From ‘Sport for All’ to Not About ‘Sport’ at All?:
Interrogating Sport Policy Interventions in the United Kingdom

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This article provides a critical account of the ways in which the funding for, and political justifications underlying, sport policy in the United Kingdom have shifted from concerns to provide ‘Sport for All’ opportunities for the generality of the population, and at various times for targeted groups in particular, to a peculiarly sharp twofold focus. Namely: (i) the promotion of the ‘active citizen’ through social investment strategies that have children and young people as their principal target; and (ii) a ‘no compromise’ approach to winning (Olympic) medals and trophies on the international stage. In utilizing the theoretical perspectives of ‘policy as discourse’ and ‘storylines’, the analysis thus interrogates, and goes some way towards answering, questions raised in the literature regarding the ‘demise’ of Sport for All related programmes and activities. The conclusions consider some of the potential ramifications of this sharpened twofold policy focus for sport policymakers, management professionals and practitioners alike.

Introduction

Over the past decade, at least, in the United Kingdom (UK) the rise in salience to government of sport-related policy interventions has been remarkable for the wide-ranging array of objectives that these interventions have been expected to realize (cf. Audit Commission, 2006; Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS)/Strategy Unit, 2002; Sport England, 2006a,b). During this period, sport and physical activity programmes have been variously called upon to realize (social welfare) policy goals in sectors...
that include education (cf. Houlihan & Green, 2006), health (cf. Hardman & Stensel, 2003), social exclusion/inclusion (cf. Collins et al., 1999), drug abuse and community safety (cf. Home Office, 2006), and the family (cf. Kay, 2000). At the same time, both Conservative and Labour governments have promoted, legitimised, and funded a system for supporting elite athlete development that bears little resemblance to the fragmented, makeshift and unplanned state of affairs of just 10 years ago (cf. Green, 2004a; Green & Houlihan, 2005).

Clearly, the argument that sport’s ‘value’ as a malleable and instrumental policy tool is at once vulnerable to counterclaims that there is nothing particularly ‘remarkable’, or indeed new, in such a contention (cf. Audit Commission, 1989; Coghlan with Webb, 1990; McIntosh & Charlton, 1985; Roche, 1993; Wolfenden Report, 1960). Over 30 years ago, for example, the Council of Europe (CoE) published the European Sport for All Charter, and in Article 1 it was argued that ‘Every individual shall have the right to participate in sport’ (quoted in Marchand, 1990, p. 16). The rationale put forward as justification for this argument was that sport was an aspect of socio-cultural development related to a wide range of welfare services including education, health, social services, land-use planning and the arts. Although the European Sport for All Charter was not published until 1975, the CoE had been a leading protagonist in debates about this issue since at least the mid-1960s. Around this time, developments at a European level were being played out in the UK. One of, if not the, dominant policy programmes of the newly created GB Sports Council in 1972 was ‘located within a broad welfare state discourse best reflected in the egalitarianism of what was later to be referred to as the “Sport for All” campaign’ (Houlihan & White, 2002, p. 24). At the same time, however, the policy rhetoric of social welfare benefits that (might) accrue from sport-related interventions was tempered by politicians (sometimes but rarely), sport policymakers, bureaucrats, and practitioners framing such interventions in the language of, and delivery through, programmes for sport—and in the main, this meant elite sport. Indeed, Houlihan and White (2002, p. 24) argue that the GB Sports Council’s Sport for All campaign ‘disguised the underlying tension between the community welfare view of sports development (development through sport) and the perception of sports development as a synonym for talent identification and elite development (development of sport)’.

In this context, through an interrogation of sport-related (national) policy interventions, the primary aim of this article is to make the argument that, from the mid-1990s—and from the election of New Labour in 1997 in particular—there has been a qualitative (and quantitative in funding terms at least) shift in the legitimization of policy discourse around, and thus expectations for, government intervention in sport policy in the UK. More specifically, and to provide some clarification to the wording of the title for the article, the aim here is not to suggest that either national sport policy strategies, or the delivery and implementation of programmes and initiatives on the ground, have little or nothing to do with sport. Clearly, that would be
misguided. Rather, the aim is to provide a critical account of the ways in
which the funding for, and political justifications underlying, sport policy
have shifted—from concerns to provide sporting/recreational/physical
activity opportunities for the generality of the population, and at various
times for targeted groups in particular (cf. Sports Council, 1982), to a
peculiarly sharp twofold focus: (i) the promotion of the ‘active citizen’
through social investment strategies that have children and young people as
their principal target (Sport England, 2006a,b); and (ii) a ‘no compromise’
(UK Sport, 2006a) approach to winning (Olympic) medals and trophies on
the international stage. In so doing, this analysis thus draws attention to, and
goes some way towards answering, the question posed by Collins (2002,
p. 508) following a review of Sport for All related interventions in England/
UK: the question Collins raised was, ‘Is Sport for All defunct?’

The analysis also reveals just how far policy priorities have shifted from
the publication of Sport and the community (Wolfenden Report, 1960),
which is widely recognized as triggering the ‘initiation of Sport for All
policies’ in the UK (McIntosh & Charlton, 1985, p. 6). Of note for this
article is McIntosh and Charlton’s comment that ‘The underlying justifica-
tion for the [Wolfenden] Committee’s recommendations was sport for
sport’s sake but extraneous benefits were not totally ignored’ (p. 6). Thus,
the first part of McIntosh and Charlton’s comment indicates that, in 1960 at
least, ‘attention was focused on policies for sport’ (p. 7, emphasis added).
The second part of their comment, however, is important for signalling
future sport policy priorities. Indeed, McIntosh and Charlton note some of
the ‘extraneous benefits’ signalled by Wolfenden: ‘Reduction of juvenile
delinquency, improvement of mental and physical health and “character
building” were specific benefits which might be expected from the
development of sport’ (p. 6).

