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The evolution of sport policy since 1945

Professor Kevin Jefferys,
Plymouth University

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Introduction

Thanks for invitation to speak today and I do hope that giving an historical account of sport policy since 1945 can help to contextualize the current policy environment. What I propose to offer today is a paper in two parts. In the first part I'd like to give an overview of my research and then I'll follow that with some reflections on perennial issues in sport policy that still resonate today.

Overview of research into sport policy

I'm basing my work on a range of materials including various Cabinet, Treasury and departmental papers held at the National Archives, and maybe I could start my overview with a brief comparison between the Olympics of 2012 and 1948. As the clock ticks down (172 days to go), London 2012 is set to become a spectacular global phenomenon, likely to be followed on television by over two-thirds of the world's population. As we know, huge sums of public money, in excess of nine billion pounds, have been committed to ensure the success of the venture.

It all seemed so different when London previously hosted the Games in 1948. At that time, Britain was still recovering from the ravages of war. There was no prospect of building a new Olympic site, and venues that had escaped war damage such as Wembley Stadium had to be hastily adapted. The idea of

lavish government investment in 1948 was a non-starter; the Labour government of the day made it clear that Olympic organisers had to cover all costs from a modest budget. As a result, the 1948 Games are commonly remembered as 'the austerity Olympics'.

There are some intriguing parallels between the Olympics of 1948 and 2012, with both taking place against a backdrop where British governments were faced with crippling public debt. But the contrasts are more striking than the similarities, not only in the scale and cost of the two events - one hastily put together at a time when much of world sport was unpaid and based on amateur principles and the other meticulously planned in an era of commercialisation and professionalism - but also in the degree of involvement by political leaders.

Before the post-1945 age of the welfare state, sport was a largely voluntary enterprise, overseen by the individual national governing bodies responsible for running hundreds of separate sports. What happened on the athletics track, the tennis court or the football pitch was not considered to be the preserve of the state. Direct and sustained interest of the type shown by Tony Blair in the framing and winning of the 2012 Olympic bid was unimaginable in the era of his 1940s predecessor, Clement Attlee.

It would be misleading to suggest that sport and politics operated in entirely separate compartments before 1945. Britain had a tradition stretching back to the Victorian period of local authorities providing (on a non compulsory and so variable basis) parks and other recreational facilities such as swimming baths. And with the spread of international competition in the first half of the twentieth century, ministers sometimes found themselves embroiled in unwelcome diplomatic disputes arising from sporting controversy. In the wake of the bitter dispute over the tactics of the English cricket team battling the Australians for the Ashes in 1933, the Dominions Secretary J. H. Thomas remarked: 'No politics ever introduced in the British Empire ever caused me so much trouble as this damn Bodyline bowling.'

But the reality remained that, in an age when the role of the state was much less intrusive than today, it was commonplace to assume that sport and politics did not mix. The contrast between then and now – exemplified by the sharp differences between the 1948 and 2012 Olympics – provides the context for my research, which looks to examine and explain the increased interaction between sport and politics since 1945. This interaction can be gauged in various ways, among them the manner in which, by the end of the twentieth century, prime ministers were routinely expected to lend support to efforts to bring major sporting events to British shores. Blair was not the first, or the last, national leader to put his reputation on the line in the interests of sport. His Conservative predecessor John Major perhaps started this trend (continued by Gordon Brown and David Cameron) when he pulled out all the stops in supporting an earlier Olympic bid made by Manchester. Far from being dragged reluctantly into proceedings, as before 1939, the contemporary politician is often found showcasing the virtues of international sport.

Domestically, the relationship between sport and politics has also converged. This trend can be traced in the development of administrative machinery for the oversight of sport and recreation and in the gradual rise in central government funding for sport. Such funding was almost non-existent at the end of the Second World War, whereas hundreds of millions of pounds are now of course directed annually to sport and recreation through this department and distributed via the various delivery agencies.

