

## The Games that almost Weren't: London 1948

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Hidden between the ostentatious Nazi Olympics of 1936 and the bitter East/West rivalries that marked the Olympic Games from Helsinki onwards, the 1948 London Games are accorded limited attention in most histories of the Modern Games. The simple fact that the Games were resumed within three years of the end of World War II was itself remarkable yet became, over the years, unremarkable as subsequent Olympiads drew more and more attention due primarily to political issues and expanded media coverage. The fact that the 1948 Summer Olympics ultimately went off so well from an organizational point of view and were relatively free from political rancor has resulted in underestimation of both the magnitude of the task accomplished and the danger to the Games posed by Britain's post-war economic problems. This article attempts to assess the organizational effort involved in the staging of the 1948 Games and the threat to them derived from economic circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Two distinguishable, but not wholly separate, decisions were made in the months following the end of World War II. One involved the desirability of resuming the Games in 1948, the other the location to be chosen. Publically, the process began in August 1945 in a London meeting involving Sigfrid Edstrom, Avery Brundage and Lord Aberdare and ended with the announcement in February 1946 that a formal invitation to hold the Summer Games of the XIV Olympiad in London had been accepted.<sup>3</sup> However, an element of doubt about the choice of London existed until the I.O.C. meeting of September 1946 in Lausanne. Such doubts primarily concerned the ability to house competitors in London<sup>4</sup>

The resumption of the Games was highly desirable as a significant symbol of return to normal, peacetime conditions; of business as usual. Such aspirations were high among peoples and governments and the British were certainly no exception. A more specific rationale was provided by the wish to give an opportunity for Olympic participation to those athletes whose careers had, or would have, reached

their zenith in the period between 1936 and 1948 and for whom 1952 might well be too late.<sup>5</sup>

The decision in favor of London was the end product of a dual process going on through the fall/winter of 1945-6. One element of this process was a postal ballot of the IOC, the other what might be termed a feasibility study carried out by a committee of the British Olympic Association.<sup>6</sup> Although no decision was made public until February 1946, London appeared to be a leading candidate from the outset.<sup>7</sup> In public explanations of the choice of London, it was the earlier understanding that it would have hosted in 1944 that seemed to carry most weight, even though the logic of this was disputed in some sections of the British press.<sup>8</sup>

There was certainly an awareness at the time of the award that post-war circumstances would result in a more modest staging of the Games in 1948 than had been the case in 1936. In fact, this was seen by many as a positive circumstance as there were aspects of the Berlin Games they did not wish to see duplicated.<sup>9</sup> However, it is extremely unlikely that many people anticipated the severe degree to which wartime austerity was to cast its long shadow into the late 1940s. Few could have anticipated the general level of economic difficulties which were to beset Britain, intensified by the savage winter of 1946-47 and the convertibility crisis of the late summer of 1947. Contemporaries were not to know how austere the background to the Austerity Games was to be.

They could not have forecast the restraints that economic difficulties would impose on preparations for the Games nor, at one point, the direct threat to the very staging of the Olympics.

There was certainly no tendency to take the organizational task lightly. Though reporting positively, the British Olympic Association's investigative committee. . . "was under no illusion as to the magnitude of the task."<sup>10</sup> Lord Aberdare emphasized that, "the work involved in the organization of the Games is colossal and we shall have to get cracking at once." Others advised that, "the stupendous task," would take up all the time available.<sup>11</sup> Some involved in athletic administration, like Jack Crump, were shocked by the decision to hold the Games in . . . "I badly blitzed London, short of hotel accommodation, in circumstances of food rationing and short also of building and other necessary materials."<sup>12</sup>