Research Design

The following analysis draws together both theoretical insights and
empirical findings. Two empirical studies conducted by the author over
the past five years are utilized. The first study explored elite (Olympic) sport
development and, in particular, policy change in Australia, Canada and the
UK (Green & Houlihan, 2005). The second study provided an account of the
changing status of school sport and physical education (PE) in England and
Wales (Houlihan & Green, 2006). In addition, initial findings are used from
an ongoing study that aims to provide an account of the (potential)
consequences of New Labour’s modernizing agenda for Sport England,1
UK Sport2 and selected national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport. These
empirical studies did not set out to address specifically the changing ways in
which government and governmental sporting agencies’ Sport for All
strategies, interventions and programmes emerged to form part of the
overall sport policy milieu. However, evidence from all three studies reveals
a considerable pattern of change in respect of sport policy interventions in
the UK, and an interrogation of that pattern of change is the main objective of this analysis.

All three studies used a research design that employed a systematic review of documents from the academic literature, government departments/agencies, and NGBs. In addition, a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior staff in NGBs and government departments and sports agencies, and sports analysts complement the documentary analysis. The interview data are utilized here in order to provide ‘insider’ perspectives into the primary aim of the article. In order to protect the anonymity of interviewees, a protocol was agreed for the reporting of individuals’ responses. Namely, that a job title would be used to identify the interviewee’s position where this would not necessarily reveal her/his name. If this was not appropriate, then it was agreed that the term ‘senior official’ would be used.

The remainder of the article is structured in four parts. First, the theoretical perspectives upon which the article draws are set out. These perspectives are used to sensitize us to the ways in which sport policy has been/is discursively constructed through the generation of policy ‘storylines’ (Fischer, 2003; Hajer, 1995; Hendriks, 2005) and/or ‘policy as discourse’ (Bacchi, 2000; Bulkeley, 2000; Green, 2004a,b). Second, the broader political, organizational and policy context within which the two dominant sport policy storylines have emerged is provided. In this section greater focus is placed on elite sport development given that its ‘dominance’ as a strong storyline predates our second, more recent sport policy priority. It is in the third section where, utilizing insights gained from the previous two sections, we interrogate and discuss in more depth the emergence of a strong narrative around the promotion of the active citizen, social investment ideas, and policies for sport and physical activity. Finally, in the Conclusions we reflect on the utility of the theoretical approaches in helping us to better understand the trajectories of sport policy making in the UK, as well pointing to some of the possible reasons for the demise of Sport for All as a prominent and guiding policy ethos.

Theoretical Perspectives

Interpretive Approaches

The theoretical perspectives upon which the article is based, and through which the aim is to provide a richer understanding of the ways in which sport policy interventions in the UK have evolved and changed, draw in part upon recent methodological developments in British political science (in particular, see the symposium by Finlayson et al. in the British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 2004, pp. 129–64). In brief, these authors debate the relative salience of ‘interpretive approaches’ in the interrogation of political and policy phenomena. Thus, for Bevir and Rhodes (2003, p. 69) two of the leading protagonists endorsing the utility of interpretive approaches, relative to the ‘brute facts’ derived from empiricist
or positivist research designs—the human capacity for agency takes centre stage. The focus from this perspective is on the ways in which ‘dilemmas’ arise for an individual or an institution when a new idea is antagonistic to existing ‘beliefs’ or practices and so forces a reconsideration of these existing beliefs and associated ‘traditions’.

The concept of tradition is important in this schema. It is important because for Bevir et al. (2003, p. 7), a tradition is conceptualized ‘as a first influence on people. The content of the tradition will appear in their later actions only if their agency has led them not to change it, where every part of it is in principle open to change.’ Bevir and Rhodes’ work is an important contribution to the ways in which political and policy change is understood, and we certainly would not want to deny the idea that individuals have reflexive powers to change beliefs and actions. However, we concur with McAnulla’s (2006, p. 121) critique of Bevir and Rhodes’ ‘interpretive’ approach, which maintains that ‘these may not be the only causal powers that shape belief and action’. Indeed, the view that traditions or webs of beliefs are evident only through the activities of individuals, and that ‘discourse, ideologies or traditions have no existence apart from the contingent beliefs of particular individuals’ (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, p. 2) seriously downplays the relevance of the broader structure or discursive context within which such individuals act.

In acknowledging this last point, the argument is that individuals’ current activity always takes place within a pre-structured context. As Lewis (2000, p. 258) maintains, ‘pre-existing social structure makes a difference to the course of events in the social world by influencing the actions that people choose to undertake’. In other words, human agency is both enabled and constrained by the distribution of vested interests and resources embodied in antecedent social structure. Green (2004b, p. 386), for example, has shown how, over the past decade in the UK sport policy sector, the actions that people choose to undertake ‘are increasingly shaped by the requirements of elite sport and, specifically, the requirement to construct “pathways to the podium” that serve to subdue alternative voices within the sporting community’. Therefore, within this schema, a notion of social structure is possible, if not necessary, to account for current policy and practice which emerge from past action (Lewis, 2000; McAnulla, 2006).

In short, the above discussion revolves around the well-documented ‘structure-agency’ debate in the social and political sciences (cf. McAnulla, 2002). It is not possible to disentangle the labyrinthine complexities of this debate here. However, as McAnulla (2002, p. 283) notes, one of the principal issues that remains under-examined in this debate ‘is the need to account for and explain the role of the ideational and discursive’. It is vital because, as McAnulla goes on to argue, ‘Dominant or hegemonic discourses will play a particularly important role in influencing the strategy of actors’ (p. 284). The insights yielded by a closer examination and application of these conceptual and theoretical assumptions are rarely utilized in research about sport policy. In this area, writers investigating developments in school sport and PE have arguably been the most prominent advocates of
‘the concept of discourse’ (Penney & Evans, 1999, p. 24; see also Gilroy & Clarke, 1997; Penney & Evans, 1997), while Green (2004a,b) drew on similar insights for investigating aspects of policy change in respect of elite sport development in Canada and the UK, and Henry et al. (2005, p. 480) delineated ‘Defining Discourse’ as one element of a four-fold typology for interrogating comparative sports studies.

