Olympic opening ceremony gave us a long-overdue tribute; Columnist.

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A LITTLE bit of Olympic history was made in Newcastle on Sunday night and I can say my family were there. The pre-tournament favourites for the Gold medal in the men's football were knocked out by plucky outsiders Honduras.

It's fantastic that we are so involved.

When councils were having their road repairs budgets cut five years ago to pay for the London Olympics, I had a huge sense of 'here we go again', yet another project putting London centre-stage at our expense.

But Sunday shows that the organisers have made good their promises to create an event the whole nation can participate in.

I have been excited for weeks at my chance to go back to St James' Park for perhaps the last time and watch football as it was meant to be, Sports Direct sponsorship and commercialism stripped back revealing the game's true inner beauty.

From the progress of the Olympic Flame to the massed audiences for TV coverage, the nation has taken the Olympics to their hearts. Almost half our population watched the opening ceremony, the BBC playing to perfection their role as the nation's broadcaster. Just as the nation has united behind the Games, there was almost universal admiration for this opening ceremony. Everyone could feel included in and represented by this multi-faceted performance of our island's history.

The show's director, Danny Boyle, gave a nice vignette covering the Industrial Revolution. He gave a fine reminder that once, the North East of England was the engine of a world-spanning empire but that industrialisation brought the dark side of a heavy social cost.

The importance of the North East has long been side-lined in our national mythology, but if we can see ourselves so clearly in an opening ceremony, then surely it has perfectly captured what it means to be British.

So how to interpret the burst of criticism that erupted on Friday night of this tremendous national celebration? A Conservative MP, Aidan Burley, took to Twitter to criticise the whole ceremony as politically correct, and demand the Red Arrows, Shakespeare and the Stones.

The media then took great delight in reminding their audiences that Aidan Burley's political career has hitherto mainly been mainly memorable for the manner of his resignation from a minor governmental role.

Unfortunately for him, no resignation on a matter of principle, but after a newspaper revealed he had attended a stag party which included a groom dressed in a Hitler costume and a toast to the Third Reich. Burley's career ended abruptly when it emerged that he had hired that costume.

Many commentators made the point that someone with such a clearly shaky grasp on modern history...
is perhaps not in a strong position to start demanding singular historical narratives about the United Kingdom.

But Burley's call for a strong national narrative also missed the perfect contrast between Boyle's ceremony and dictatorships' favourite form of Olympic opening ceremonies.

Both Berlin in 1936 and Beijing in 2008 gave perfectly choreographed representations of unity and progress.

These shows captured the essence of totalitarianism: the subjugation of the individual to the group, in this case the nation, but also its leaders' wishes and whims.

But while dissidents were hidden and repressed in Berlin and Beijing, on Friday, one of the Government's most vocal human rights critics, Shami Chakrabarti, actually carried the Olympic flag.

Boyle captured with this our defining strength as a democratic nation, messiness and conflict bringing dynamism, diversity and a power of self-reinvigoration. We have always been driven forward by individuals willing to challenge existing power structures for our general benefit.

From Earl Grey's Great Reform Act, through Gladstone's Newcastle speech inventing the modern welfare state and the Jarrow Crusade, the North East has always played a role in our national coming-of-age.

Although we might not always get the credit we deserve, the opening ceremony gave a long-overdue but welcome affirmation of our contributions.

Politicians who want to whitewash our diverse history want to deny crediting how important our national diversity was in securing our contemporary place in the world.

Beware of politicians bearing singular national narratives: the next group they write out of the national storyline might just be you!