In the main, the organizers, though aware of the scale of commitment necessary, believed initially that the job could be done. From the outset there were some critics who disagreed and pointed to inconsistencies in staging a major international event at a time of national privation. Other critics attacked, not the specifics of the choice of London, but the Games themselves. Arguments that the Games had "become too large," had been in circulation for some time and they were revived in the period after 1945.<sup>13</sup> The Games had become a "big bewildering jamboree," and growth, so some critics alleged, had gone hand in hand with an overly-serious approach and excessive specialization. This in turn had led to them becoming "gladiatorial contests between trained specialists," and heavily commercialized. The Games were "a financial proposition, and when money comes tumbling in at the turnstiles, the spirit of true sport has a way of flying out at the window."<sup>14</sup> Other critics challenged the Games on the very grounds cherished by their supporters, the contribution made to international understanding and good will. "The pernicious doctrine that national prestige was bound up with victory or defeat" had led to the Games becoming "nothing but a battle of nations," where "sport for sports sake was not the only spirit prevailing."<sup>15</sup> While it would be misleading in the extreme to suggest that such criticisms ever represented a majority position, it is important to recognize their existence and indeed their relevance as Britain's economic difficulties worsened and the Games appeared endangered. At the time, a vocal minority, even though only a minority, could exert certain pressures, particularly in the political realm.

Given the circumstances of post World War II Britain, an undertaking on the scale of the Olympics could not realistically be pursued without government involvement. The Labour Government was as committed as any of its predecessors to the belief that sports administration should remain firmly in the hands of voluntary organizations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, there was never any question of Government usurping authority from the Organizing Committee or, on the other hand, making any significant financial contribution. Nevertheless, given the range of wartime shortages and consequent rationing and other restrictions that carried over into the period of peace, it was absolutely necessary to seek and obtain Government cooperation. Thus, the Organizing Com-

mittee approached His Majesty's Government at an early date and stated that, whereas financial help was not sought, there were many ways in which the Government could assist the Committee. The Government readily agreed."<sup>17</sup> With Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin to the fore, the Government committed its help. The Ministry's primary motive for contributing to the success of the Games was "to seize the occasion for an organized drive to attract tourists into this country."<sup>18</sup> One measure of the Government's commitment was the appointment of Philip Noel-Baker, former Olympic athlete and Secretary of State for Air, to act as liaison with the Organizing Committee.<sup>19</sup>

With the formalities of selection completed and assured of Government cooperation, the Organizing Committee was formally constituted with Lord Burghley, Olympic hurdler, as chairman and Noel Curtis-Bennett, Chairman of the National Playing Fields Association and British representative on the IOC as vice-chairman. Lord Portal, as President of the Committee began as something of a figurehead but gradually became more closely involved in its business. At its most extensive, the Committee had fifteen members including representatives from the British organizing bodies of the major Olympic sports and specialists in advertising and legal questions. A key member was Arthur, later Sir Arthur, Elvin managing director of Wembley Stadium Ltd.<sup>20</sup> A smaller executive committee and numerous specialized sub-committees were created over the two and one half years leading up to the Games. Possibly to establish some control over this rambling structure, E.J. Holt was appointed Director of Organization and became the principal manager of day to day activities. The staff of the Committee grew over the months of preparation to a peak of 219 on the eve of the Games.<sup>21</sup>

An important precondition to effective planning was a clear understanding of the full program of events to be included in the Games. This was achieved as a result of the IOC meeting at Lausanne in September 1946 when it was agreed to extend the time covered by the Games to 18 days in order to avoid competition on Sundays but to keep the number of sports close to that of 1936. Proposals for the inclusion of some seven or eight sports were rejected. According to some IOC members "the idea is to get the Olympics started again, but not to make the first post-war games top-heavy with events."<sup>22</sup>

