

SPORT, NATIONALISMS, AND POLITICS

Going to the Dogs; Hostility to Greyhound Racing in Britain, Puritanism, Socialism and Pragmaticism

Norman Baker
S.U.N.Y., Buffalo

Introduced into Britain in the 1920s modern greyhound racing soon gained great popularity and became a significant focus of gambling activity. Along with many other sports it enjoyed a major boon in the years immediately following world War II. Though widely assumed to be a preponderantly working class sport, greyhound racing was not well regarded by most of the leaders of the Labour Government elected in 1945. This paper focuses on the consequent differences between the political leadership and many of their constituents.

In part because of its close association with gambling, greyhound racing had a negative image which was reinforced in the 1940s by incidents involving corruption and violence at the tracks. The image of the sport also suffered from association with a feared growth in passive leisure. Attempts to improve this image by way of better security and an aggressive public relations campaign were not particularly successful. Although shared facilities and overlapping ownerships served to link to dogs with a number of other, more respectable, sports, this did little to mitigate its pariah like status. Not surprisingly, when the Labour Government adopted a range of restrictive policies towards sports in the economic crisis of 1947, greyhound racing became a particular target and cries of discrimination were heard.

A number of different groups had contributed to the Labour Party's history of hostility toward gambling. Religious Nonconformists who sought the moral improvement of working men, left-wingers who identified gambling with exploitation and serious-minded Fabian Socialists who saw it as jeopardizing the opportunities presented by Labour's electoral success of 1945, all had reason to discriminate against greyhound racing a sport whose *raison d'être* was believed to be betting. There is clear

evidence that a number of key members of the 1945 government were strongly influenced by such ways of thought.

While Government policies could be reasonably anticipated, the strength of the hostile reaction to them was not. In public demonstrations, in the press and from both sides in Parliament a wave of criticism engulfed the Government, which was accused of panic, of anti-gambling prejudice, of sabbatarianism, of imposing austerity for the sake of austerity and, most damagingly of all, of lacking trust in its own supporters sense of responsibility. Such criticism forced the Government into a gradual withdrawal. It proved harder and harder to withstand criticism, particularly because ministers were unable to furnish concrete evidence to sustain the reasoning behind restrictions, that there was a definite connection between mid-week sport, absenteeism and levels of industrial production.

This 'case-study' demonstrates that, while the leadership of the Labour Party may well have represented the political and economic interests of its primary constituents it was generally out of sympathy and out of touch with the cultural ways of many members of the working class it claimed to represent.