So the starting point for my research has been to ask when, why and how has the sport-politics relationship become closer, and what have been the characteristics and limitations of that relationship? At this point it may help to outline what I think (with hindsight) are four broad stages in the development of sport policy. This is a crude categorization, and in my research I try to distinguish across the whole period for example between reluctant intervention by politicians (occasions when political leaders had little choice but to intervene

in sport, as in the case of football hooliganism in the 1980s) and more creative efforts to shape and influence sporting development. But I hope the four sub-periods that follow nevertheless point us towards broad trends:

1. 1945-64

In this period there was no government 'sport policy' as such. Attlee's government gave important practical and moral support to the London Olympics, and lobby groups and some MPs made the case that Britain's infrastructure of sporting facilities was deeply inadequate compared with many other advanced industrialized nations. But the Conservative governments of the 1950s adopted a traditionally minimalist approach, believing sport should be left to run its own affairs, a stance that largely prevailed despite the publication of the influential Wolfenden Report in 1960. This clarion call for improved facilities was a CCPR-sponsored rather than a direct government initiative, and as a result ministers did not feel obliged to take up its main recommendations. Although there was some movement on the Wolfenden proposals, when the Conservative lost office in 1964 nothing had been done to act on the central recommendation – that of introducing a 'Sports Development Council' to act as a focal point for the development of a new generation of athletic tracks, swimming pools and multi-purpose sport centres.

2. 1964-79

In my second period, spanning the Wilson-Heath-Callaghan administrations of 1964-79, central government sport 'policy' became a reality for the first time. This was partly because Harold Wilson was the first (indeed only, until more recent times) prime minister to sense the potential electoral significance of sport. He knew that sport was never of course likely to be a front-line electoral issue (though it came close in 1970), but calculated that it did no harm to his and his party's popularity to be identified with something more than the uncoordinated

and low key approach of the past, especially in the light of the growing commercial and media importance of sport. Hence, for example, Wilson sanctioned an unprecedented intervention in professional sport, providing Treasury funds to help ensure the organizational success of the 1966 World Cup and in due time making sure he was pictured with the triumphant England team (indeed at one point he virtually snatched the cup out of the players' hands!).

In relation to amateur sport, Wilson also agreed there was a need for more proactive state activity to help remedy the deficiencies identified by the Wolfenden Report. With this in mind he appointed Denis Howell as the first Minister for Sport (not 'of'), and within a couple of months Howell had established a Sports Council, initially as an advisory body with the Minister as Chairman. Among other things, the energetic and populist Howell created a system of Regional Sports Councils that gradually assessed needs and stimulated local authorities in the development of a new generation of municipal sports facilities. Despite periodic bouts of retrenchment, continuing and intensifying in the 1970s, both Labour and Conservative administrations in the 1964-79 era engendered a sense of momentum in sports development. The Sports Council was granted executive status in the early 1970s and pushed forward on various fronts: increasing levels of financial backing to British amateur teams competing overseas at events such as the Olympics; assisting clubs in improving their infrastructure; and aiding local authorities with the capital costs of new facilities. Between 1973 and 1977 facilities for indoor sport in Britain almost trebled, and on a decade-long time scale there were notable advances particularly in relation to the construction of leisure centres, up from 12 in 1971 to 449 in 1981.

2. 1980s

The 1980s, the third of my four stages, reminds us that it's not appropriate to think historically of a uniform process, of steadily advancing closeness in the relationship between sport and politics across time. Many of the tensions of this

period reflected prime minister's Thatcher's indifference towards sport, and the lasting effects of her (mostly) failed attempt to persuade British athletes not to attend the 1980 Moscow Olympics in protest at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Elite-level sport could not rely, as it was later to do, on strong and consistent ministerial backing for bids to host the Olympics, with failed attempts being made by both Birmingham and Manchester in the 1980s. And on the domestic front, the Sports Council found it difficult to maintain the momentum of earlier years, with sections of Conservative parliamentary opinion questioning the need for either a Council or for a Sports Minister, preferring some form of return to a 1950s-style hands-off approach.

The low priority accorded to recreation in government circles was also reflected in a high turnover of Sports ministers. Thatcher appointed five during her premiership, all working as Under-Secretaries at the DOE, and most struggled to make an impact. Peter Corrigan of *The Independent* summed up the consensus among contemporary observers: 'Hector Monro took the Moscow rap, Neil Macfarlane carried the can for Bradford and Heysel, Dick Tracey never solved anything [and] Colin Moynihan was last seen floating down the Thames strapped to an identity card' (a reference to the difficulties encountered in trying to deal with football hooliganism). This scathing critique, it might be added was echoed in senior Conservative circles, at least by John Major - rising rapidly in ministerial ranks at the time – who later referred in his autobiography to the absence of any 'coherent and positive strategy' towards sport in the 1980s.

