

[Comment] London 2012: who will get the Olympic tickets?

RICHARD LAMING

08.06.2011 @ 17:50 CET

EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - Olympic fever is spreading in the United Kingdom and, as with all fevers, it is raising temperatures and causing a headache. The games themselves will be held in London in July and August 2012, but the nation is currently agonising over who has been successful in their application for tickets, and arguing over how the tickets should have allocated.

The most sought-after events – the opening ceremony, and the men's 100 metres final – have attracted millions of bids for tickets, while the stadium itself will hold no more than 80,000 people (and many of them will get tickets via the sponsors, the organisers, or the press). How to decide who gets to watch Usain Bolt, bolt?



The closing ceremony at the Beijing Olympics (Photo: Beijing Olympics / Xinhua)

A website was set up through which members of the public could submit their requests and payments, for each session of each event in turn, with as many as 26 sports on offer. So if you want to take a plunge on the diving, or have a shot at the archery, or if it is canoeing that floats your boat, then this is the sporting event for you.

Unlike most ticket sales websites, dispensing tickets on demand, the Olympic website has collected in all the requests and is choosing the successful ones at random with an automated lottery. The stated aim is to be fair.

But fair to whom?

It is a principle of European law that the public administration of any member state should treat the citizens of all EU member states equally. There are a few exceptions when it comes to social welfare and other similar matters, but for commercial questions the point is clear. To allow a government to discriminate in favour of its

own citizens and companies and against foreigners would be to permit the return of national protectionism, something to which European integration is firmly opposed.

The Olympics in London next year are bound by the requirement not to discriminate in this way because some of their funding is coming from public sources. In fact, as much as £9.3 billion is being provided by the taxpayer through one means or another, from central government, from the national lottery, and from a levy on taxpayers in London itself.

As a result, residents of the UK and all the other member states of the European Economic Area plus Switzerland have to be treated equally in the allocation of tickets. The fact that people in the UK, and particularly people in London, are paying to host this party does not give them a greater expectation of being allowed to join in. European law won't allow it. (Other European countries also have allocations of tickets, but much smaller, and they have to open up their tickets sales to the rest of Europe, too.)

You can understand why some people in London feel aggrieved, but they should not be surprised. Non-discrimination has been a founding principle of European integration since the very beginning – indeed, Lionel Robbins write of the importance of the free flow of commerce across borders as far back as 1937. If anyone is to blame, it is the politicians who should have thought of this before plunging into the bid, but too late now.

The crucial point is that European law does not distinguish between different types of commerce. Culture and sport do not get special treatment. The construction of an identity is treated no differently from the construction of a stadium. Maybe that is what needs to change.

Under the Lisbon treaty, the European Union now has the power to "carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States" in the field of sport. Perhaps a part of the Olympic legacy should be to recognise the special place that sport plays in the public life of Europe and to protect it a little from the fullest consequences of the marketplace.

The European Union is founded on a single market, but needs to be more than that. There are aspects of our life together as Europeans that cannot be expressed in purely monetary terms, and they should not be dismissed as worthless. Against the background of the crisis among the banks and in the financial markets, we should remember how else we can build Europe together.

The writer is chair of Federal Union (and lives in London)
www.federalunion.org.uk

© 2011 EUobserver.com. All rights reserved. Printed on 18.06.2011.