Introduction

The London Olympics of 2012 will be a spectacular global phenomenon. In excess of £9 billion of public money has been committed to ensure the success of the Games. The organisers have pledged a tangible Olympic 'legacy', delivering sustainable regeneration in east London and lasting improvements for British sport. The picture was very different when London last staged the Games. In 1948 Britain was still recovering from the ravages of war, and the idea of building a dedicated Olympic park or making extravagant legacy promises was a non-starter. Although successful, they truly were 'the austerity Olympics'.

The contrasts between the London Games of 1948 and 2012 are striking, not only in scale and cost - one hastily put together at a time when much of world sport was 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. In the 1940s, sport in Britain was essentially a voluntary enterprise, overseen by the British Olympic Association (BOA) and hundreds of individual national governing bodies, responsible for running separate sports. It was widely assumed that sport and politics did not 'mix'. What happened on the athletics track, the tennis court or the football pitch was not considered 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. These differences exemplify a broader trend towards convergence between sport and politics in Britain over the past sixty years, especially in relation to international sport. Far from engaging tentatively in sporting affairs, contemporary politicians now personally champion bids for Britain to stage major sporting events such as the Olympics and football's World Cup. This convergence can also be traced in other ways: in the evolution since the 1960s of central government machinery to oversee sport and in incremental rises in state funding. Such funding was minimal at the end of the Second World War, whereas today hundreds of millions of pounds are directed annually to sport through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Education (DfE), which has responsibility for sport in state schools.

This Ruff guide explores what we might learn about the prospects for securing Britain's Olympic legacy by examining how successive governments have approached sport since the Second World War. The emphasis is mostly on traditionally amateur sports: Olympic disciplines such as athletics, which sought state financial assistance in the post-war period, whereas professional sports such as football were expected to pay their own way. The focus here is on the evolution of central government policy, and areas where exchequer resources have been deployed such as school sport, but this should not overshadow the key role played by local authorities -
stretching back to the Victorian period - in funding parks, playing fields and swimming pools for everyday recreational use.

Sport policy in historical context, 1945-97

The evolution of policy since the war can be divided into four broad stages:

1. In the 1945-64 period, as before the war, there was no government 'sport policy' as such. The Attlee administration's extension of welfare principles did not extend to the sporting arena. Ministerial backing for the 1948 Olympics was designed primarily to bolster post-war economic recovery. For several years thereafter, a small number of MPs and peers, working through a newly-created Parliamentary Sports Committee, lamented that Britain's sporting infrastructure remained deeply inadequate compared with other advanced industrialised nations. Sport, these reformers argued, was a valuable means of countering problems such as youth alienation at a time of rising affluence, and required investment at all levels, from the casual participant to elite performers. Britain's unpaid amateurs found it increasingly difficult to compete on the international stage against the likes of state-sponsored Soviet athletes. One 1950s British Olympic diver living in London had to fund regular travel to Cardiff to access the nearest indoor high-board training facility. Conservative governments of the 1950s maintained a minimalist approach, leaving sport to run its own affairs. This stance largely prevailed despite the publication in 1960 of the influential Wolfenden Report, which called for a range of state initiatives to enhance 'sport in the community'. However, there was no action on the central recommendation to introduce a 'Sports Development Council' as a focal point for the building of a new generation of athletic tracks and multi-purpose sport centres.

2. It was in the years spanning the Wilson-Heath-Callaghan administrations of 1964-79 that a government sport policy really emerged. Labour's Harold Wilson was the first Prime Minister to sense the potential electoral resonance of sport. He knew that sport was never likely to be a front-line electoral issue, although it came close in 1970, when sporting links with apartheid South Africa (and England's defeat in the football World Cup) threatened to overshadow the general election campaign. But Wilson calculated that it did no harm to his party's popularity to be identified with a more positive approach to sport. He sanctioned an
unprecedented intervention in professional sport, providing Treasury funds to help ensure the organisational success of the 1966 football World Cup on English soil, and ensuring he was personally associated with the success of the English team. But it was in relation to amateur sport that fresh departures were most apparent after 1964. Labour thinking in opposition had long echoed Wolfenden's view that state funding was required to increase the range and availability of sporting facilities. With this in mind, Wilson appointed the energetic and populist Denis Howell as the first Minister for Sport in 1964, and within months he had established a Sports Council, initially as an advisory body with the Minister as Chairman. Despite periodic bouts of retrenchment, both Labour and Conservative administrations between 1964 and 1979 provided new momentum in sports development. The Sports Council was granted executive status in the early 1970s, freeing it from direct ministerial control. It worked to provide travel costs and expenses to British amateur teams competing overseas at events such as the Olympics, fund coaching schemes across a range of sports, assist clubs in updating their facilities, and aid local authorities with the capital costs of new projects. Between 1973 and 1977 the number of facilities for indoor sport in Britain almost trebled, and there were notable advances in the construction of multi-purpose leisure centres, up from just 12 in 1971 to 449 in 1981.

