

PLAY THE GAMES: THE VALUE OF INTERNATIONAL SPORTING EVENTS

A historical perspective on the Commonwealth Games

The future of the Commonwealth Games has come to be questioned in the face of recent decisions to relinquish hosting the event on the grounds of their prohibitive cost. Such concerns, though, tend to be based on narrow transactional economic calculations that do not consider the wider benefits of organised international sporting events. These less tangible sporting dividends should be better appreciated in order to counter the growing narrative that the Commonwealth Games are anachronistic, irrelevant and not cost-effective.

In 2023, the Government of Victoria in Australia announced their withdrawal from hosting the 2026 Commonwealth Games, citing that the costs of this had more than doubled to AU\$6 billion. A few weeks later Alberta, Canada suddenly withdrew their bid to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games on similar grounds. The UK has stepped in to host a slimmed down version of the 2026 Games in Glasgow, Scotland in place of Victoria. However, much of the British media reaction to this was decidedly unenthusiastic with imperial guilt as well as economics informing a prevailing narrative that the Commonwealth Games are a wasteful anachronism.

Whilst there can be little doubt that international sporting events are often unnecessarily costly and have also been subject to political manipulation, the Commonwealth Games have been a force for good in myriad ways.

One of the most familiar arguments around the staging of international sporting events is that allowing authoritarian countries to do so is to collude in 'sportswashing'. There is a

compelling logic to this, but it is also the case that putting such regimes in the global spotlight can have beneficial results. Concerns that the awarding of the 1998 Commonwealth Games to Malaysia were a sop to the authoritarian rule of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad seemed to be vindicated when he fired his popular, reformist deputy Anwar Ibrahim during the games. However, this contrived sacking actually became a positive turning point in Malaysian history since the spotlight on Kuala Lumpur encouraged the emergence of the democratic social movement Reformasia, and the genesis of significant reform.

Further accusations that international sporting events are overly nationalistic overlooks their capacity to bring countries together and provide an outlet for healthy displays of patriotism. The Commonwealth Games have been pioneering in permitting 'non-sovereign' entities to participate and fly the flag more than any other international sporting event. This is greatly valued by these non-sovereign teams, as confirmed by the National Sports Council of the Falkland Islands who have stated that the event: 'matters a great deal ...both for sporting and political visibility reasons'.¹ International sport's capacity to promote positive patriotism can also be seen in an endogenous form. Jamaica's hosting of the 1966 Commonwealth Games was used to announce their sovereign arrival on the world stage four years earlier, with a new national Independence Stadium symbolically built for the occasion and much pride taken in being the first

black majority country to host the event.

In line with the Jamaican experience of hosting the Games, recent evidence supports the case that - contrary to the rationale for the recent withdrawals - hosting cities and countries gain in terms of social capital. In-depth interviews with residents of Gold Coast, Australia in relation to the 2018 Games, found overwhelming support for the knock-on effects of hosting. Respondents cited significant physical capital pay-offs - such as the upgrading of sports facilities - as well as social capital gains in terms of employment opportunities, increased tourist inflows and the multiplication of social connections.² Analysis of the 2022 Birmingham Games similarly found evidence of notable material and social capital gains. The event is estimated to have made a financial profit and provided a £1.2 billion boost to the UK economy. Beyond this were also significant less-tangible gains echoing the findings in Gold Coast studies in terms of community cohesion, physical and mental wellbeing and social regeneration.³

Fair play, justice and universality are inherent to the governance of major international sports, and the Commonwealth Games have gone further than any in promoting human rights on the world stage. The Games adopted their 'international sports' first official Human Rights Policy in 2017 (updated in 2022) committing the organisation to enshrine a respect for human rights and free expression in the bidding, hosting and management



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of the Games. As a consequence of this, the rights of indigenous peoples and sexual minorities were celebrated in ceremonies at Birmingham, putting the Games beyond the Olympics in giving expression to non-state identities. The Games have also been pioneering in advancing disabled sports and Birmingham 2022 was the first global multi-sports event to feature more medal events for women than men.

Probably the best example of international sport advancing rights and justice, though, is in challenging racial discrimination. The boycotting of major events is often cited as evidence of the negative politicisation of sport but, this is a skewed account of the phenomenon only properly applicable to the tit-for-tat Olympics Cold War boycotts of 1980 and 1984. Beyond this, sporting exclusions and boycotts have done much to challenge racism in the name of fair play and the Commonwealth Games are the leading example. The Commonwealth's strong African contingent made them a leading light in the anti-apartheid

movement, dating back to the start of the organisation. In 1934, the hosting of the 2nd British Empire Games was removed from Johannesburg in South Africa and relocated to London after protests at the South Africans seeking to dictate the racial composition of visiting teams.

The anti-apartheid movement led to South Africa being expelled from the Commonwealth in 1961, but a full sporting isolation of Pretoria did not happen since rugby and cricket connections were maintained by teams such as England and New Zealand. Protests against this culminated in the 1977 Gleneagles Agreement which declared that a full sporting boycott of South Africa and other racist states (such as Rhodesia) should be maintained. When the British commitment to this waned, there was a mass walk out in advance of the 1986 Edinburgh 'Unfriendly Games': the largest sporting boycott in history with 32 states (out of 59) pulling out. As a result, the Edinburgh Games were a sporting, financial and political disaster for the UK. Following this nadir, the

Commonwealth Games have not experienced another sporting boycott and their contributions to advancing non-discrimination has advanced.

Ultimately, the value of international sport comes from its general contribution to deepening global communications, without which human rights and international justice cannot develop. The Commonwealth Games, to some, smack of imperialism but this criticism

does not stand up to much scrutiny. Participating nations do so voluntarily and several countries that were never part of the British Empire have also chosen to join the organisation and its games.⁴ The government of one of these nations, Rwanda, have cited the healing capacity of sport as a contributory factor to them debuting at the Commonwealth Games this year.⁵

The argument that the Commonwealth Games are not cost-efficient is a lazy assumption that ignores the fact that they demonstrably can make a profit but also that there are wider, less tangible gains for the hosts, participants and spectators.

In a polarising world, the inclusive, integrative, rules-based and rights-based nature of organised international sport should be encouraged rather than questioned. The Commonwealth Games have a proud record of advancing these goods and should not be consigned to history on the basis of blinkered economic analysis and imperial guilt.

References

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 - ³ UK Government (2024) *Evaluation of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games – One Year Post-Games Evaluation Report* – March 2024 (accessed 16.08.2025)
 - ⁴ Mozambique, Rwanda, Gabon and Togo will make their debuts in 2026.
 - ⁵ Mimoso (2022) 'Rwanda's rebuilding Journey through Sports', *The Parliamentarian*: Issue 2: 120-121.
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