

The joy of the nudge Olympics

A highly successful Olympics contains two lessons for Britain's policymakers. Only one is reassuring



BY ANY measure Britain has shown the world—and its own sceptical population—that the country can stage a brilliant Olympics. As the games draw to a close on August 12th, David Cameron, the prime minister, will be delighted that the predicted “feel good factor” of hosting the event did indeed emerge. Even the sun has (mostly) shone.

In fact most Olympics work pretty well. But each host achieves that end by different means. In 2008 China staged a command-and-control games, shunting dissidents and other undesirables out of Beijing, ordering locals not to drive and even launching 1,100 cloud-seeding missiles before the opening ceremony to make it rain somewhere other than over the main stadium.

By contrast, the London games have been a “nudge” Olympics, where locals and visitors have been coaxed rather than coerced. Nudging, a theory developed by two American academics, Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, is in vogue in Britain. In 2010 the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition set up a behavioural insight unit to consider how government might subtly steer people's decisions.

Organisers have, for example, tried to make enjoyable Olympic experiences that might otherwise be annoying. The long trudge from Stratford station to the Olympic Park is lined with grinning volunteers, many shouting cheery messages reminding people that this is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Banners carry slogans: “You're part of it.” Commentators rouse crowds in a similar way. It sounds cheesy, particularly for Britain. Yet it works.

Spectators have been nudged out of their cars—public travel passes were sent out with tickets—and persuaded to avoid hotspots by a heavily-marketed website that helps them plan their journeys. “People aren't passive. They like to feel they are making decisions,” says Peter John of UCL, an adviser to the government's behavioural insight team. Less subtly, Transport for London repeatedly warned people how “exceptionally busy” the city would be.

Though many Londoners were cross about being elbowed aside for Olympic bigwigs, a diverse city of individuals not known for their pliancy listened. Many stayed at home, whereas others travelled early or late to avoid crowds. West End firms gripe about the loss of trade. With an eye on the faltering economy, even Mr Cameron has started urging people to return to the capital and eat and shop.

Henry Ford at the track

But a parallel policy lesson has also emerged, which is much less reassuring—the advantage of sheer numbers. The Olympics workforce is huge: the organising committee directly employs over 7,000 staff alongside 70,000 volunteers and 100,000 contractors. In every other sphere of British public life, staff numbers are being cut and roles merged to save money. Not so at the games.

In May, for example, Heathrow airport was castigated for long queues at passport control, caused partly by job cuts in the immigration service. Olympic organisers, by contrast, keep crowds moving through airport-style security checks in part by having lots of workers and scanners. When G4S, a private security firm, failed to provide enough workers, the army and police were simply drafted in.

Within Olympic venues, each worker is given a single task so that nothing may distract him or her from it—a kit bag to carry, a starting block to remove, a rake to smooth the sand. “Simplicity and clarity” is the guiding principle, says Paul Deighton of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Such an inflexible apportionment of jobs, rather like an old-fashioned assembly line, flouts modern management techniques where team members typically float between roles. It is viable during the Olympics because so many workers are volunteers, rewarded only with a garish purple-and-red uniform and, hopefully, a fun time. As Mr Deighton acknowledges, “If you were paying these people you’d obviously reach the conclusion that you could save costs by having fewer of them.”

The Olympics shows what can be done with volunteers—a welcome win for Mr Cameron’s flailing “Big Society” agenda. Yet it also shows the limitations of such schemes. Despite all the free labour, the London games hugely bust their original budget. What works stunningly well for a fortnight is impossible to replicate over a longer period. And, like all those Olympic athletes, the games organisers toiled for seven long years to achieve two glorious weeks in 2012.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 404, n. 8797, p. 45, 11th - 17th Aug. 2012.