One of the aims of this article, then, is to build on this relatively small but growing body of research and provide further examples of the ways in which such insights might help us to better understand the prevalent discursive activity around two particular sport policy priorities: (i) the high priority now placed upon ‘creating’ active citizens, and in particular in this respect, ‘meeting the needs of children and young people’ through sport interventions (Sport England, 2006b, p. 13); and (ii) the high political salience currently accorded to supporting elite sport success (cf. Green, 2004a). Recent statements by the Sports Councils in the UK are not only useful for signposting these shifting sport policy priorities but also for revealing ‘the ways in which the terms of a discourse limit what can be talked about’ (Bacchi, 2000, p. 49).

With regard to the first policy priority identified above, since 1997 the emergence of a new social welfare policy architecture in the UK wherein the ‘active citizen’, and children and young people, in particular, are valorized and appear centre-stage as the focus for sport policy interventions—with regard to health and education matters in particular—is noticeable for its prominence in governmental discourse. The dominant ‘storyline’ in this respect is the aversion of risk. Taking the lead from Game Plan (DCMS/StrategyUnit, 2002), the government’s major sport policy strategy for the next 20 years, Sport England has recently published a number of strategies under the rubric of Sport Playing its Part (cf. Sport England, 2006b). Achieving economic well-being, being healthy and staying safe are now prominent governmental policy objectives to be achieved in part through sport policy interventions (Department for Education & Skills (DfES), 2004). One clear example of the shift towards the second policy priority of elite sport success was signalled in 2002, with UK Sport (2002, p. 8) stating that ‘winning medals is just as important as getting people to take part in sport’. UK Sport’s rhetoric is important for the role it plays in legitimizing policy and political support for the development of elite athletes; a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. Indeed, Green (2004a, p. 381) argues that, from the mid-1990s, elite sport development has emerged ‘as an increasingly significant area of interest for governments on both sides of the political spectrum’. Importantly, according to Green, this is due in large part to ‘The subtle framing of discourse by government and governmental agencies, such that the discursive context within which sport policy has developed in recent years, has … perceptibly altered’ (p. 381). One of the ways in which we might interrogate and better understand this altered discursive context is through the concepts of policy as discourse and storylines.
Policy as Discourse and Storylines

Despite the above critique of the interpretive approaches set out by writers such as Bevir and Rhodes, their insights do offer useful connections to the increasingly influential body of research on ‘policy as discourse’ (cf. Bacchi, 2000; Bulkeley, 2000) and the related concept of ‘storylines’ (cf. Fischer, 2003, Hajer, 1995; Hendriks, 2005). Indeed, Bevir and Rhodes (2003, p. 69) suggest that ‘complex political objects’ cannot be understood as ‘brute facts... individuals construct them [facts] in the stories they hand down to one another’. This view draws attention to the importance of the interpretation of narratives, and ‘As social constructions of particular events, storylines serve to position social actors and institutional practices in ongoing, competing narratives’ (Fischer, 2003, p. 87). In this view, discourse is characterized as a ‘specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations, that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’ (Hajer, 1995, p. 44).

Following this line of reasoning, then, policy processes are characterized by ongoing argumentative ‘struggle[s] for discursive hegemony in which actors try to secure support for their definitions of reality’ (Hajer, 1995, p. 59). In this ‘discursive struggle’ the integrity and acceptability of, and faith invested in, the storyline and the actors involved become significant. Over the past decade, the dominant storylines articulated by prominent sport policymakers, bureaucrats and, importantly now, politicians, have transformed the discursive terrain for debate about, and programmes implemented for, sport in the UK. Indeed, it is possible to argue that, in Bulkeley’s (2000, p. 735) terms, we are witnessing the emergence of ‘institutionalised discourse coalitions’ that have significantly shaped the agenda for sport in the UK. Discourse coalitions are linked by a shared understanding of the problem—the storyline, where interdependencies involve legitimacy, is discursive, normative and cognitive. The principal institutions (and actors therein) in this schema are the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), UK Sport and Sport England. This discursive, argumentative struggle is thus clearly dominated by government and its principal sporting agencies (cf. Green & Houlihan, 2006). These government departments and agencies have shaped, channelled and guided a heightened (political) legitimacy for a set of normatively instrumental aspirations for sport that are far removed from what was envisaged in the recommendations set out over 20 years ago by McIntosh and Charlton (1985) in their analysis: Impact of Sport for All Policy 1966–1984. In the mid-1980s McIntosh and Charlton concluded that:

Sport as a means and sport as an end are not mutually exclusive. There is a continuum of emphasis from extrinsic to intrinsic rewards and from sport as a useless enjoyment to sport as social machinery. Our suggestion is that Sport for All has travelled too far along this continuum towards
...The next stage for Sport for All might be to travel back and to base both research and promotion on enjoyment rather than social function (p. 193).

It appears that McIntosh and Charlton’s advice has gone largely unheeded. The earlier discussion pointed to a contemporary discursive context for sport policy development that clearly favours the ‘social machinery’ and ‘social function’ end of McIntosh and Charlton’s continuum. At this stage it is important to note that, within a contemporary context of sport policy priorities that are discursively constructed around the two increasingly distinct storylines discussed above, the question raised by these observations in respect of this article is, what space remains for the ambitions of Sport for All?

Political, Organizational and Policy Context for Sport

This section provides an overview of the broader political, organizational and policy context within which sport policy has evolved and shifted over the past 30 years or so. The institutional complexity of the organizational arrangements for sport in the UK is such (cf. DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002) that this article is limited to investigating documentation of (and related to) the GB Sports Council, covering the UK and England from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, and thereafter of the English Sports Council, now operating as Sport England (cf. Collins, 2002). The focus of what follows is necessarily circumscribed around policies, programmes and activities concerned with, first, social welfare, Sport for All related initiatives and, second, elite sport development.