4. 1990-2010

It was Major of course who set about remedying the situation as prime minister in the 1990s, and coming closer to the present day, it seems safe to conclude that the fourth of my sub-periods, from 1990 to 2010, witnessed significant advances in sport policy – certainly in comparison with the 1980s. Much of what took place stemmed initially from Major's personal love of sport and his sense (like

that of Harold Wilson) that political opportunities were being missed by not at least attempting to tap into sport as a hugely popular social and cultural phenomenon. Major's key achievement, it's generally agreed, was to find significant new sources of revenue for elite and grass-roots sport via the introduction of the National Lottery. During his seven-year premiership Treasury grants to the Sports Council (what became Sport England) remained generally static and local authority spending rose only modestly, but the success of the Lottery ensured markedly increased investment for sport, particularly on capital projects.

Yet despite his best efforts, there was always a sense that Major promised more than he delivered for sport. Improvements were slow in coming, and generous new funding systems for elite athletes (enabling them to train on a comparable basis with major international rivals) came on stream too late to influence Team GBs poor showing at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, which resulted Britain finishing a lowly 36th in the medal table. The advances of the 1990s were arguably the product less of evolving maturity in the system of governance for sport than of the exceptional personal interest of the Prime Minister. Major's unstinting enthusiasm was not widely shared at the top level of his administration. According to a top official quoted by Major's biographer, his Cabinet colleagues 'were variously indifferent to, amused or irritated by, his passion for sport'.

The steps taken by Major nevertheless provided a platform upon which 'New Labour' built after 1997. Blair, like Major, clearly felt there was some political capital to be gained through a progressive sports policy. With the British economy in reasonable shape for the bulk of Blair's ten-year premiership, and with the luxury of huge parliamentary majorities in 1997 and 2001, a brief summary of what was achieved in the Blair era might include sustained investment in elite and community sport, the revival of school sport after years of neglect and of course securing the right to host London 2012. On

the other hand, by the time Gordon Brown took over the reins of power in 2007 it was becoming evident that it would not be easy to deliver on all aspects of the ambitious Olympic legacy plan, particularly in relation to increasing participation. And by the time of the 2010 election campaign as we know none of the parties were keen to talk about the nation's massive public debt, which had spiralled to a post-war high with the onset of recession in 2008. Looking forward, there were clearly question marks over whether the advances secured for sport since the early 1990s could be sustained in the long run.

Perennial problems in sport policy

In the final part of my paper I'd like to take stock and touch upon *some* of the recurring problems that have beset sport policy and which continue to be topical today.

Taking a positive view of the overall picture since the Second World War, in many respects sport occupies a place in political discourse today that was inconceivable at the time of the 1948 Olympics. Prompted by a mixture of pragmatic, ideological and electoral impulses, state involvement in sport had been transformed, not uniformly over the whole post-war period, but with discernable leaps forward nevertheless.

But on a more negative reading, we have be careful not to exaggerate the extent to which sport and politics have become natural bedfellows, and we have to acknowledge there have been many disappointments along the road to 2012. The optimistic 1970s slogan of 'sport for all' has remained a long way from becoming a reality, and I'd like to briefly allude to four of the enduring difficulties in sport policy that we might wish to explore further in discussion.

A. It will come as no surprise to learn that funding shortages have been a source of concern throughout the post-war period. Starting from a tiny base, direct exchequer funding for sport did rise after 1964 (Denis Howell engaged in some

battles royal with the Treasury) but by the end of the 1970s had still not reached the levels proposed by the Wolfenden Report in 1960. In the mid-1990s the entire budget of the Department of National Heritage (where sport formed only one component of departmental responsibility) amounted to just 0.4 per cent of all central government spending, a proportion not dissimilar to what was spent on equivalent services a decade earlier. While account must of course be taken of (fluctuating, but significant) levels of local authority spending on recreation and the additional input generated by lottery money since the mid-1990s, it's difficult to disagree with the recent verdict of *Guardian* journalist David Conn that the sums spent today on community sport in particular are 'heartbreakingly small', certainly when seen in relation to the budgets accorded to bigger spending departments such as health and education.

