



**Baroness Jo Valentine – Speech in Baroness Gardner’s debate  
6 May 2008**

I’d like to thank Baroness Gardner for calling this timely debate.

Last year, Visit London tells us there were 16m visitors to London, contributing an estimated £15bn to the economy. And many of these visitors go on to visit the UK – London is the natural gateway to Britain.

In just four years, the Olympic curtain will be raised – and, as the directors of the show, we must be ready. We won the Olympics based on our claims for their legacy. And hospitality and tourism can be one of the most important facets of that legacy.

Aside of the extra tourism spend accompanying the Games, let’s use 2012 as a trigger:

- to upgrade our visitor offer so that those visiting recommend the Capital to their friends, and
- to employ more Londoners in a sector which is traditionally a magnet for migrant workers

This – I’m afraid – is where the crunch is. London simply must do two things if it is to realise these benefits.

- a transformed quality of visitor experience and
- a workforce with the skills to do the hospitality and leisure jobs.

In 2012, London will be on display, and hundreds of thousands of people will pass through the East End, the West End, and dare I say it, Heathrow.

Let me start at the airport. Heathrow was last year ranked 90 out of 101 international airports for overall passenger service. I am delighted that BAA and BA have fastened their seatbelts for take off to remedy recent 'local difficulties'. We have four years to get the experience at London's airports back to world class. Here’s a couple of steps along the way:

There should be one 'owner' of terminal waiting times - whether airline or airport operator - with the primary responsibility for getting



the passenger off the airplane and through the airport with the minimum hassle.

The Home Office should set itself targets for queues at Immigration which progressively decline over the four years, and it must commit itself to delivering the staff resource needed to meet them: that means more immigration officers, not fewer.

And please, BAA can we have Heathrow East open in time for the flame to be lit, rather than after it is extinguished. By the time we get to 2012, visitors must be made to feel welcome from touch-down to take-off.

From Heathrow to the West End, the heart of one of the World's most famous Cities. We find the Eye, Buckingham Palace, the British Museum, a renovated South Bank and a wonderful variety of restaurants feeding and fed by London's cosmopolitan people.

London's theatres have never been more popular – they contribute £1.5bn per year to the Capital's economy – yet their buildings and facilities owe more to the 19<sup>th</sup> than the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Surely in the next four years owners and Government could find a way to upgrade at least some of these buildings in time for 2012? (I note that several of us will be back here tomorrow debating this precise issue.)

But some of London's iconic streets do not have the quality feel of the European boulevards. The West End is busy in an ugly way – traffic congestion, pollution.

Compared with staging the Olympics, improving our streetscapes ought to be simple. Now's the time for central London boroughs, working with the new Mayor, to create a deliverable and imaginative plan for upgrading their public realm in the next four years.

Renovated streets, pavements, meeting places and lighting are critical. But we must also show imagination! We must help visitors find their way – there are already plans for signposting walking routes across the city, which could allow for pauses at traffic-free oases brightened by public art, events and animation? We have to make the West End the best end!



And finally, what of East London? The Olympic organisations have to get the venues ready and prepare for the event itself. They seem to be making good progress. But there's an Olympic opportunity to make sense of the visitor attractions in this area; the O2, ExCeL and the new aquarium, Biota, on top of the venues.

A further thought. After many years of debate, London remains the only major city in Europe to lack a **Convention Centre** such as the Palais des Congres in Paris to host the largest, most prestigious - and of course most profitable - conferences. We must not forget business travellers to London who are the most valuable contributors to our capital's hospitality and tourist industry.

The five Boroughs united by the Olympics are also united by high unemployment. As a region, London has the highest unemployment rate in the UK.

We have a new London Skills and Employment Board, established recently with a remit to match training provision to the needs of employers and would-be employees. Its Employer Accord guarantees interviews to unemployed applicants who have the necessary skills, for up to 30,000 additional jobs surrounding the Games.

It is vital that the hospitality and tourism industry signs up to such initiatives wholeheartedly. We must equip the people of London to take advantage of the benefits coming our way – and not remain in a situation in which some of the cities' largest employers put jobs on a website and are inundated with applications, not one of them from a Londoner.

Making the most of the Olympics for London's tourism sector is not a solo performance. It requires a large cast. If London is to take a bow, to a standing ovation from both visitors and residents alike in 2012, we must have a script worthy of the occasion and of the world's leading city.

If we do that, the contribution of tourism to London and the UK economy can only get better.