Social Welfare Objectives and Sport for All

In the early 1970s, governmental policy priorities for sport, recreation and physical activity were clearly focused on the promotion of Sport for All programmes, and the construction of public sport and leisure facilities (cf. Coghlan with Webb, 1990; Collins, 2002; McIntosh & Charlton, 1985). Indeed, there was a rapid construction of public sport and leisure facilities throughout the 1970s: in 1972 there were 30 municipal sports centres, and less than 500 indoor swimming pools in England. By 1978 this had increased to 350 sports centres and more than 850 pools (Sports Council, 1982). Yet, the policy goal of realizing sport and leisure opportunities for all proved to be far less amenable to interventions from government (Sport England, 2004). The response to this ‘policy problem’ was the gradual emergence of a raft of programmes and initiatives that targeted, what were termed, ‘disadvantaged groups’ (notably, young people, the elderly, women, ethnic minorities, disabled people and lower socio-economic groups) (Collins, 2002; Henry, 2001; McIntosh & Charlton, 1985). The key organizations charged with this task were the Sports Councils (then the GB Sports Council
and the Sports Councils for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), which were established by Royal Charter in 1971–2.

The retention of this policy response persisted throughout the 1980s, with varying degrees of success, but was overlaid and at times subsumed by other, more (politically) instrumental uses of sport and leisure programmes and services (cf. Henry, 2001; Houlihan & White, 2002). The shift towards a more pragmatic promotion of sport and leisure, on the basis of the externalities which accrue from such provision, first emerged in the mid-1970s under a Labour administration. However, it was the ‘shock waves’ from the urban (inner city) riots in England in the early 1980s that shaped, profoundly, the Conservative Government’s (elected in 1979) policy priorities for inner city sport and leisure spending (cf. Henry, 2001; Houlihan, 1997). Thus, the shift away from spending on targeted groups (as noted above), which was rationalized on the basis of alleviating recreational disadvantage and the fostering of community development, and towards the use of sport and leisure as a form of ‘benign policing’, realigned political priorities for sport, recreation and physical activity policy. At this time, at least one consequence of this realignment of priorities was that:

the emphasis in provision was placed on groups which are perceived as volatile and troublesome, typically young, male, unemployed, often black, inner-city residents, while other equally disadvantaged groups are relatively neglected (e.g., elderly people, ‘housebound’ mothers, single parents, the handicapped) (Henry, 2001, p. 78).

Greater prominence was thus given to concentrating resources on the symptoms, as opposed to causes, of social unrest in the inner cities. As a consequence, what characterized political and policy responses to sport ‘policy problems’, at least until the early to mid-1990s, was their passivity, or re-active nature. With the advent of ‘social investment’ ideas (cf. Lister, 2003, 2004), policies designed around sport and physical activity gradually became increasingly pro-active and heralded the valorization of the ‘active citizen’, where government seeks to enhance the capacities of individuals and communities to enable them to take greater responsibility for their own actions and future welfare (cf. Raco, 2004). Currently, in the UK, children and young people are at the heart of these social investment ideas. In this respect, two prominent examples are The children act 2004 (HM Government, 2004), which sets out statutory duties and accountability for children’s services on local government and other service providers, and Every child matters: Change for children (DfES, 2004). A deeper analysis of the emergence of the storyline linking social investment ideas and policies for sport and physical activity follows in the Discussion and Conclusions. At this stage it is important to recognize that this increasingly strong sport policy narrative has emerged over the past four or five years. The prioritization of elite sport development, however, can be traced back to the mid-1990s.
Elite Sport Development

Before the mid-1990s, support for elite sport development was uncoordinated and fragmented, with little sustained support from government and its sporting agencies. For many, if not most, athletes funding was sporadic and, unless an athlete was one of the very few who were winning prize monies on the Grand Prix circuits, parental support, part-time work and occasional sponsorship constituted their support system for training and competing (Green & Houlihan, 2005). This situation changed radically with the introduction of a National Lottery in 1994 (with sport being one of the five original ‘good causes’ to benefit from this new funding stream) and the publication, in 1995, of the Conservative government’s comprehensive policy statement, *Sport: Raising the game* (Department of National Heritage (DNH), 1995). *Raising the game* indicated the withdrawal of central government and the Sports Councils from the provision of opportunities for mass participation, and focused primarily on school (youth) sport, plans for an elite sports academy/institute, the role of higher education institutions in the fostering of elite athletes, and conditional funding allocations to governing bodies for supporting government objectives. *Raising the game* was not only important in that it signalled the emerging salience of sport at central government level, but for some it also abandoned any pretence of an integrated and multi-dimensional approach to sports development as conceived in the late 1980s by the GB Sports Council around the sports development continuum of four tightly integrated levels: foundation, participation, performance and excellence (cf. Lentell, 1993).

Against this background, the Labour government (elected in 1997) published its own strategy for sport, *A sporting future for all* (DCMS, 2000). Although there was a strong degree of policy continuity (i.e. on the twin emphases of school [youth] sport and elite development) between the Labour strategy and *Raising the game*, there were also important differences. For example, from 1997 the Labour Party introduced a new public policy language of professionalism and modernization, which was seen as a key vehicle for achieving welfare goals such as social inclusion and widening access for all (Oakley & Green, 2001). Political support for elite development has, however, strengthened under a Labour government. Yet, there is also some evidence that not all in the UK sporting community have embraced elite sport values and beliefs to the degree now evident at the highest levels of government. For example, a former senior official at the British Athletic Federation (now UK Athletics) maintained that:

The way athletics, and sport generally, is going, [what] we’re all trying to do is find talent and hothouse it to the top. ... We don’t believe that any experience is, in a sense, intrinsically worthwhile anymore. Anything is only worthwhile if there is a big pay-off at the end (Interview, 28 May 2002).
Any resistance to the drive for Olympic medals is somewhat fragile, however, as NGBs become ever more dependent upon government resources, which are linked inextricably to Olympic medal targets. A senior official at British Swimming supported this view in stating, unequivocally, that:

the government will only judge swimming by eight days in Athens [Olympic Games]. . . . It isn’t five days in Manchester [Commonwealth Games] this year. It wasn’t five days in Fukuoka [World Championships] when we came back with seven medals. [That’s] all very interesting but if [we] come back with seven medals from the Olympics . . . that’d get people sitting up and thinking (Interview, 18 March 2002).

