

## Management Summary of Sports Issues at the Party Conferences

One thing that united Labour and the Conservatives during the party conferences was their praise of the record-breaking achievements of Team Great Britain. However, accolades aside sport is a serious business, as reflected in the platform speeches made and the debates had at fringe events in Manchester and Birmingham. Organising a successful Olympic Games is about more than winning lots of different coloured metal. London 2012 is now viewed as a catalyst to creating a happier, healthier, more socially cohesive United Kingdom.

### **A common thread**

The three main sports bodies were in attendance at the conferences, Steve Grainger representing the Youth Sport Trust, Jennie Price, Sport England, and John Steele and Sue Campbell, UK Sport. Also with them was Lord Sebastian Coe, chairperson of the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG). At both conferences a number of themes ran through debates and speeches made. These were:

- **Participation** The government has set a target of two million more people playing sport by the time the Olympic flame is lit. How this will be achieved was a focal point at both conferences.
- **Performance** What was the best way to maximise sporting performance in the UK.
- **Funding** With construction prices going up and a recession starting to bite there was concern about how this would affect funding for London 2012. Linked to this was exactly how this would effect lottery funding to for other projects.
- **Using sport for good** - to improve the health, the habits and the behaviour of the nation

### **Labour in Manchester**

In his speech to conference Andy Burnham, Secretary of State for the DCMS, reaffirmed the government's drive to have children doing at least two hours of school sport a week, and five hours in total. Mr Burnham spoke of the efforts being made to have free swimming entry for all, detailing how by next April 85% of councils will have free access to pools for under 16s and over 65s.

At the 'Are we fit for 2012?' fringe, sports minister Gerry Sutcliffe stated that further investment in local clubs and schools was the best way to reach the target of two million more people playing sport by 2012. He also stated that the drive to increase the number of people playing sport will run alongside other government policies, including health. Steve Grainger said the Youth Sport Trust believes the improvement of PE lessons in school would increase sporting participation and lead to PE taking a more central role in the education system. Sue Campbell added that UK Sport would be working to promote sport in schools and communities as a means to maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

At another fringe meeting Lord Coe, Olympic Minister Tessa Jowell, chairperson of the Olympic Delivery Authority, John Arnitt and the deputy mayor of London, Ian Clement talked about how they were working to deliver the 2012 Games for the UK, not just London. Tessa Jowell challenged the regions to develop programmes across the country to engage people in the Olympics. She suggested they should look at producing volunteers with the specialist skills needed for the Olympic Park. Ms Jowell also rejected calls from First Minister, Alex Salmond, for a Scottish Olympic Team, stressing that Hampden Park will be an Olympic venue and that Scotland will also host 29 world class training camps. John Arnitt, stated that the ODA had sought to engage people across the UK, with 50 per cent of contracts won by companies outside London and the South East.

Lord Coe stressed the performance of Team GB in Beijing had relied on strong governing bodies, a world class coaching structure, unprecedented government and lottery funding for elite level sport and ambitious and motivated competitors. For him the challenge was for all the national governing bodies to replicate the success of rowing and cycling. Speaking at a Big Lottery Fund

fringe event Andy Burnham declared that the amount of medals won was made possible with the additional lottery funding.

Talking finance, John Arnitt acknowledged the rising price in materials was likely to place pressure on the Olympic budget and the credit crunch was making it more difficult to obtain private funding for the Olympic village. Mr Arnitt said he was looking for a resolution on finance by the end of the year. Tessa Jowell stated that despite the economic conditions the commitment to affordable housing and the regeneration of East London remained unaltered.

### **Conservatives in Birmingham**

Introduced by Kelly Holmes, the Shadow Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt noted that boys who play sports were two and a half times less likely to drop out of school. He criticised current practice where decreasing numbers of children were taking part in competitive sport. In his mind competition is crucial as it teaches children about "values, team work and discipline."

Mr Hunt criticised the government's 'smash and grab' raids on the lottery funds, saying that lottery funding for grassroots had more than halved since 1997. He pledged to make the lottery statutorily independent of government and in this way provide an extra £40 million for grassroots sports each year. At a later fringe event it was noted that because of 2012 no new lottery projects were being launched.

In the Tory version of 'Are we fit for 2012?' the Shadow Olympics Minister, Hugh Robertson stated that the biggest obstacle to increasing sporting participation was the standard of school sport and PE teaching. In his mind teaching should be the priority. Looking forward he said it was obviously going to be difficult for the British athletes in 2012 as they had over performed in Beijing. As a result they would need all the support they could get, but with the credit crunch he was unsure whether the necessary funds would be forthcoming.

Jennie Price from Sport England explained that 21% of the nation presently played sport and that she wanted to increase this number while also increasing the facilities available and the opportunities to play competitive sport. She pointed to the British Cycling team, which had emphasised the importance of increasing participation through the 'Go Ride' programme. In her view the strongest governing bodies were those that noted the importance of participation, for both public health and the level of elite sport. She said that to increase participation Sport England would challenge all sports in the current funding round on how they would reach into communities and increase participation.

John Steele from UK Sport, said that 65 per cent of the nation had watched at least 15 per cent of the Games on the BBC. He stated that high performance elite sport embodied behaviour and values that should be at the core of society and that sport could be a vehicle for social change. The goal of UK Sport is to make the UK the best high performance system in the World. Mr Robertson finished by saying he had had meetings with the Metropolitan Police about the issue of security for the 2012, and insisted it would not be as oppressive as in Beijing.

### **Conclusion**

For politicians sport is now a cause for both celebration and concern, a means to deliver the nation better health, better schools and a higher world profile. Beijing was a triumph and now people will expect more of the same in London, delivered in front of architecturally exciting but economically efficient stadia. The issue of exactly how this is to be achieved, along with how 2million people will be persuaded to take-up sport by 2012, is likely to be even higher up the political agenda as Parliament returns this week.