

Raymond J. de Souza: Games showcase a vibrant display of youth in the world's most aged nation

The Olympics brings us competition among young people; the most important economic, social, political and culture challenge of the 21st century will be competition for young people

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An elderly woman watches the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games from her home in Yokohama, Japan, on July 26. PHOTO BY YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP

There was something fitting about Tokyo's vacant arenas, with no one to watch the Olympic athletes. That's the near future of Japan — not youthful exertion, but a great emptiness as the country ages into an infirm and deserted future.

The Olympic motto is “*Citius, Altius, Fortius*,” which was proposed by Father Henri Didon, a Dominican priest, and adopted by his friend, Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games. Translated, it means “Faster, Higher, Stronger.” An inspiration, to be sure. Japan could use it, as its future is slower, lesser, feebler.

The Olympic host cities are often symbolic. Most infamous, of course, were the 1936 games in Berlin, which were intended by Hitler as an exaltation of the Nazi

ideology. Germany had been banned from the 1920 and 1924 games as punishment for its aggression in the First World War (the other central powers were also banned in 1920). By 1936, the Games had been intended to signify the reintegration of Germany into the family of nations.

In 1948, London hosted the “austerity Games” — no new facilities built — given Britain was victorious but still rationing after the Second World War.

Then came the “rehabilitation” series — Rome 1960, Tokyo 1964, Munich 1972 — in which the Axis powers were celebrated for their democratic transformations.

The boycott Games followed: many African nations boycotted Montreal 1976, in protest of apartheid in South Africa; America led a Western boycott of Moscow 1980 over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and the Soviet Union refused to attend Los Angeles 1984 to return the favour.

Tokyo will be remembered as the pandemic Games, with Japan’s elderly population too at risk to attend. Japan’s present is the world’s future, and it will touch every aspect of life. Currently, about nine per cent of the global population is over 65; that is expected to grow to 17 per cent by 2050.

There are vast areas of rural Asia and small-town Europe where prenatal clinics have closed, schools are shuttered and even universities are desperate to attract students. The Olympics brings us competition *among* young people; the most important economic, social, political and culture challenge of the 21st century will be competition *for* young people.

Japan has long been known as the most aged nation on earth, with as many senior citizens as Canada’s entire population: 28 per cent of its 127 million people are over 65.

Japan is rich, so it is attempting to use technology to cope with its massive elderly population and lack of people to look after them. Robots are deployed, walkers are equipped with GPS to track those who may wander off in their dementia and extraction services are at the ready to retrieve the bodies of those who die alone in their apartments, slowly decomposing for weeks.

Unlike Japan, China got old before it got rich. In 2020, there were 191 million people over the age of 65 in China, representing 13.5 per cent of the population. By 2050, that will climb to a staggering 370 million people, approximately 30 per cent of the population, which is older than Japan is now. Without Japan’s wealth,

however, there will be no extraction teams to recover the bodies of the elderly Chinese who die alone.

How catastrophic are the demographics for China? On current trends, its population will almost halve from 1.41 billion to 730 million by 2100, when it will have as many 85-year-olds as 18-year-olds.

China is trying desperately to cope. In 2016, the Chinese regime revised its one-child policy to a two-child policy, and this year made it a three-child policy. The totalitarian regulation of births — complete with forced abortions, sterilizations, incarcerations and breeding permits — has been the largest and most systematic violation of human rights by any government program in the world for four decades.

Yet even as the Chinese Communist regime relaxes its coercion on the general population, it is tightening the screws on its Uyghur Muslim minority, using all measures at its disposal to reduce births in that community.

In Europe, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi hosted a national conference on the disappearing Italian nation in May, where he introduced a “universal single allowance” to encourage Italians to have children. “An Italy without children is an Italy that does not believe and does not plan. It is an Italy destined to slowly grow old and disappear,” he said.

Draghi, as head of the European Central Bank, was credited with saving the euro. Will there be a Europe to save in 30 years, given that Germany, Spain and Portugal share Italy’s demographics?

Canada is not immune, either. Our aging population, with all that implies for the labour force and health care, has been somewhat masked by mass immigration. That’s an option Asia and Europe don’t have, but it comes with its own challenges.

Canada’s plan to import some 10 per cent of the population every 10 years is almost unmatched in human history. And the pandemic will make it worse: births in British Columbia were down 18 per cent this year, for example, and demographic facts endure for generations.

They will soon extinguish the Olympic flame in Tokyo, a suitable sign of sunset coming to the land of the rising sun.

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