The Organizing Committee had not waited for these IOC actions before developing and announcing the basic plans as to venues for the various events. As had been long anticipated, the complex of the Empire Stadium and Pool, Wembley was to be the dominant single venue. The Stadium was to be the site for the opening and closing ceremonies, the finals in soccer and field hockey, the Grand Prix des Nations and the track and field program. A number of alterations or renovations were planned. A new running track was to be laid on the existing foundations and this would involve suspension of the regular and remunerative greyhound and motorcycle speedway meetings. A new access road to the Stadium was to be constructed, some of the standing terraces in the Stadium were to be converted to seating, dressing-rooms were to be expanded and a second swimming pool built. Although the estimated costs of these works was about £150,000, the Minister of Works, George Tomlinson, believed they represented . . . “the minimum required to enable an international event of this size and importance to be carried through.” In his view “it would be mistaken policy to insist on too austere a standard of preparations.” As of the summer of 1946, Tomlinson was confident that the work would come in no more than 10% over estimate and that, spread out over two years, demand for labor and materials would pose. . . “no major detriment to priority work.”<sup>23</sup> Both the ambition and confidence displayed here were to be severely tested during 1947 and not all the planned works survived the ensuing economic crises.

The worst was yet to come when the Organizing Committee made its second major statement on Olympic venues in January 1947. The main focus of this report were venues away from Wembley. Equestrian events were to be held in the Windsor and Aldershoty areas. Shooting was assigned to the Bisley ranges west of London. Despite some misgivings about its adequacy, Herne Hill, in south London, was to be the site for track cycling. At this stage it was hoped to hold the road race in Richmond Park. After some widening, the Henley Regatta course was to be used for both rowing and canoeing events and sufficient fields were available in the London area for preliminaries in soccer and field hockey.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the work done in 1946 to establish venues and schedules of competition, the final arrange-

ments did not become fully set until as late as June 1948, within a few weeks of the opening ceremonies. A substantial number of alterations, both as to venue and scheduling, became necessary.<sup>25</sup> Some of these changes arose from the demands of the International governing bodies of the various sports, some from initial misjudgements on the part of the Organizing Committee, and yet others from Britain's recurring economic crises. Not infrequently, changes in arrangements for one sport set in course a chain reaction affecting others.<sup>26</sup>

A significant last minute adjustment occurred in the staging of the gymnastics competition. The International Federation wanted the events held in the open-air in the main Wembley Stadium. Despite warnings from the British Amateur Gymnastics Association of a consequent vulnerability to uncertain weather conditions, the IOC backed the International Federation. The Organizing Committee gave in and assigned three days of the second week to gymnastics in the Stadium. Torrential rains forced a last minute switch to the indoor facilities at Earl's Court, causing considerable stress to arrangements for ticketing and transportation.<sup>27</sup>

Though long anticipated as a last minute arrangement, the laying of the new cinder track at Wembley was, nevertheless, a matter of concern. The aim was to keep disruption to regular dog and speedway meets to a minimum as the proprietors had to be compensated. Consequently, work did not begin until just 17 days before the opening ceremonies, and this on a project which the conventional wisdom, as of 1945, held that it would take two years to complete. Although the exact composition of the, 'quick-spread surface,' was a closely guarded secret, its manufacturers in Leicester had been experimenting with it for a year. In fact, apprehension proved to be unfounded. The surface was laid in a week and, although it was not found to be particularly fast, there were no substantive complaints. Rather, there was considerable praise for the track.<sup>28</sup>

Given the proportions of the task in the first place and then the number of alterations forced on the Organizing Committee for one reason or another, it was quite remarkable that the great majority of the events went as smoothly as they did. In particular, despite an embarrassing delay in the very first event, the organization of the track and field competition

was the object of extensive praise by both Britons and foreign visitors.

