

# INDIGENOUS AND GOVERNMENT STUDIES

## The Labour Government and British Sport, 1945-48

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During World War II the British Government had assumed extensive regulatory powers over most aspects of national life. In 1945, with the War ending, a Labour government came to power with a large Parliamentary majority and a mandate to involve itself in the creation of a fairer society. An extensive programme of nationalisation and the expansion of the social services were embarked upon by this government. Ubiquitous post-war shortages and a series of economic crises compelled the government, willingly or unwillingly, to maintain, and in some cases to extend, war-time rationing, regulation and the direction of resources, human and material. In this context, the more so once a commitment had been made to hold the 1948 Olympic Games in London, it would not have been surprising if Labour had developed an intrusive policy toward sport, even to the extent of creating a Ministry of Sport. In fact, calls for just such a creation were occasionally made. However, that was very much a minority opinion and leading members of the government refused to countenance a major role for themselves in the regulation or direction of sport.

This denial of what might seem to have been a natural role for the Labour government stemmed from several circumstances. In the first place, the political association of 'state involvement' in sport was with the Nazis of the 1930s and particularly the 1936 Berlin Olympics. As the Cold War developed in the late 1940s, so this detrimental association shaded over to apply to the Soviet Union. Such adverse connections served to intensify a well-established belief, shared across party and ideological lines, that politics, and by implication politicians, should be kept out of sports whose administration was best left to volunteers. Politicisation as much as commercialisation was seen as a threat to the intrinsic virtue and purpose of sport. Furthermore, for some serious-minded socialists sports, especially commercialised spectator sports and even more particularly

those involving gambling, were a threat to the working man or, at the very least, diverted him from a serious attempt, either collectively or individually, to improve his position in society. As they tended to assume that state involvement meant state subsidisation, such left-wing politicians shared with others of different persuasions a very cautious approach toward sport as an object of public policy. A generally more positive view toward various forms of participatory, recreational leisure never served to outweigh this cautionary bias.

Strong though the deterrents to involvement might have been, the post-World War II Labour government nevertheless found itself obliged to make decisions that in practice moved on impact upon sport. Pragmatically they came to develop a sports policy even though in theory they were hostile to precisely that activity. This paper discusses the various circumstances which obliged the government to become involved almost against its own will. The allocation of scarce land, labour and materials to the renovation or expansion of sports facilities and the manufacture of sports equipment, the restriction of sporting events to the week-ends in order to minimize the inducements to absenteeism and the selective imposition of entertainment and betting taxes were but the most notable of a range of issues that compelled government involvement in sport.

In this process, mainly guided by pragmatic considerations but nevertheless giving the appearance of a susceptibility toward traditionalist influences, the Labour government ended up discriminating against what were perceived as working class sports: in essence, turning upon their own constituency.