B. Part of the reason for recurrent funding problems, I think, has been the unstable administrative framework in which sport policy has been set for much of the post-war period. Making the case for sports expenditure has not been helped by the junior status (in most but not all cases) of the ministers appointed and frequent concern over where, within Whitehall, the role of Sports Minister best fitted: the post having variously resided since 1964 at the Education Department (on two separate occasions), the MHLG, the DOE and DNH before becoming finally established at DCMS. This picture of fragmentation at ministerial level has been further compounded by other departments retaining influence over particular aspects of the sporting landscape, notably the DfE on school sport and the FCO on international-related sporting matters.

Similarly, achieved settled continuity of policy has been difficult in the face of ongoing disputes over the role, status and functions of the delivery bodies charge with day-to-day oversight of sport. I've already mentioned that the advisory Sports Council of 1965 was replaced by an executive Council in the 1970s, initially on the grounds that it would be less prone to ministerial

interference, though by the 1980s the Council was under attack for lacking any degree of independence. The ex-civil servant David Pickup, appointed Director General of the Sports Council in 1988, later commented in a revealing memoir on how he found himself venturing into a 'sad landscape', where he inherited 'a system of planning and provision for sport which has failed to match the rate of progress achieved elsewhere in the developed world'. During Pickup's five years at the helm and beyond, the arguments continued to rage behind the scenes as to whether the Sports Council needed strengthening, adapting or abolishing. In 1993 the government shelved plans for restructuring, only to return a couple of years later after tortuous negotiations to the idea of separating out responsibility for elite and community sport.

C. Funding shortages and disputed administrative structures seem to me to have contributed to a third enduring problem, that of determining where the balance should lie in prioritizing the needs of community, elite and school sport. No integrated approach to these three 'pillars' has been evident for long periods. While there was no golden age of participation, it's fair to say that in the 1964-79 period when the emphasis was on building new facilities, community sport held sway. 'Sport for all' was at least an aspiration, if not a carefully costed and measured feature of policy. David Pickup claimed when he went to the Sports Council in 1988 that the question of where the balance should be struck between programmes aimed at promoting mass participation and those designed to encourage excellence had 'never been seriously addressed'. Under his stewardship, the Council decided in the early 1990s to give a higher priority than in the past to developing Olympic sports, a trend that intensified when John Major's government diverted large-scale lottery funding towards the training needs of elite athletes.

In explaining why the balance has been tilted in quite the way it has in recent years, I'd like to end by noting that both a strength and weakness sport

policy has been a high degree of dependence on the personal interest (or lack of it) among successive prime ministers. The periods of most discernable advance have come under sympathetic leaders such as Wilson, Major and Blair, all of whom had an acute sense of the particular importance of international sport. But across the post-war period as a whole, sport has often been less fortunate with the incumbents of Number Ten, and as a small cog in the large government machine has frequently struggled to raise its profile in corridors of power.

D. So, finally, sport has always had to contend with variable but often shallow levels of political support. The imminence of London 2012 perhaps finds sport policy in a sort of limbo, one where all contemporary politicians readily fall in behind the consensus that the Olympics will bring a host of benefits, embracing trade, regeneration and national well-being as well as sporting legacy. We all of course eagerly anticipate what will be the major sporting spectacle on these shores in our lifetimes, anxious that the Games will be a resounding success. But it might be concluded that on the basis of the historical record, meaningful and sustained political commitment to sport in the future is far from guaranteed. It may be salutary to finish with the story (from a time only 20 years ago, underlining the unreliable nature of political attitudes to sport) told by David Pickup - of one day in 1992 bumping into Margaret Thatcher's husband, Denis. Referring to John Major's pledges of large-scale state financial resources to bolster Manchester's bid to host the 2000 Olympics, Denis Thatcher, according to Pickup, was 'near-apoplectic' and 'noisily let it be known that such a nonsense would never have been contemplated had his good lady still been in charge'.

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