Formidable though the organization of the athletic events may have been, other tasks faced by the Organizing Committee presented equally, if not more, difficult problems. From the very early stages of preparation it was anticipated that the housing of visiting athletes and officials would present some significant difficulties. This was the aspect of preparation where government cooperation and assistance was most critically needed. For this, and other reasons, Olympic housing became something of a political issue. There was considerable potential both for outbursts of paranoia on the part of foreigners fearful of the conditions they would confront in Britain, and for criticism from among the British themselves as resources, already in short supply, were allocated to the use of visitors. Diplomatic as well as organizational skills were to be tested. Government performance in meeting the housing needs of post-war Britain lagged behind their own, their opponents' and the public's expectations. Squatting had become a highly publicised activity among the homeless and the whole issue had become emotionally charged.<sup>30</sup> There were international as well as domestic concerns raised on the housing question. Some Government officials argued of the Games that "it is essential to our national prestige that they should be a success....and one of the factors most likely to contribute to the success of the Games is the provision of satisfactory accommodation for the competitors."<sup>31</sup>

The days when nations housed their Olympic competitors in convenient hotels had clearly passed. Both the Organizing Committee and the Government recognized that, by the 1940s, the preference of athletes and officials was for "the modern system of the Olympic Village," inaugurated in Los Angeles in 1932.<sup>32</sup> The Organizing Committee's report of January, 1947, indicated that the question of "whether or not an Olympic village will be built," had not yet been decided. However, discussions with the Government on other modes of accommodation had begun in late 1946. Thus, when the possibility of a village, "blasted by current conditions," was finally abandoned in March 1947, alternative plans were quickly made public.<sup>33</sup> Rather than build a village specifically for Olympic use, it was planned to house the majority of competitors and officials in two RAF camps, at Uxbridge and West Drayton, and

an adapted Army Convalescent Depot in Richmond Park. It was anticipated that these three sites would cater for some 4,300 of the 6,000 expected.<sup>34</sup>

Although the Government would allow for the use of the properties free of rental, and the Ministry of Works provided a wide range of basic furnishings, the Organizing Committee was expected to be responsible for costs incurred in adapting these accommodations to Olympic use. Plans for extensive and costly alterations, particularly at Uxbridge, had to be scaled down.<sup>35</sup> Accommodation needs not met by these three sites were to be provided for in Middlesex County Council schools vacated for the summer holidays. Three colleges in the greater London area were set aside for the housing of women competitors. Changes resulting from late arrivals provoked the ire of teams moved out of the major camps, into which they had been settled for a week or more. The Australians and the Indians were particularly incensed. All in all there were twenty-five different accommodation sites used. Combined with last minute changes in venue arrangements, this served to account for the fact that the most commonly complained of aspect of the Games organization was the provision of transport between accommodations and sites of competition.<sup>37</sup>

In February 1948, the Ministry of Works and the Organizing Committee held a joint press conference reviewing the Richmond Park facilities. The resulting published accounts dispel any hint of spartan conditions that the use of an Army depot might have engendered. One thousand five hundred visitors were to be cared for by a domestic staff of two hundred. A wide range of services and facilities were provided, extending from dining halls to a cinema, from banking to dry-cleaning. Official caution and moderation was reflected in an added note to the effect that accommodations represented "austerity to a point," and that they should not be compared with the Olympic Villages at Los Angeles or Berlin.<sup>38</sup> Later, there were favorable reports of the Uxbridge camp where it was anticipated the Americans and Canadians would be housed. The RAF camp . . . "has everything calculated to make an Olympic athlete happy. It is a large, bright camp fitted with plenty of dining halls, baths and showers and it is close to a sports stadium with a running track." Ultimately, Dean Cromwell, coach of the US track and field team, expressed himself delighted with the quarters and training facilities.<sup>39</sup>

