

Book Review: Sport and Politics in Modern Britain: the Road to 2012

by Blog Admin

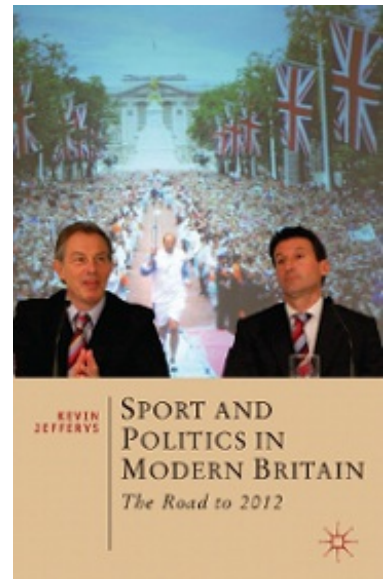
December 21, 2012

For many, the 2012 Olympics was UK sport's "Golden Summer", heavily promoted and supported by UK politicians. But, this has not always been the case, with state engagement with UK sport ebbing and flowing over political administrations through the decades of the 20th century. Daniel Burdsey finds that Kevin Jefferys' new text is an impressive overview of the politics and politicians that have shaped sports policy over the past 70 years in the UK. Covering both domestic and international sports policy as well as sport's links with the welfare state, he writes that this book would be essential reading for those planning sports policy in Whitehall today.



Sport and Politics in Modern Britain: the Road to 2012. Kevin Jefferys. Palgrave Macmillan.

As Team GB stacked up an impressive medal tally at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, one could be sure that the smiling faces and sound bites of Prime Minister, David Cameron, and Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, would be rarely far behind. The high public profile of these and other political figures at the Games illustrated the unmitigated politicisation of London 2012 – a process that began with Tony Blair's vote-swinging visit to Singapore in 2005 when the decision regarding the event's host city was made. Yet, as Kevin Jefferys' erudite volume makes clear, it has not always been this way.



Fundamentally, *Sport and Politics in Modern Britain: the Road to 2012* addresses the convergence of sport and parliamentary politics in the UK during the post-Second World War era, focusing specifically on what Jefferys refers to as 'the development of administrative machinery, both local and central, devoted to sport and recreation'. In the space of nearly 70 years, British governments have progressed from minimal post-war sporting interest, involvement and funding, to unprecedented levels of influence and spending on sport, epitomised by the substantial role of the state – financially, organisationally and ideologically – in the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Jefferys demonstrates insightfully that the Attlee and Churchill administrations of the 1940s and 1950s placed very little emphasis on sport – with approaches being 'largely uncoordinated, ambiguous and low key' – and it was not until Harold Wilson's Labour government of the 1960s that sport, primarily through the presence of a discernible policy, achieved a firm place on the Whitehall agenda.

This is only part of the story, however. What stands out in this impressive text is a considered appreciation of *how* and *why* these developments took place. One of Jefferys' many strengths is his convincing contestation of any notion that the relationship between sport and politics in the latter part of the twentieth century has been linear or smooth. The subtlety of his analysis illuminates the ebbs and flows of British sport policy, both between and *within* different political administrations (such as the divergent views on sport articulated by Margaret Thatcher and John Major in the 1980s and 1990s).

Jefferys identifies the complexities, nuances and contradictions embedded in the sport policy process,

addressing various manifestations of support and opposition to government intervention in sport. The book details not simply the (often seismic) shifts around sports policy *per se*, but also prominent debates about where in Whitehall it should sit and the degree to which senior cabinet figures should be involved. It also maps the different levels of, and reasons for, state engagement in sport, from law and order issues around football hooliganism to more implicit attempts to dictate the scope and direction of sporting governance. More broadly, Jefferys contextualises and explains the ideological changes underpinning sport policy, for example, through the Labour White Paper on 'Sport and Recreation' in the 1970s, which introduced the 'notion that sport required state support not so much because of its own intrinsic worth but as something that contributed to other aspects of welfare policy'.

Jefferys does not refrain from challenging certain orthodoxies in the field. For instance, he argues that 'above all, the contention that the growing entanglement of sport and politics reflected a cross-party consensus around "welfare state ideology" requires revision'. Alongside areas of commonality, clear differences were also apparent, he posits, representing 'a function of contrasting shades of ideological commitment as well as varying perceptions about the value of sport in political and electoral discourse'. He also counters reasoning in the field around the immediate impact of the 1960 Wolfenden Report, questioning the putative newness of its ideas and the extent to which they were actually fulfilled following the Conservatives' loss of power.

As the title suggests, the book's content is related primarily to British sport policy, but a number of international issues are addressed as well, reflecting how governments' global sporting interventions increased analogous to growing domestic involvement. Political manoeuvrings are discussed in relation to the familiar territory of apartheid, Basil D'Oliveira and Zola Budd, and Margaret Thatcher's proposed (yet not achieved) Great Britain boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Lesser-known controversies are covered too, such as the participation of North Korea at the 1966 men's football World Cup Finals in England.

If there is one criticism, it is that the book's focus on sport policy is very much in the realm of the "mainstream". While there is some mention of New Labour's social inclusion agenda, plus brief reference to Sport for All and the Sports Council's 'Action Sport' programme of the early 1980s, there is little coverage of how sport policy has addressed (or not, as the case may be) marginalised and excluded social groups. The book's focus on governmental approaches to sport means that a degree of generality is understandable, but some discussion around ethnicity, gender and disability would have provided an interesting additional chapter.

Sport and Politics in Modern Britain is a highly engaging and readable book that provides a timely and welcome addition to the literature. It will appeal intuitively to a range of audiences, lay and academic, with interests from sport to contemporary British politics and socio-economic history. One would hope that a copy might also find its way into the corridors of Whitehall, for current political approaches to sport in the post-2012 era suggest that many past lessons are still to be learned, and that misguided and contradictory thinking still reigns. "Legacy" and "inspiring a generation of young people through sport" may have become ubiquitous post-Olympic phrases. Yet in the wake of the Coalition's cuts to physical education funding, their decimation of School Sport Partnerships and a proposed return to John Major's 'Raising the Game' emphasis on competitive sport, the likelihood of them being achieved remains doubtful to say the least.

Dr. Daniel Burdsey is Principal Lecturer in the School of Sport and Service Management at the University of Brighton. His research addresses issues related to sport and leisure, race and ethnicity, and football and its communities. He is the author of *British Asians and Football: Culture, Identity, Exclusion* (Routledge, 2007) and the editor of *Race, Ethnicity and Football: Persisting Debates and Emergent Issues* (Routledge, 2011). [Read more reviews by Daniel.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: Sport Italia: the Italian Love Affair With Sport \(17\)](#)

2. [Book Review: British Social Attitudes 28: 2011-2012 Edition \(10.1\)](#)
3. [Book Review: Why the Olympics Aren't Good for Us, And How They Can Be \(9.9\)](#)
4. [Book Review: Youth Policy, Civil Society and the Modern Irish state by Fred Powell et al. \(9\)](#)
5. [Book Review: Dial M for Murdoch: News Corporation and the Corruption of Britain \(9\)](#)