It is not only the resistance to the drive for Olympic medals which is fragile; an argument easily illustrated if we stay with the example of swimming. Unfortunately, the GB/NI Olympic swimming team won only two bronze medals in Athens. Although this was a marginal improvement on the performance in Sydney four years earlier (where the swimming team won no medals and which resulted in reduced funding), Olympic swimmers struggle to achieve the medal performances demanded by government targets. Thus, even for those actors (and sports) that have embraced the government’s drive for Olympic glory (such as the senior swimming official above), the conditions within which NGBs operate are characterized by fragility and insecurity, typified by a resource-dependent relationship: a relationship that will only endure if the sport delivers, against agreed targets, on the Olympic stage.

Notwithstanding the potentially fragile (and potentially punitive) nature of current relationships between government and sporting organizations, from the mid-1990s onwards the political salience of sport at different levels has increased immeasurably. Some of the most prominent sport policy commitments in the late 1990s were elite-related, for example the development of a UK-wide elite sports institute network (the UK Sports Institute), and the establishment of a three-tier (Performance, Potential and Start) World Class Lottery Fund to support elite athletes at different levels of development. The UK Sports Council (UK Sport) was created during 1996–7 and became the distributor of Lottery funding for elite-focused programmes in 1999 and, by the time of the Athens Olympic cycle, 2001–5, £83.5 million was awarded in support of (17) summer Olympic and (15) Paralympic sports (National Audit Office, 2005). The allocation of an additional £200 million of public money in the 2006 Budget for the support of Olympic sports is a clear indication of the current political resolve for the support of elite development (HM Treasury, 2006).

There is also a clear storyline emerging from these developments, that is, a ‘ruthless’ (UK Sport, 2006a, p. 1) approach to the realization of Olympic glory for the UK. UK Sport has made it very clear that it is adopting a ‘no compromise’ investment strategy for Olympic sports over the next six years that will target ‘resources solely at those athletes capable of delivering
medal-winning performances’ (UK Sport, 2006a, p. 1). This new funding strategy clearly epitomizes a narrative or storyline constructed around a broader discourse of ensuring elite sport success in 2008 and in 2012 in particular. A recent press release from UK Sport helps to make the point, where the organization’s Chief Executive stated that ‘we must . . . ensure that the money is not wasted—huge amounts of public funds are being invested and our job is to challenge the sports to spend it to maximum effect’ (quoted in UK Sport, 2006b, p. 1). The Director of Performance at UK Sport continued this theme in stating that ‘There are no hiding places in Olympic sport now . . . The 2012 mission is a challenging one that requires a full commitment from athletes and everyone in a support role’ (quoted in UK Sport, 2006b, p. 1).

The recent background to this new ‘uncompromising’ approach by UK Sport and government is one in which Olympic NGBs have been required to put together talent identification and development strategies, part of which involves the construction of ‘performance pathways’ to higher levels of competition, especially between schools and clubs. The broader backdrop to these latest developments is the funding of an ongoing programme of establishing up to 400 Specialist Sports Colleges (SSCs) which have, among their various functions, the responsibility to act as the first rung on the talent development ladder. The SSCs form an important part of a planned, coordinated and integrated organizational and administrative framework for elite sport development. The SSC development is just one strand of the broader PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) strategy, for which the government is investing £459 million over the period 2003-6. This funding is additional to the £686 million now being invested to improve school sport facilities across England (DfES/DCMS, 2003).

Overall, growing political ‘engagement’ with sport policy was reinforced in the 2002 government strategy, Game plan, which reiterated the commitment to elite success, set out an ambitious aim of increasing grassroots participation for health benefits (a policy goal closely aligned to the PESSCL strategy), and clearly outlined a strong determination for a results-driven and evidence-based approach to the achievement of strategic aims. Government support for London’s successful bid to host the 2012 summer Olympic Games is further testament to the importance now placed upon elite sport success in the UK. In this regard, Prime Minister, Tony Blair’s contribution to the (successful) bidding process in Singapore in July 2005 provides clear evidence of the significance of (elite) sport at the highest political level. In sum, on the one hand, ‘sport’ in general now enjoys a far higher political saliency than at any time over the past 40 years. On the other hand, this increased saliency has to be tempered by the realization that government is also now ‘shaping’ sport policy development with a far tighter hand than ever before (Green, 2005; Green & Houlihan, 2006).
Discussion

The Discursive Struggle

What is very clear, and important to understand, from the insights provided in the previous sections is that, to paraphrase Marx, discursive actors can shape their own history but not under conditions entirely of their own making. As Fischer (2003, p. 85) notes, given that actors operate ‘within pre-existing social structures, the political and policy context of interaction has to be situated in a discursive construction that offers both possibilities and constraints’ Clearly, ‘possibilities’ have opened up for (or indeed by) those actors and organizations prominent in the construction of the dominant discourses around the two storylines of: (i) the promotion of ideas about the ‘active citizen’ through social investment strategies that have children and young people as their principal target; and (ii) a ‘no compromise’ approach to winning (Olympic) medals and trophies on the international stage. On the other hand, such is the current political legitimation for, and funding support allocated to, these two sport policy priorities, that alternative sport policy developments for activities, initiatives and programmes which fall outside the discursive space created by these two narratives are seriously constrained. The contention of this article is that support for programmes falling under the rubric of Sport for All have at best been subsumed, and at worst, ‘severed’ (McDonald, 1995, p. 75) by these developments. In this respect, in Fischer’s (2003, p. 87) terms, ‘The winner of the discursive struggle will define what will be taken to be reality with categories that will at the same time suppress alternative conceptions.’ Here, for Fischer’s ‘categories’, we can insert the two dominant storylines outlined above.