It appears that the policy of the Government and the Organizing Committee was to provide adequate but basic accommodations, facilities, and to steer a careful course between niggardliness which might offend visitors and over-indulgences which would alienate a British public dealing with shortages and austerity on a routine basis. The voices of official spokesmen certainly indicate efforts to strike such a balance. Philip Noel-Baker, Government liaison with the Organizing Committee, expressed the modest hope that the camps . . . "will make everyone feel comfortable."<sup>40</sup> Charles Key of the Ministry of Works set a goal . . . "that Olympic visitors will feel that they are being housed, not lavishly but with the attention to their needs which they would expect from this country...."<sup>41</sup> Squadron-Leader Briault, appointed by the Organizing Committee to oversee housing and catering arrangements, described the facilities as providing a "reasonable" standard of accommodation "a cross between a military and a holiday camp."<sup>42</sup> Manny Shinwell, one of the more outspoken members of the Government, in opening accommodation for Olympic athletes at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, was characteristically blunt in his observation that "the hospitality we offer here is not sumptuous but it is the best we can do."<sup>43</sup> Understandably, Lord Burghley, on the eve of the Games with a long period of responsibility and concern almost behind him, was more ambitious in claiming that Britain had . . . "nothing to be ashamed of in comparing arrangements to house visiting athletes with any previous Olympic camps."<sup>44</sup>

Although, in the end, the difficult housing issue was handled with significant success, it was almost inevitable that somewhere along the way the Government measures would provoke an element of political friction. Political controversy focussed particularly on the Richmond Park camp. Here, the root of the problem was the strongly held belief in the neighboring borough of Kingston that, once vacated by the Army, the Convalescent Depot would become available for the use of some of the local homeless. Even before the Army moved out, there was concern over the need to place guards at night in order to keep squatters out. The local Member of Parliament was a Conservative, not overly worried about causing the Government embarrassment. Behind him was a well-organized and vocal Kingston Homeseekers Association, headed by a local vicar

and backed by several trade union branches.<sup>45</sup> When the Ministry of Works decided to retain the camp after its use as Olympic accommodation, the Organizing Committee acquired a degree of 'guilt by association' and a string of difficult questions were asked in Parliament.<sup>46</sup>

If the provision of housing was a task demanding of organizational and diplomatic skills, such qualities were dwarfed in comparison to those needed to solve the food problem. Notwithstanding official analysis showing that the diet of the average English person was nutritionally superior to that prevailing before the War, the majority of the population chafed over rationing, the shortage of many foods and, most insistently, the lack of variety in their diet. There was a housing problem, politically significant but impacting directly on only a minority of Britons. Food was a national obsession.<sup>47</sup> In these circumstances the Government and the Organizing Committee were walking an even finer, potentially more perilous, tight-rope than had been the case over housing. Being both fair and reasonable presented a formidable task. To insist that foreign visitors of any kind, let alone Olympic athletes, be confined to the standard rations was likely to discourage tourism and raise questions about the appropriateness of London as a venue for the Games. On the other hand, to allow too many concessions to visitors was to court unpopularity with the British public and to raise criticism that British athletes were being placed at an additional disadvantage against well-fed foreign competition. Given the circumstances, the Government steered a reasonable course of compromise through the dangerous shoals of public opinion, particularly volatile on any issue related to food.

After some initial uncertainties, a basic policy was developed. British and foreign competitors in the Olympic camps were to receive A rations, those normally provided for industrial workers. Other foreign visitors would receive temporary ration books putting them on an even footing with the majority of Britons. However, there was an advantage for foreigners in that normal government regulations permitted any visitor to bring 25lbs of food into the country. . . "of which not more than 5lbs may be of any one kind."<sup>48</sup> By the time the Olympics were held, a well established practise had developed among visiting sports teams to take advantage of this allowance and even to seek further privileges. Thus, in 1947, the United States' Walker Cup team was

granted a licence to import 300lbs of beef. . . “ to ensure they are properly fed.”<sup>49</sup>

Over a month before the Games were due to start, it was reported that 17 nations intended to bring their own supplies of food to supplement rations provided by the British.<sup>50</sup> With the largest team and the highest standard of living, it is not surprising that the United States were the most prominent importers of extra rations. Diplomatically trying to justify their supplementary rations and not offend the British, a US official, commenting on the food at the Uxbridge camp, judged that “the basic menu is insufficient to the taste and satisfaction of the American athlete, but all the same it is good considering conditions in Britain.” The list of American ‘extras’, beginning with 5,000 sirloin steaks, was diverse and substantial enough to generate envy among the British.<sup>51</sup>