3. In the 1980s this process was abruptly interrupted by Margaret Thatcher's indifference towards sport, and the lasting effects of her 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 at this time on sustained ministerial backing for bids to host the Olympics; failed attempts were made by both Birmingham and Manchester. On the domestic front, sections of Conservative parliamentary opinion questioned the need for either a Sports Council or a Minister for Sport, advocating a return to a 1950s-style hands-off approach. And after years of progress for school sport under the terms of the 1944 Education Act, ministers anxious to reduce public spending embarked on a policy that was later held up as a symbol of Thatcher's disregard for sport: the sale of school playing fields. Some 5,000 fields across the country were lost during the 1980s to new building development and, with teachers in dispute over pay and conditions, school sport went into a period of pronounced decline.

4. From 1990-97, Thatcher's successor John Major went some way towards repairing the damage, inspired by his personal love of sport and his sense (like that of Harold Wilson) that the popularity of sport presented political opportunities. Major's key achievement was to find significant new sources of revenue for elite and grass-roots sport, especially for capital projects, after the introduction of the National Lottery in 1994. Despite Major's efforts, by the time he left office, school sport remained in the doldrums, and generous new funding systems for elite athletes came on stream too late to influence Britain's poor showing at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, when Team GB finished a humiliating 36th in the medal table.
Policy lessons: advances and limitations

By 1997 state involvement in sport had been transformed. Sports administrators and governing bodies still prized their independence, but they valued assistance (though not control) from politicians prepared to sanction funding for sport from the grass roots up to international level. More people than ever before had access to local recreational amenities such as pools and sport centres, and structures were in place to enable elite athletes to compete seriously at future Olympics. On the other hand, optimistic 1970s talk of 'sport for all' remained a long way from becoming a reality. Only about one quarter of adults took part in sport regularly, and school sport was at a low ebb. In weighing up the policy lessons of the 1945-97 period as a whole, four enduring difficulties can be highlighted:

1. Funding constraints were a major source of concern throughout the post-war years. Starting from a tiny base, direct exchequer funding for sport did rise after 1964, 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 (the home of the Minister for Sport at that time) amounted to just 0.4 per cent of all central government spending.

2. Recurrent funding problems stemmed in part from the unstable administrative framework in which sport policy was set. Making the case for state investment was not helped by Sports Ministers' junior status (never above Minister of State level) and frequent shuffling of the sport portfolio within Whitehall. After 1964, the Sports Minister resided variously at the Education Department (on two separate occasions), the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, the Department of the Environment and the Department of National Heritage, before becoming part of the DCMS in 1997, where it remains. This picture of fragmentation at ministerial level was compounded by other departments retaining responsibility in specific areas: the education ministry for school sport and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for international-related sporting matters. Achieving policy continuity was also difficult in the face of ongoing disputes over the role, status and functions of the delivery bodies. The Sports Council was granted executive status in the 1970s largely on the grounds that it would be less prone to ministerial interference, but by the 1980s the Council was again under attack for lacking independence. Arguments continued to rage into the 1990s as to whether the Sports Council needed strengthening, adapting or abolishing. In 1993 Major's government shelved plans for a restructure, only to decide a couple of years later to separate responsibility for elite and community sport between new bodies including UK Sport and Sport England.

3. Funding shortages and disputed administrative structures contributed to a third problem, determining the balance between the needs of recreational and elite sport. In 1964-79, when the emphasis was on building new facilities, community initiatives were the top priority. 'Sport for all' was the rhetorical aspiration. By the early 1990s the Sports Council gave a higher priority
than in the past to developing Olympic sports, a trend intensified by John Major's diversion of large-scale lottery funding towards training elite athletes.

4. The perennial difficulties of sport policy reflected both the shallow levels of political support - among MPs at Westminster, across Whitehall, and around the Cabinet table - and a high degree of dependence on the personal interest of successive Prime Ministers. Thatcher's only prolonged intervention came when she was forced to react to events, such as 1980s football hooliganism. For the most part, sport occupied a lowly place in the political pecking order, its profile only occasionally raised by one-off events, and successive sports ministers were heavily outgunned in the battle for resources by bigger-spending Whitehall departments.

New Labour and sport

With the economy in reasonable shape and the luxury of huge parliamentary majorities in 1997 and 2001, the prospects for sport were more promising under Tony Blair's premiership than at any time in the previous generation. Progress was slow in coming, however, and in the short term all spending was constrained by Chancellor Gordon Brown's desire to work within the financial framework laid down by the previous administration. But over time the government overcame, at least partially, the characteristic shortcomings of previous policy. Sport received a sympathetic hearing in Downing Street as Blair, like Major before him, felt there was political capital to be gained, describing sport as 'an asset which is massively under-utilised'. After 2001, the duo of Tessa Jowell as Culture Secretary and Richard Caborn as Sports Minister had close links with key figures at the heart of government, such as Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, helping to explain why sport policy temporarily established a profile in the corridors of power to which it was unaccustomed.

