A comparison between London's 1948 'austerity Olympics' and the massive public investment in the 2012 Games, illustrates how sport and politics have converged since the Second World War, and prompts questions about how far an Olympic 'legacy' can be secured for British sport.

Assisting Olympic athletes, improving local recreational facilities and increasing participation rates have been widely accepted as legitimate objectives since the 1960s, but there has not always been consensus about the role of central government in achieving them. Sport policy has often been hamstrung by funding constraints, shallow levels of political support and an unstable policy-making environment. These problems persist today.

A key factor has been the influence of Prime Ministers' personal interest, or lack of it, in sport and its electoral resonance, with Harold Wilson pioneering government sport policy in the 1960s and Margaret Thatcher exemplifying the hands-off approach in the '80s. After 1997 the Labour government successfully built on foundations laid by John Major's administration, developing a coherent, wide-ranging strategy, investing heavily at all levels of sporting provision.

So far in the life of the 2010 parliament, sport policy has once again been disjointed. The Coalition government protected Labour's budget for the Olympics, but has been criticised for backtracking on school and community sport, and for failing to regard sport as a tool for addressing wider health and social policy ambitions.

With the sporting element of Britain's Olympic legacy in the balance, the Coalition could learn from the likes of Labour's 1975 White Paper Sport and Recreation and John Major's 1995 policy document Raising the Game.

Sport policy could be reinvigorated by the creation of a similarly radical, comprehensive statement of government intent. This would provide a fresh sense of direction and bring together the threads of school, community and elite sport into a coherent and ambitious strategy for the future.
Editor's comments - [ This paper 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. ]

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