

From Acronyms to Americans: Why so little sport in General Election 2015?

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It goes without saying that interest groups and lobbyists with sport at heart will be disappointed with how little sport has featured in the 2015 General Election campaign, especially in the manifestos.

While the two main parties have provided some broader sport policy thinking (Labour's [More Sport for All](#) document, Sajid Javid's [speech](#) at the *Centre for Social Justice* on sport for development), few new innovative policy proposals have been outlined to support or lead the sector at a time when the sector is delivering on numerous public agendas. Why is this?

Back to 2010

Both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party released substantial documents ([A Sporting Britain for All](#) and the [Conservatives Sports Manifesto](#)), detailing their aspirations for the sports sector. Ambitious ideas included bringing 'UK Sport, Sport England and the Youth Sport Trust under one roof' and recognised the power of 'Golden Decade of Sport for 'driving record investment into the economy'. The Olympics was of course central to these plans and even the minor parties, who usually didn't mention sport, expressed their excitement for the 2012 Olympic Games. This was a period of hope for the sport sector: that its intrinsic worth

would be valued and that the sporting legacy would remain long after 2012.

Manifesto Promises in 2015

So what have we been promised this time?

[Labour](#) are committed to ensuring school children achieve 2 hours of school sport a week and have promised to put 'physical activity at the heart' of its public health agenda among other ideas. Meanwhile, the [Conservatives](#) have promised to look beyond numbers for participation and 'recognised' sports' benefit to health and social impact. Other than perhaps the radical idea to expand links with US professional franchise sports, the [Sport and Recreation Alliance](#) said that there was 'nothing to disagree with' in the proposals. This perhaps explains why we are little disappointed.

There are a variety of interesting proposals from the [minor parties](#). The Liberal Democrats want more walking, cycling and recognise the benefits of sport for mental health; The DUP propose that the British Olympic Association is renamed to 'Team UK' or 'Team GBNI'; The Greens would expand grassroots links between schools and clubs; UKIP would abolish DCMS all together and have no mention of sport. It is encouraging that the minor parties are slowly developing coherent sports policies

and plenty of food for thought, to potentially feed to the impending coalitions.

But despite this, these manifestos lack a real vision for sport – a vision that can bring the sector together so it can work with the Government in a new and innovative way. Yet we know that the politicians understand what sport can do, so maybe this a casualty of this particular election.

Why sport may have lost its edge

Hung Parliament

With so many parties in the race for a seat in 2015, only the most headline-grabbing, frontline policies were likely to attract the attention of the electorate. It therefore bears the question: when voices need to be heard, is sport worth the manifesto's paper? Coalitions are likely to be formed on big money agreements and the big public policy squabbles. With a mere £1 billion being spent across Government on sport in the last year, sadly sport has inevitably dropped off the edge in terms of being anywhere near a priority.

Tough times ahead...

The ring fenced UK Sport funding and protected Primary School Sport Premiums are evidently core headline spending promises from the current Government. However, uncertainty remains around Local Government's ability to provide a good level of community sport. With core services such as health and education likely to be predominantly protected, 25% cuts in for some departments appear to be an inevitability. Local authorities spending on sport have already been cut by £42 million. It was always unlikely that the parties would openly detail where the next wave of savings are coming from.

The 2012 Olympics

Sadly for sport, we do not have a £9.2 billion major event, embedded in and funded by Government, scheduled just around the corner. Much of the 2010 manifestos rallied around delivering promised legacy and achieving wider political goals through sport: medal success, inward investment, regeneration, participation and support for NGBs were key themes which capitalised on the 'feel-good' factor among the electorate. Nearly three years since the event, policy makers are continually being held to account to ensure these promises are still being met, but there is little impetus. What it did show was the huge power of sport on so many levels, except perhaps the most important: significantly increasing the public's participation in sport and physical activity.

Furthermore, we should ask whether the electorate's fascination with sport reach a pinnacle in 2010, has the population subconsciously connected sport and politics in anticipation? While spikes of further sporting interest continue through events like the Tour de France and no doubt again with the Rugby World Cup, as the Olympics has shown, it is the countries love affairs with sporting events that is really important. In the case of the Olympics maybe the public was only interested in it as an important watershed in our collective consciousness: our fear that we couldn't deliver a top-class event to the world. This fear has been relieved. In fact we proved we can deliver on an impressive scale, giving us, once again, the confidence that GREAT Britain can do anything better.

Populist Football Governance

Some would say fan empowerment is a populist tactic, to connect with millions of fans who will be voting on May 7th and a heroic attempt to capture the emotional attachment which appears on our back pages day after day. With the emotional value which communities place on the 'beautiful game', it's no wonder the integrity

of professional football is constantly called into question, from world governing bodies to Premier League club owners alike. This could not be more true than at the Sports Journalists Association question time event in the House of Commons. Three spokespeople from the main parties, Clive Efford (Labour), Helen Grant (Conservatives) and John Leech (Liberal Democrats), continually answered questions with remedies for FIFA and solutions to global scandals – both of which sit outside the remit of them as policy makers.

Despite Government having little authority in professional football, politicians believe it is right to address the anger of fans by proposing solutions in the 2015 manifestos. Labour's spokesperson for sport, Clive Efford, [spoke to the Sports Think Tank](#) about the Premier League not fulfilling their grassroots responsibilities and the party are committed to '[putting fans at the heart of football's future](#)'. The Liberal Democrats outlined their own plans for ownership and [safe standing stadiums](#). The Conservatives have also proposed their own models for ownership of professional clubs. We will have to wait and see whether these interests will align in a new hung parliament to push a minority government across the football Rubicon.

Do we need to worry?

Where does the sector find itself from 5 years ago? Despite the huge success of the Olympics, arguably sports' position has worsened politically. The Olympics has been and gone and there is no new hook for sport to use at the highest levels of government and once again falls down the pecking order. With an uncertain Parliament ahead, politicians are focusing on the big issues as health services, immigration, economic growth and the very makeup of the United Kingdom. While most politicians advocate the role of sport,, the manifestos don't offer the strong vision the sector was looking for. While doing well in

the cuts in the last parliament, it's a fair assumption that sport is likely to suffer in the 'inevitable cuts' regardless who is in government and however many parties are in government for the next 5 years.

The [Sports Think Tank hosted a roundtable](#) in November on priorities for the upcoming election, from which the group concluded that the sector needed a much stronger unified voice and the Government, both national and local, needed to provide stronger leadership to ensure consistent implementation of effective programmes. While many [sector organisations](#) have been tenaciously lobbying, making their case to use sport for achieving wider aims, hopeful of gaining political traction, these desires remain an optimistic aspiration in the current climate.

Making the case however, for sport's ability to contribute to wider political objectives is even more crucial in the forthcoming Parliament, as physical activity, participation and local provision become ever more scrutinise and one anticipates that departments will need to work together to make further savings in their budgets.

This provides a new opportunity. The sector needs to work together with Sport England and UK Sport to scrutinise, organise and prioritise its thoughts and invite innovation from those outside the sector to help establish sports rightful place in society and policy-making.