While the British athletes, like their foreign competitors, were to receive additional rations during the Games, the Government, presumably fearing public resentment if it unduly favored athletes, stuck to its policy of “no extra rations.” British athletes did, however, receive some long-term supplements to basic rations. This occurred, not because of any shift in Government policy, but as a result of food parcels sent for that purpose from various parts of the ‘Empire’ and distributed among Olympic ‘possibles’ by the British Amateur Athletics Board.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the various efforts to maintain equity and supplement athletes’ diets, the ‘food issue’ was seldom absent for any period of time from the pages of newspapers, in Britain and elsewhere. Food shortages came to be blamed, among other things, for the reluctance of American tourists to attend the Games and for Britain’s poor competitive showing. Given the contemporary British preoccupation with food and the shortage thereof, it is doubtful if any official policy could have made the issue go away for the duration of the Games.<sup>53</sup>

The difficult task of organizing the athletic contests and providing accommodation and food for visiting athletes was not made any easier by distractions furnished by certain abrasive issues. The question of whether the former enemies would compete in London was resolved in the negative at a relatively early stage.<sup>54</sup> The position of one former ally remained in doubt for a longer period of time, generating uncertainties that the Russians themselves seemed to cultivate. For the leadership of the Olympic movement, the issue of Russian participation

provoked some rather contradictory impulses. As the Cold War rapidly developed out of peace, the exclusion of the Soviets would surely be interpreted as contravening a cardinal principle of the movement, that the Games were above politics. On the other hand, Russian inclusion would cast into doubt any ability to sustain even the appearance of true amateurism to which some of the leadership were committed. With the admission of the Soviets to the IAAF in 1946 and their subsequent membership in a number of other international sports bodies, there was widespread optimism over the chances that they would participate in London in 1948. It was not until the spring of that year that Russian failure to form an Olympic Committee and their continual evasion on a number of topics led to a spreading scepticism as to their intentions. Ultimately it was no surprise when the June 15 deadline for entries passed without any further Russian efforts to qualify for participation.<sup>55</sup>

The possibility of Russian participation was often seen as closely related to another divisive issue, the definition of amateurism. Protracted and, at times, acrimonious debate extended through the period leading up to the London Games. Although such debate was formally focussed on the IAAF and the IOC, it received extensive press coverage and drew the close attention of sporting organizations in Britain. At the international level, opposition to Swedish sponsored liberalization of the rules on amateur status came from the British and their American ally, Avery Brundage. Together they succeeded in defending the status quo by stalling any conclusive decision until after 1948.<sup>56</sup> These divisive issues cast a shadow of potential complexity over a planning process already difficult to conduct. There were even rumors circulated at different times that the British and the Americans would pull out in 1948 if a sweeping acceptance of broken-time passed in the IAAF Congress.<sup>57</sup> The bitter and protracted controversy over the US ice hockey representation at the 1948 Winter Games provided another cause for concern among those planning for the London Games.<sup>58</sup>

Though much less public in nature than the debate over amateurism, relations between the Organizing Committee and the Government were not always harmonious and, at the very least, distracting. The resolution of such difficulties time-consuming. In September 1947, Lord Burghley, chair of the Organizing Committee had granted an interview with

Harold Palmer, a reporter for the *Evening Standard*, a newspaper generally critical of the Government and an established opponent of the 1948 Summer Games.<sup>59</sup> In his insistence on the careful and economical planning of the Games, Burghley cited the example of the Richmond Park camp which he said would become available after the Olympics for "housing of the community". This ran counter to the intent of the Ministry of Works and caused considerable displeasure within Government circles. It was observed by one official that "this is not the first time that Lord Burghley has spoken out of turn on something which doesn't concern him."<sup>60</sup> Earlier in the same year, Lord Portal, President of the Organizing Committee had spoken out strongly against the Government in a House of Lords debate on the intended ban on mid-week sport.<sup>61</sup>