Yet it could be argued that this is no bad thing, as this twofold focus does at least bring a degree of coherence to sport policy in the UK. For at least as long ago as the early 1970s and the creation of the Sports Councils, and the emergence of governmental ‘sport policy’ in any meaningful sense, efforts to produce substantial benefits in this sector have been bedevilled by the constant critique that it is ‘one of the most divided, confused and conflictive policy communities in British politics’ (Roche, 1993, 78). In large part, for Roche at least, these historical divisions have persisted because ‘Britain has a long-established tradition of … sporting self-government’ (p. 79). The inference here is that the mosaic of sport-related organizations across the public, private and voluntary sectors have not only rarely agreed on sport policy outcomes, let alone on the ways in which such outcomes might be achieved, but they have also clung desperately to the idea that any government intervention should be viewed as unwanted and unnecessary interference into their private affairs. Green and Houlihan’s (2005) research into elite sport development corroborates this line of thinking. In the sports of athletics and swimming, in particular, Green and Houlihan found many instances over 30 years at least of bickering, disagreements and plain in-fighting, both within the respective sports as well as in their relationships with government and the Sports Councils.
The idea that sport organizations would continue to ‘benefit’ from the degree of autonomy from government that they had enjoyed over the years was rudely interrupted in 1995 with the publication of the Conservative sport strategy, *Sport: Raising the game*. The antecedents of the two dominant sport storylines of the past decade have their genesis in this document. The overriding narrative in *Raising the game* was one of a future sporting landscape that focused attention on the needs of children and young people, in relation to school sport and PE in particular, and a peculiarly nostalgic lament for the country to improve upon its recent poor international sporting performances (cf. Penney & Evans, 1997). Although *Raising the game* was published as the Conservatives were slipping into political decline, its ideas proved to be fertile ground for developments in sport policy under a New Labour administration from 1997.

**Dominant (Sport) Discourses/Storylines**

As illustrated in some depth in the previous sections, under New Labour the dominance of the elite sport discourse has strengthened significantly (cf. Green, 2004a). In the Conclusions we consider some of the potential consequences of this dominant elite sport narrative, however, for the majority of the remainder of this section, we concentrate on the second strong ‘sport storyline’ that has emerged over the past four or five years. Namely, ‘social investment’ (cf. Lister, 2003, 2004) strategies that promote a normative vision of the ‘use’ of sport and physical activity wherein the self-responsibilizing, ‘active citizen’ is shaped, channelled and guided into taking steps to realize well-being, a healthy lifestyle and educational benefits in particular. Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck and Myles (2002) provide a useful outline of the underlying premise upon which New Labour has grounded social investment policy development. Esping-Andersen *et al.* (2002, p. 51) argue that ‘If we aim for a productive and socially integrated future society, our policy priorities should centre on today’s children and youths. Solid investments in children now will diminish welfare problems among future adults.’ Here, we have social investment ideas captured in microcosm: a future-oriented focus, the pivotal status of children and young people, and the alignment of economic and social policy goals.

Pro-active government rationalities and social investment ideas in the realm of sport and physical activity were first set out in a robust manner in *Game plan*, which outlined a long-term aim for 2020 ‘to increase significantly levels of sport and physical activity, particularly among disadvantaged groups’ (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002, p. 80). New Labour set a target ‘for 70% (currently ∼30%) of the population to be reasonably active (for example 30 minutes of moderate exercise five times a week) by 2020’ (p. 80). What is noticeable, in the context of this article, is that, in the Government’s prioritization of ‘disadvantaged groups’, greatest prominence is placed upon children and young people (women, older people and people from lower socio-economic groups are also mentioned). Crucially, New Labour locates its strategy for increasing participation (for all targeted
groups) within a set of four criteria, one of which is whether it ‘fit[s] with other overarching objectives (crime reduction, education, social cohesion, etc.)’ (p. 95). To this list, we can add health, as each campaign for the targeted groups is required to ‘achieve health benefits [which] can be articulated quite simply with the “5 × 30mins” message’ (p. 104). In line with this strong discourse around the social/educational benefits to be achieved through sport, a senior civil servant at the DfES confirmed current political thinking on the value of school sport and PE:

it’s not simply about PE and school sport. If what we end up with at the end of this is lots of kids having lots of fun [but] making no bigger difference perhaps to behaviour, attitude, motivation and [academic] achievement, then actually we will have failed (Interview, 24 May 2004).

Thus Game plan’s focus on lifelong opportunity, social inclusion and a child-centred sport and physical activity agenda clearly mirrors social investment objectives in other policy sectors. For example, as Jenson (2005, p. 2) notes in charting the markedly altered thinking in recent years in respect of social policy, ‘Now the goal is to be proactive rather than compensatory. One result of this shift in ideas is that the best policy mix envisioned often targets children.’ Indeed, in Game plan the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport argues that sport and physical activity projects help ‘to improve all round educational performance, to build confidence, leadership and teamwork in our young people, to combat social exclusion, reduce crime and build stronger communities’ (quoted in DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002, p. 7). The Secretary of State goes on to note the hoped-for lifelong gains in such an approach: ‘A 10% increase in adult activity would prevent around 6,000 premature deaths not to mention bringing economic benefits worth at least £2 billion a year’ (p. 7).

