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The mysterious case of funding for sport

Having had time to get used to the contradictions and assumptions of current government spending policies, Jonathan Ives still cannot understand the maths when it comes to elite sport. What lies behind the chancellor's enthusiasm for international competition and could he explain it to the minister for sport?

These are interesting times for sport. On the international stage numerous chickens, each with suspiciously sumptuous plumage, seem to be coming home to roost, prompting some hasty reappraisals of what constitutes probity within the offices of several international governing bodies. At home we have a new government strategy for sport which is a reflection of and a response to the quiet acceptance that the fundamental premise of London 2012 – that hosting an Olympic Games would transform participation – has been a failure of epic proportions.

We have also been obliged to witness the very public discomfort of the man who led London to Olympic glory owing to the exposure of international athletics as a case study in corruption, naivety and conflict of interest. Watching Lord Coe, IAAF president and former long-term vice-president, having to defend his past and his future by treading a precariously fine line between allegations of stupidity and complicity has been painful for anyone who remembers Coe's role in London 2012 with affection. For others with little faith in the ability of thoroughly corrupted, self-selecting and self-regulating bodies to transform themselves from the inside, his semantic contortions may have been a source of grim amusement.

The exposure of the state of international sport governance had been an unedifying spectacle but amid all the accusations and allegations the most surprising revelation came not from a press conference in Switzerland or the fine print of an international arrest warrant but from the rather more sedate setting of the front bench of the House of Commons.

In November 2015 the chancellor the exchequer delivered his autumn statement setting out the government's spending proposals for the coming year and beyond. It contained much to shock anyone who with a working knowledge of the most recent Conservative manifesto and much to surprise anyone with a basic understanding of public finance but for anyone in the sport, leisure and culture sector one item stood out. While Mr Osborne held fast to the principles of austerity, cutting hard and deep into any spending that might be tainted by association with the welfare state or the public realm, UK Sport was to have its budget increased.

It took a while to sink in. The central government grant to local authorities, Osborne revealed, was to become a thing of the past, removing £18 billion from council budgets across England. There would be a £12 billion cut to welfare funding. The NHS budget was to be cut by £22 billion. And the body that funds elite sport was to have its £135 million budget increased by 29%.

With the health service, welfare and education wobbling on the verge of collapse, and with support for the most vulnerable in our society deemed unaffordable, here was the chancellor extending the provision of public money for the men and women who travel round the world to play games. Even the most ardent sports fan or the most committed

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advocate of the contribution of international sporting success to the nation's wellbeing could be forgiven for wondering what the hell was going on.

Several months later we are no closer to an answer and may have to wait decades for the inevitable political memoir to explain the chancellor's motivation. This was clearly not an example of someone demonstrating their faith in public investment: the rest of the statement reads like a tribute to Ayn Rand and George Osborne is a man who can defend a government that incentivises a private company to tell terminally ill people that they are fit for work without bothering to look sombre while he does it.

Could it be a new-found faith in the efficacy of sport? The lamentable recent participation figures would suggest not. For all the billions spent and all the promises made, London 2012 seems to have had a negative impact on the number of people engaged in sport, at least in the immediate short term, and the legacy of the Games seems to have been limited to a small part of east London that now has some rather impressive local leisure facilities.

Is it the allure of sporting excellence? Perhaps Osborne has put the rather negative reception he received from the crowd when presenting himself on the London 2012 medal podium behind him and has recognised that there is political capital in associating himself with sporting success. Does he like the way he and his colleagues look in the glow of reflected glory or is it just the allure of wealth and fame so beloved of so many politicians before him? In this scenario it is more likely that the 'high net worth individuals' upon whose wealth so many politicians and their parties depend are more likely to be found at international sporting events these days than the opera. Is elite sport the new high culture, the plush and exclusive environment where deals are done and donations are secured?

Perhaps it is a function of the isolation of a political elite? Does Osborne know so little about how sport works that he has not grasped the role of local government in the sports development process? It is a possibility. For all his fondness for hanging around in factories sporting a hi-vis jacket and brand-new items of personal protective equipment, it is unlikely that the chancellor spends much time outside his work commitments with people who are not wealthy; while he has probably met some poor people, he does not actually know any of them. It is unlikely that his friends moan to him about the lamentable state of their local football pitches or the rising costs of taking their kids swimming. His colleague the minister for sport has published a strategy document outlining the need to promote and facilitate grassroots sport but his own department has committed the government to undermining almost every aspect of the strategy's intent. Is it possible that he just has not realised the impact of austerity measures on the everyday aspirations? Given that he works with a prime minister who signs petitions protesting against the policies devised and implemented by his own government, it seems highly likely.

Could it be a good old-fashioned case of political stupidity? Even the most academically accomplished of individuals can be revealed as a deep resource of ignorance when it comes to anything outside their immediate experience; many politicians have been found within this group. With headlines continually revealing the world of elite sport to be little more than a seething cauldron of greed, graft and corruption, there would be a case to be made that UK sporting institutions should be withdrawing from international competition and commitments rather than extending their ambitions on the world stage; and the headlines are written in the biggest letters right on the front of the paper so it is hard to miss them even if you are only glancing along the racks in the newsagent. In such circumstances any chancellor serious about reducing expenditure might think that our sports people should be kept

at home until the rest of the world learns how to play properly; imagine the money we would save on travel and washing the kit.

To all these questions there are as yet no clear answers. For many observers – perhaps the majority of people in the country – participation and success in international sport is something that we as a nation should pursue, celebrate and support but that does not alter the strange circumstances in which elite sport funding has been defended and increased. In the context of a continuing economic depression, the removal of central funding for local government and political appetite for the imposition of austerity to become permanent, how is elite sport to be afforded? And, given the disappearance of public finance everywhere else, how is it to be sustained?

Perhaps the sports minister knows? If she ever meets Mr Osborne perhaps she could ask him.

Jonathan Ives is the editor of the Leisure Review.

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