Relations became particularly strained over the plans to hold the Cycling Road Race in Richmond Park. Although the Minister of Works, George Tomlinson, was initially anxious to cooperate, it was soon found that such usage contravened regulations laid down by Parliamentary statute. The Government was reluctant to pursue legislative revision even for what was acknowledged as . . . "an unusually important occasion."<sup>62</sup> Although the Organizing Committee brought considerable pressure to bear from a number of quarters, the Ministry held firm and the venue was shifted to Windsor Great Park.<sup>63</sup> Relations became strained and reached a low point in late April 1947 when Wing Commander Sinclair, described by a Ministry of Works official as . . . "some kind of assistant to Mr. Noel-Baker," advised department representatives that his superior would not accept their decision and would take the matter to Parliament and the Cabinet if necessary. At the end of what appears to have been a stormy meeting, Sinclair claimed that . . . "all these things could be wangled and...if the Ministry of Works could not do a wangle like other Departments it was about time they started to learn."<sup>64</sup> At the level of general policy, the Government firmly supported the work of the Organizing Committee which in turn, recognized the value of official help. But the working out of detailed arrangements sometimes disclosed differing priorities among the partners.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, on occasions, government officials were no more aware of the finer points of athletic administration than members of the Organizing Committee were familiar with the complexities of the issues faced by

government departments. A senior official at the Foreign Office recommended the use of the Earl's Court Arena for ice skating and ice hockey during the summer Games and Ernest Bevin's early memorandum to the Cabinet supporting the Games expressed the belief that they would last for six weeks.<sup>66</sup>

The ability of the Government and the Organizing Committee to overcome difficulties arising from the details of administration and keep their mutual Olympic commitment to the fore was sorely tested in the year of economic crises, 1947. Indeed, belief that the Games themselves might be in jeopardy spread among some of those prominently involved. Originally raised in 1946, the issue of possible restrictions on mid-week sport reemerged in sharper form in the early months of 1947. Abnormally severe winter weather threatened to cripple British industry. Subsequent flooding carried disruption well into the Spring. Commencing in early March 1947, the Home Office conducted meetings to develop a policy of voluntary restraint in regard to mid-week sports. It proved very difficult to produce policies that were effective, rational and fair. Thus, the Government encountered significantly more opposition and unpopularity than it had anticipated.<sup>67</sup> While some newspapers voiced the opinion that "the Olympics are in the same boat as other crowd-pulling sports," others published public opinion polls showing strong support for a continuing commitment to the Games. There was no sign at this stage that either the Government or the Organizing Committee considered the Games in jeopardy.<sup>68</sup>

Briefly, the most intense economic gloom lifted during the summer of 1947. But such relief came to an abrupt halt due to an acute crisis in foreign payments in turn brought about by the convertibility of Sterling mandated under an earlier United States loan. It was at this point, in July, August and September 1947, that confidence in the Olympics surviving began to wane. Not only were there rumors in the press about the possible cancellation of the Olympics, there also developed nervous uncertainty among those involved in preparations for the Games.<sup>69</sup> Considerable effort had already gone into preparations for radio and television coverage of the Games and the British Broadcasting Corporation was one of the first organizations to seek Government assurance. Broadcasting of the Olympics was . . . "important to the prestige of the country and of

British broadcasting,” so it was felt important in the light of, “the possibility of a serious crisis next year,” to ascertain if there was any likelihood of postponement.<sup>70</sup> The response from the Cabinet Office, while expressing understanding for the BBC’s anxiety, pointed out that Government support had been approved initially at Ministerial level and that all departments were continuing to work on the basis that “the Games will actually take place.” The view was also expressed that because of the potential contribution to dollar earnings arising from the Games, they had become more important in economic terms than ever before.<sup>71</sup>

As the Government began to take severe economic measures in August 1947, the Evening Standard, began to mount a vigorous campaign culminating in an editorial of September 2 entitled ‘Call off the Games’. Believing that “in normal times the average range of British enthusiasm for the Games stretched from lukewarm to dislike,” the editor argued that the circumstances then prevailing in Britain . . . “reduce them to an unheard of absurdity.”<sup>72</sup> Though there was pro-Government response elsewhere in the press arguing that the Games would . . . “provide splendid entertainment for the people,” it was recognized in government circles that the Standard . . . “certainly seemed to be making a little political hay.”<sup>73</sup>

Even before the press campaign politicized the issue, concern over the impact of the economic crisis on the Games had reached into the higher echelons of both the Government and the British Olympic Association. In August 1947, Lord Portal, as President of the Organizing Committee, had approached the Government for assurances that the Games would go on. Correspondence on the issue ensued between Prime Minister Clement Atlee and Lord President of the Council Herbert Morrison and was carried on into the second half of September. In the meantime, Lord Portal was becoming increasingly nervous . . . “in view of recent press criticism,” He again contacted the Government for assurance. The delay in developing an official response suggests that some careful deliberation took place and that the decision was by no means cut and dried. In the end, however, both Labour leaders remained committed to the Games. The severely pragmatic reasoning that produced this favorable result might not have been appreciated by the Olympic leadership. For the Government, the primary quality of the Games, as had

been the case from the outset, lay in their potential to attract tourists. Atlee and Morrison laid great weight on these possibilities even though both found it difficult to get precise estimates of dollar earnings from the Board of Trade. Furthermore, both leaders believed that if Britain abandoned the Games, they would be moved to the United State, forcing British Olympic representatives to spend much needed dollars. It was thought that in addition to the direct earnings from foreign tourists coming for the Games, the Olympics would provide . . . “very valuable opportunities for publicity for Britain” and thus, hopefully, boost tourist earnings beyond 1948. In terms of expenditure on the Games, it was agreed that much of the needed manpower and materials had already been used and would be wasted if the Games were to be abandoned. Finally, as economies had already been effected, the Labour leaders were persuaded “that if anything less is done than is now planned, the efficiency of the Games may well be impaired, and more harm than good may result.”<sup>74</sup>

Final relief came to the Organizing Committee in December 1947. As consideration was being given to the extension of limits on mid-week sport into 1948, the Home Office determined that the Olympics should be exempt . . . “since the Games are an international event for which arrangements must be made far ahead and which in any case will be completed within fifteen days.”<sup>75</sup>

Ironically for those who were already beginning to be discomfited by the commercialization of the Games, it was that very potential which more than anything else saved them from becoming victims of Britain’s economic crises in 1947. Economic conditions improved somewhat in 1948 and, again with a hint of irony, it was the political crisis over Berlin, provoked by the Russians, that presented the most severe and proximate threat to the Games. Certainly the organizational history of the London Olympics of 1948 belies the description, “fetchingly placid,” that was bestowed on them in the 1960s.<sup>76</sup>

#### Endnotes:

1. The financial and political issues surrounding the Games and discussion of the levels of athletic competition have to be left to subsequent essays.
2. John Lucas, *The Modern Olympic Games*, (New York, 1980), p.148. *New York Times*, August

- 25,1945,p.15,col.2. London Times, February 15, 1946.
3. Public Record Office,(PRO),CAB 124/767, Foreign Office to Cabinet Office, August 26, 1946.
4. Paul Addison, *Now the War is Over*, (London, 1984), p. 113.Jack Crump, *Running Round the World*,(London, 1966), p.85.
5. Crump,op cit,p.85.
6. Evening Standard,January 3, 1946. PRO/CAB 129/8/141,Memorandum, Foreign Secretary to Cabinet, April 6,1946. Report of the Organizing Committee,(London, 1948),p. 17.
7. New York Times, August 17, 1945. Daily Herald,August 25, 1945.
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