In these comments, we begin to see more clearly the linkages to analyses of the ‘social investment state’, the growing relationship between social and economic policy, and also the focus on children as ‘citizen-workers of the future’ (cf. Lister, 2003, 2004). Lister’s critique of such an approach hinges in part on concerns that children become ‘valued’ merely as ‘cipher[s] for future economic prosperity’ (2003, p. 433), with the well-being or enjoyment of children as children overshadowed. In line with this thinking, unease regarding the treatment of young athletes is one of, if not the, major concerns to emerge from an increased prioritization on elite sport development in the UK over the past decade. For example, a former senior official at the British Athletic Federation drew attention to talent identification mechanisms with regard to young athletes, and argued that ‘Nobody cares what happens to them if they aren’t successful. Nobody seems to be asking the question at all about how people put together their lives when they have failed to make it through the talent ID [identification and development] process’ (Interview, 28 May 2002).

Notwithstanding the above concerns, the embedding of social investment ideas and their relationship with sport and physical activity is clearly
deepening. In this respect, *Sport playing its part: The contribution of sport to meeting the needs of children and young people* (Sport England, 2006a) is instructive. Here, attention is drawn to a recent Government Green Paper (*Youth matters*) that explores the issues facing young people and teenagers. Sport England’s publication not only cites the Green Paper’s acknowledgement of ‘the positive contribution of sport to the health and well being of young people’ (2006a, p. 5), but also, and especially, it states that ‘for such benefits for children and young people to be realised through sport there is a need to take a proactive approach’ (2006a, p. 5, emphasis added).

In these observations from Sport England, as well as from the DCMS and the Strategy Unit in *Game plan*, we have powerful evidence of what Foucault (1982, pp. 220–1) referred to as the ‘conduct of conduct’, or the rationalities and techniques of government which seek to shape and guide those who are the object of government ‘to particular sets of norms and for a variety of ends’ (Dean, 1999, p. 10).

These rationalities and techniques are about shaping behaviour constitutive of ‘active’ citizens, in both senses of the word: active in the sense of ‘becoming active’, or genuinely taking part in sport and physical activity, and active in taking responsible steps for one’s own well-being and health. Indeed, in a discussion of neighbourhood regeneration and the London bid for the 2012 Olympic Games, Raco (2004, p. 38) notes that ‘Active citizenship has become the buzzword with communities and individuals expected (and sometime compelled) to take increased responsibility for themselves and their neighbourhoods.’ And government will measure this activity, creating calculable spaces within which citizens can be judged (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002; Raco, 2004). In this respect, as noted, these policy interventions invoke a strong narrative storyline about risk aversion. As Dean argues in another (but clearly related) context, ‘measures of health promotion for smokers or obesity may effectively target “working class” men but they do so to erase risky behaviours, not redress disadvantage’ (1999, p. 167). One of the ways, therefore, in which New Labour seeks—at an early stage—to intervene and avert ‘risky behaviours’ for health, and other social policy objectives, is to target schools: children and young people are thus centre-stage in New Labour’s social investment strategies for sport and physical activity interventions.

**Conclusions**

Overall, the above discussion reveals that political justifications for investment in policies for sport and physical activity in the UK have shifted away from a Sport for All ethos and towards a twofold focus on the ‘active (child) citizen’ and elite performance. Neither of these two sport policy priorities has a distinct concern with ‘sport’ as envisaged by McIntosh and Charlton (1985) in their argument that sport for sport’s sake or sport as just plain fun might be a better rationale for governments attempting to encourage participation in, and enjoyment of, sport and physical activity. Nor do these priorities have much to do with the notion of ‘All’ in the Sport
for All ethos. Today, sport and physical activity policy priorities focus on: (i) children and young people and the use of programmes that aim to reduce longer-term (financial) costs associated with poor health, poor educational achievement and by association a less than satisfactory contribution to the future economic well-being of the country; and (ii) the development of elite performers and the winning of Olympic medals. In short, it is difficult to disagree with Houlihan’s (1999, p. 19) conclusion that ‘In the UK, the policy of SFA [Sport for All] has ossified, retaining at best a symbolic status of a past concerned with sport as an element of welfare.’

The emphasis in the article on the ways in which understandings of policy problems are forged through the policy process, through the concepts of policy as discourse and storylines offer a useful contribution to our appreciation of contemporary sport policy interventions in the UK. As Bacchi (2000, p. 49) argues, ‘This is where the idea of policy as discursive activity comes into its own, because it promotes consideration of the ways in which the terms of a discourse limit what can be talked about.’ Thus, to take the example of the increased focus on elite sport development, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts recently debated the National Audit Office (2005) report, UK Sport: Supporting elite athletes. The Chairman of the Committee was told by the Permanent Secretary at the DCMS and the Director of Performance at UK Sport that £97 million of public money was being used for supporting elite athletes for the Beijing Olympics in 2008. In response, the Chairman asked:

Are you aware of the Olympic ideal, the words of Baron de Coubertin? What is it? It is not winning, but taking part. Why are we concentrating resources on a few elite athletes? Why not just help sport generally? It is not winning, but taking part, surely? (quoted in House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2006, p. Ev 2).

Although the Permanent Secretary acknowledged that ‘medals are not the only yardstick’, UK Sport’s Performance Director maintained that ‘[Olympic success] really does have a huge impact on people in this country in motivating them to participate in sport. That is why we do it . . . but success comes at a price’ (quoted in House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2006, p. Ev 2). The storyline that Olympic success motivates the generality of the population to participate and compete is what might be termed a ‘usual suspect’ in any discussions of the ways in which funding for elite development is allocated (cf. DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002). However, an influential report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research and Demos found that all ‘the evidence shows that past Olympics failed to bring with them a sustained increase in participation’ (Vigor et al., 2004, p. xiii). Yet, such is the currency of the narrative storyline around elite achievement at the highest political and institutional levels in the UK, that ‘alternative voices’ arguing for some perspective in respect of spending such large amounts of public money on the aspirational goal of a handful of Olympic medals, remain relatively suppressed.
Finally, the argument developed throughout is that we are witnessing the decline of Sport for All as a prominent and guiding policy ethos. It is therefore necessary to provide some concluding thoughts as to the possible reasons behind this demise. One way of looking at this issue is to ask, was there something inherently problematic about the Sport for All ethos that contributed to its demise? From the available evidence, one compelling answer appears to rest on the argument that ‘Sport for All was an extremely flexible policy’ (Houlihan & White, 2002, p. 25). Indeed, McIntosh and Charlton’s (1985, pp. 99–101) comprehensive and authoritative review found that early statements of the policy were constantly being revised and amended, and included a bewildering array of objectives, associated with psychological, health, community and sport benefits. As a result, Houlihan and White (2002, p. 25) concluded that this lack of specificity ‘did little to help establish Sport for All as a coherent policy in its own right and perpetuated the impression of it being a convenient umbrella term for a diverse and constantly shifting set of objectives.’