Direct Treasury funding doubled between 2001 and 2005, with wide-ranging effects. In 1997 only a quarter of pupils in state secondary schools were doing two hours of Physical Education (PE) per week; a decade later the figure was nine out of ten. In addition, the government created almost 450 School Sports Partnerships (SSPs), responsible for stimulating inter-school games in local areas, and widely regarded as reversing the decline of school sport. Progress
was also facilitated by a more stable administrative framework. Caborn, himself a sports-fan, remained in post for longer than most of his predecessors, and worked hard to ensure that at the roles and expectations of the main delivery agencies were settled and clarified: Sport England concentrated on increasing participation, UK Sport on high performance sport, and the Youth Sport Trust monitored school sport. Above all, government policy was distinguished by its attempt to achieve a more integrated approach, trying to knit together school, community and elite-level sport, regarding recreation as part of a 'joined up' approach to deliver wider policy goals such as improved health, civic renewal and social cohesion. Blair described sport as 'a pro-education policy, a pro-health policy, an anti-crime and anti-drugs policy.'

These were the foundations in place when in 2005 the Blair administration secured its single most high-profile success in sport policy: winning the right to host the 2012 Olympics. Protracted arguments followed over whether the scale of public investment represented value for money, and whether Britain could deliver on the ambitious legacy promises that were essential to winning the bid. One of these, that Britain would maintain its high ranking in the Olympic medal table, seemed readily achievable. Lottery funding on a scale that dwarfed what went before, together with UK Sport's 'no compromise' targeting of funds at likely medal winners, helped to transform Britain's performance. At Beijing in 2008, Team GB surged to fourth in the medals table, behind only China, the USA and Russia, a position that, ironically, has only ever been bettered at the 1908 London games, with 146 medals including 56 gold, though with only 22 participating nations. On the other hand, it became apparent after Gordon Brown took over from Blair in 2007 that it would be difficult to deliver on ambitious targets to increase sporting participation. Advances such as 'Sport Action Zones' in areas of inadequate inner city provision, and the reinvigoration of 'sport development' under local authorities, were overshadowed by data showing that while the numbers playing sport three times a week rose by half a million in 2005-08, this increase had stalled by 2009. Even so, Labour went into the 2010 general election on the front foot over sport.

The Coalition, London 2012 and beyond

We now turn to sport policy under David Cameron's Coalition government, and possible policy scenarios in the aftermath of London 2012. The huge programme of spending cuts announced...
in October 2010 inevitably placed question marks over whether the advances secured for sport in the New Labour era were sustainable. From the outset, the Coalition partners were determined not to jeopardise preparations for the London Games. Like his predecessors, Cameron believed that hosting the Olympics would secure a range of benefits over and above the impact on sport, embracing trade, regeneration and national well-being. As a result, Labour's £9.3 billion budget survived the Spending Review, and funding for elite athletes was safeguarded in the medium term.

But other elements of the Blair-Brown sporting legacy fared less well: a reflection not only of the bleak economic backdrop, but also of the enduring fissures in the policymaking framework. The DCMS was initially powerless to prevent the Education Secretary, Michael Gove, scrapping Labour's £162-million a year strategy to support School Sports Partnerships. After concerted opposition from Olympic athletes, teachers, opposition MPs and sections of the press, many of the 450 SSPs were temporarily reprieved. Instead, smaller sums were committed to annual 'schools Olympics', with an end to ring-fenced funding and a 'centralised PE strategy'; if schools wished to continue with Sports Partnerships they would have to finance them from their own budgets. Dark clouds also hang over community sport provision. Labour's target of getting an extra million adults each year doing general physical activity was quietly dropped. Similarly endangered was the aim to increase by one million the numbers taking part in sport three times a week. By early 2012 the Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt was referring to what he called a 'more meaningful' measurement, based on numbers participating once a week and directed at encouraging more young adults to get involved, rather than the population as a whole.

Critics were not impressed. Sport England reported that among the myriad governing bodies, seventeen registered declining participation rates since 2007-08, with only four recording significant increases. The Guardian's Olympics editor Owen Gibson suspected that the Coalition had 'effectively swapped all the bold legacy promises for grassroots sport for a two-week jamboree that will make the nation feel a bit better about itself'. In an outspoken attack in late 2011, BOA Chairman Lord Moynihan - himself a former Conservative Sports Minister - predicted that the London Olympics would succeed in delivering on regeneration and sustainability goals, and that the British team would come close to maintaining fourth place in the medals table. But the Games would not, he claimed, inspire a new generation to take up sport. Since 2010 the sense of an integrated government sports policy has been lost. Labour's record was open to criticism: of its arbitrary targets and lack of clarity about what broader social
purposes they would achieve. But there was a least a conscious attempt at a comprehensive strategy, linking together school, community and elite sport and aiming to deploy sport in the interests of wider goals - an aspiration that fell by the wayside as austerity took hold after 2010.

Further reading


J. Coghlan with I. Webb, Sport and British Politics since 1960 (Brighton: Falmer, 1990)


K. Jefferys, Sport and Politics in Modern Britain: The Road to 2012 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

We are grateful to Kevin Jefferys for the provision of this Ruff guide, Kevin is Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Plymouth. This paper was based on a talk he gave for H&P at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in February 2012.

You can download the complete version of this paper with an executive summary and conclusions here.

Also see: