 Olympic spirit

Jackie Ashley *Guardian* 25 December 2011

In praise of... the Olympic Countdown

*Guardian* 26 July 2011

Why the Olympics is the greatest show on earth

Oliver Holt *Mirror* 16 March 2011

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## AGAINST

I won't cheer this billion-pound private party

Libby Purves *The Times* 2 January 2012

What's another billion or three!

Robert Hardman *Daily Mail* 7 December 2011

The Olympics: festival of trouble and strife

Dave Hill *Guardian* 15 November 2011

A gold medal for idiocy

Andrew Gilligan *Spectator* 30 July 2011

How Londoners can survive the Olympics

Simon Jenkins *London Evening Standard* 26 July 2011

## IN DEPTH

London 2012: Ready, steady, oh

*Economist* 27 August 2011

The high cost of sporting glory

Stefan Szymanski *New Statesman* 5 July 2010

The Olympics Scam

Iain Sinclair *London Review of Books* 19 June 2008

London 2012: Where's the Olympic spirit?

James Woudhuysen *spiked* 2 April 2008



## BACKGROUNDEERS

Securing Olympic legacy proves tricky task

*BBC News* 10 January 2012

London's Fog of Olympic Ambivalence

Alan Cowell *New York Times* 2 January 2012

Concerns over 2012 sporting legacy

*BBC Radio 4 Today* 26 December 2011

Costing the games

*BBC Radio 4 File on 4* 30 November 2011

What we've got to change before the Olympics Games

Scott Bryan *Huffington Post* 29 November 2011

Olympics: forget the legacy and enjoy the spectacle

Tim Black *spiked* 22 November 2011

London's Olympic legacy must fulfil the promises made

Dave Hill *Guardian* 21 October 2011

Going for economic gold

*The Times* 27 July 2011

2012 Olympics: will they be 'regeneration games'?

Dave Hill *Guardian* 26 July 2010

The greatest sideshow on Earth

*Economist* 22 July 2010

The great Olympics jobs lie

*Daily Mail* 8 March 2009

The 2004 legacy that London must avoid

Robert Mendick *Evening Standard* 6 February 2009

Attempting to define indefinable for 2012 Olympics

Philip Hensher *Seattle Post* 25 August 2008

Why the 2012 London Olympics offer us a real sporting chance

Ed Curran *Belfast Telegraph* 25 August 2008

Running costs

Harry Phibbs *Guardian* 21 June 2008

London's big budget allows us to build lasting legacy

Sebastian Coe *Telegraph* 16 March 2007

My Vision for an Olympic triumph

Gordon Brown *Daily Mail* 15 March 2007

A revitalising victory

*New Statesman* 11 July 2005

London must unite around sporting ideal

Sue Mott *Telegraph* 9 July 2005

And the winner is

*Economist* 7 July 2005

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## ORGANISATIONS

British Olympic Committee

International Olympic Committee

London Organising Committee of the Olympic and

Paralympic Games (LOCOG)

Olympic Park Legacy company

## IN THE NEWS

London 2012 Olympics could create perfect traffic storm  
*Telegraph* 18 January 2012

West Ham concerned about new rental terms for Olympic stadium  
*Telegraph* 17 January 2012

UK dumps Olympic legacy target  
*Financial Times* 10 January 2012

London 2012 Olympics: businesses unprepared for disruption during Games  
*Telegraph* 10 January 2012

Cameron hails Olympic legacy as cabinet meets at site  
*BBC News* 9 January 2012

Olympic stadium not reliant on football club to survive  
*BBC News* 20 December 2011

Eyes turn to value for money for London 2012  
*Reuters* 3 March 2010

London mayor promises value for money in 2012  
*Reuters* 19 August 2008

Olympics 2012: National Audit Office warns of cost over-run  
*Telegraph* 19 June 2008

London 2012 Olympics to cost 9.3billion pounds  
*Reuters* 15 March 2007

'Fantastic... it will unite the country'  
*Guardian* 7 July 2005

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**FILMCLUB**

### RECOMMENDS:

Chariots of Fire (U), 1981

Mitchell & Kenyon - Edwardian Sports (E), 1907

Find out more about our partnership with the education charity FILMCLUB, how you can bring the power of films into your school debates, and this autumn's recommendations from the FILMCLUB team for Debating Matters!

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- I am a sixth form student and would like further details about events in my area
- I am interested in becoming a Debating Matters judge
- I am interested in sponsoring/supporting Debating Matters
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School/work phone

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**“DEBATING MATTERS  
TEACHES A WAY  
OF THINKING.  
INTELLECTUAL  
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IS CREATED BY  
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**TRISTRAM HUNT, HISTORIAN & BROADCASTER**