The point here is that such observations provide a pertinent illustration of the Sports Council’s blurred objectives and the lack of a fixed narrative construction in respect of what Sport for All entailed or indeed hoped to achieve. Drawing on the earlier discussion in respect of the importance of storylines, Fischer (2003, p. 87) argues that ‘the ability to cleverly shape the discursive space can have an important and even decisive impact’ on the ways in which one policy claim wins over politicians and senior policymakers and others (in this case, Sport for All) do not. This is a significant point. Indeed, in a critical reflection on the development of a national curriculum for PE in England and Wales, Penney (1998, p. 120) argues that, from the publication of *Raising the game* in 1995, the dominant discourse in schools has become one in which ‘performance in sport’ is valorized to the detriment of a more holistic and inclusive physical education programme. Aside from schools, local authorities have traditionally been the other key provider of Sport for All related programmes in the UK. Yet, in the late 1980s, the Audit Commission (1989, p. 7) found that ‘Many local authorities do not have a clear idea of what their role in sport and recreation should be’. Given the vagueness of the Sport for All concept promulgated by the Sports Councils (cf. McDonald, 1995; Roche, 1993; Houlihan, 1999; Houlihan & White, 2002), it is hardly surprising that local authorities struggled to set clear objectives for their sport and recreation programmes and thus failed to encourage the majority of adults to take part in sport regularly (Audit Commission, 1989, p. 14).

To sum up, for sport policymakers, management professionals and practitioners alike, the current high saliency of sport to government and the associated increase in financial resources into the sector must be welcomed. However, it remains to be seen whether this political and financial commitment endures if Olympic medal targets are not met and if the evidence for increases in sport and physical activity participation rates do not materialize. With regard to Olympic medal targets, despite UK Sport’s current strategy of ‘no compromise’ for Beijing and beyond, it is undeniable
that there can be a very fine line between winning an Olympic medal and fourth place ‘failure’ (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2006, p. 10). In respect of sport and physical activity participation rates, the early evidence is hardly encouraging. The Audit Commission’s (2006) review of Public sports and recreation services found that ‘Only 15 per cent of the councils in the study had included outcome-focused targets, such as participation by target groups or customer satisfaction’ (p. 28). The Audit Commission’s conclusions provide a salutary warning in that ‘If councils fail to adopt clear comprehensive approaches to strategic decisions . . . they will fail to meet participation targets and community needs’ (p. 58). Although the rewards might appear enticing, the size of the task for those involved in realizing both sport policy priorities discussed in this article could not be clearer.

Notes

1. Sport England is the brand name for the English Sports Council. It is categorized as a non-departmental public body (NDPB) that operates on the ‘arm’s length’ principle in its relationship with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)—the central government department responsible for sport. From 1 April 2006, Sport England’s remit changed from one that, in the past, covered a broad elite sport-mass sport range, to one with a much tighter focus on what is being termed ‘Community Sport’.

2. The UK Sports Council (UK Sport) was created in 1996 and, like Sport England, is a NDPB under the auspices of the DCMS. It has a tight focus on: supporting elite athlete development; promoting the hosting of major sporting events; control of anti-doping procedures; and the use of sport for international development purposes. Some clarification is also required with regard to the complexity of the organizational architecture for sport in the UK. First, no other country competes internationally at two different levels: sometimes as UK/GB, and sometimes as individual home countries, i.e. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This means that there are currently five Sports Councils in the UK. UK Sport’s UK-wide elite focus was clarified above, and Sport England’s recently altered remit was explained in note 1. The Sports Councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland deal with both elite and grassroots sport. All five Sports Councils distribute funding, provide services and disseminate strategy. Second, it is acknowledged that the article has a UK/English focus but space precludes an in-depth analysis of Sport for All related activities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the discussion in respect of elite sport policy is UK-wide and much of the analysis considers Sport for All programmes under the auspices of the former GB Sports Council up to the mid-1990s.

3. Thirty-five interviews were conducted in the study of elite sport policy. In each country, interviewees were selected from: the leading government agency/department for sport; the national governing bodies for swimming, athletics and sailing; and leading sports academics and experts who had written on sport policy. All interviewees were selected on the basis of their involvement in the development, implementation or analysis of elite sport policy within the last 15 years. Nine interviews were conducted for the study of school sport and PE in England, with similar selection criteria as the first study. Interviewees included senior civil servants or senior members of interest/professional organizations and senior academics involved in school sport/PE. Details of the frameworks for organizing the interviews in these two studies can be found in Green & Houlihan (2005) and Houlihan & Green (2006) respectively. Seven interviews have been
conducted to date for the third (ongoing) study, again with similar selection criteria as the first two studies. Interviewees were selected from Sport England, UK Sport and the DCMS. The empirical investigation of selected NGBs begins in 2007. For all three studies, interviews were recorded and lasted between 40 and 80 minutes.

4. However, it should be recognized that, on the criterion of improved Olympic medal counts, the increased political/financial support for elite sport over the last ten years has been legitimized, to some extent at least. In 1996, the GB/NI Olympic team was placed 36th in the medals table. In 2000, the Olympic team improved its position to 10th place, a position also achieved in 2004 (for more detail see Green & Houlihan, 2005).

References


