

NOT A SPORTING CHANCE

Politicians are placing a huge weight of expectation on sport, which it cannot sustain, argues Simon Titley

“Do you like sport?” asked the Monty Python ‘nudge nudge’ character. If you were similarly nudged, the chances are you would say “no”. One of the great myths of our age is that everyone likes sport, when perhaps only a third of British people do.

If you are male, you are subjected to huge social pressure to like sport. The relentless media propaganda and peer group pressure make it difficult to admit you’re not interested. But if you want the truth, simply look at the statistics.

When the English rugby team won the World Cup final last year, the UK’s live TV audience reached an estimated 10 million. That’s only about one in six of the population, for the alleged sporting event of the decade.

At most, about half of all British men and about a quarter of British women show any interest in sport. And this is a very generous definition of the word ‘interest’, since it is an aggregate of all participants and spectators, including blokes in pubs drinking in front of the ‘big screen’. Last September, Sport England conducted a survey of schoolchildren to assess their interest in sport. It concluded that 38% disliked sport, only 25% were enthusiastic ‘sporty types’, while the remaining 37%, though not averse to sport, were not that interested.

The most popular sport in Britain is supposed to be soccer. Next weekend, take a look at the football results in your Sunday newspaper and the attendance figures for each game. While a handful of premiership teams attract capacity crowds, the vast majority of clubs have just a few thousand people rattling around in their stadiums. Most British professional football clubs are not viable enterprises, but are kept afloat through the indulgence of rich local businessmen.

Sport is a minority pastime - and active participants an even smaller minority. Yet sport is supposed to be our saviour. It is being promoted on two fronts. First, as a means of making the nation healthier. Second, as a means of restoring national pride. Both projects are doomed to failure.

“Blair tells flabby UK to get fit,” screamed the front-page headline in the Observer on 12 October last year. The article continued: “Tony Blair has admitted privately that Labour’s efforts to raise the number of people taking up sport have failed.” Is there any wonder?

Hasn’t the Blair government invented enough targets, without telling private citizens how to lead their lives? Obesity is now emerging as a major health concern, but sport is not the answer, since the majority of overweight people haven’t the slightest interest in sport (not unless you count darts).

Realising this, the government has planned a £1 million publicity campaign for this year, to persuade us to do more gardening, walking and even housework. It won’t make the slightest difference, because it doesn’t tackle the real issues. The government won’t recognise or address the fundamental economic and lifestyle changes that have made people less fit.

Meanwhile, as part of its uncharacteristically Soviet-style campaign, the Observer is “demanding” that all schoolchildren have at least two hours of school sport each week. Just what exactly is that supposed to achieve? I recall having two hours of sport each week when I was at school. I can tell the Observer and Tony Blair exactly what happened. The ‘sporty types’ played team sports (and had the full attention of the teachers), while the rest of us did everything we could to skive off. Trying to force kids with no interest or aptitude in sport to participate will not make them any fitter and will do nothing to improve their fitness in later life.

Still, there are a lot of children who do enjoy sport and get a lot out of it. What is the government doing for them?

We can judge the hypocrisy of Labour by its attitude to the sell-off of school playing fields. In the ten years before Labour’s 1997 election victory, an estimated 5,000 playing fields had disappeared. Labour’s 1997 manifesto pledged: “We will bring the government policy of forcing schools to sell off playing fields to an end.”

By 1999, the Labour government boasted that it had “already put a virtual halt to the sell-off of playing-fields,” forced local education authorities to think twice before proposing such plans and saved countless green spaces.

The truth is somewhat different. The National Playing Fields Association estimates that, between October 1998 (when the education secretary took direct control of the disposal of school fields) and June 2003, some 2,000 playing fields had disappeared and that 15% of all remaining fields were under threat. These figures are probably an underestimate, since they do not include fields developed for school buildings.

There remains no statutory protection for playing fields. Despite having a power of veto over local authorities, the government approves approximately 97% of all sell-off applications. In 2002, the number of applications rose by 40%, and the proportion of applications where Sport England decided not to object rose from 75% to 85%.

The government is doing nothing because it knows the political reality. Hard pressed schools and education authorities need the cash, and the sale of playing fields helps to offset demands to spend more on education.

Sport and PE lessons are disappearing from the school timetable, and break times are being shortened, because of unrelenting government pressure to provide more time for the national curriculum and the battery of tests.

Meanwhile, the government is window dressing by focusing on the development of elite sports. At the apex of the government's strategy is a bid to bring the Olympic games to London in 2012. The bid is likely to fail, partly because of the debacle of the World Athletics Championships (won and then lost by London), partly as a punishment for British foreign policy, but mainly because London's transport infrastructure is inadequate. CrossRail can't be built in time, so at the core of London's bid appears to be a promise to lay on some extra buses on the number 30 to Hackney Wick.

The government is also making much of its other investments in elite sports, a strategy modelled on the successful policies adopted in Australia. This is fine for the narrow stratum of athletes who compete at this level, and also brings greater national success in international tournaments. But it will not trickle down to the mass of the population who take no interest in sport, and will do nothing to make the nation fitter.

The need to win international tournaments brings us to the second of the great expectations made of sport, that it can somehow restore a sense of national pride and identity. This is expecting far too much. A big win, like England's rugby victory last year, delivers nothing more than an adrenalin rush. We're really talking about an English rather than a British problem here, since English identity is ill defined and has only become an issue in response to Scottish and Welsh nationalism.

The turning point came during the 1996 European Cup, hosted by England, when the song 'Three Lions' hit the charts (remember "football's coming home"?). For the first time, large numbers of people in England were waving English flags as opposed to the Union Jack.

Politicians and pundits assumed that this would cement some sense of English identity. But, at best, major sporting victories can supply only a sporadic sense of national euphoria. And even then, most of the population won't be watching.

English national identity is in a state of flux. It isn't yet clear, for example, how the process of devolution will play out, how attitudes towards Europe will develop or how economic and technological change will alter people's sense of identity. These are profound questions, and it is facile to assume that sport can provide an answer.

Labour is expecting big things of sport and is placing it at the centre of its target-driven approach to government. But what emerges is a fear of addressing the real issues.

Ask yourself why people are more overweight and less fit. Is it because they're not playing enough sport? The reality is that human beings have evolved as a species over millennia, whereas the profound social and economic changes, which have created more sedentary lifestyles, have occurred in only a few decades.

Until about 50 years ago, the majority of men worked in manual occupations and the majority of women worked as housewives (without the benefit of labour-saving devices). Most people did not have cars and often had to walk or cycle. They did not have the spare money to spend on fattening foods. Yet, despite the physical exercise, they were even less fit than we are today. They had a lower life expectancy. They had less protection against cold and damp weather, industrial accidents or contagious disease. Their diets were poor, due to a lack of essential nutrients rather than a surplus of food. So let's not look at the past through rose-tinted spectacles.

There's a limit to what governments can achieve but, if you really wanted to tackle the issue of obesity, what might you do? For a start, you could stop selling off school playing fields - but then you'd have to find several hundred extra million pounds to make up for the shortfall in the education budget. You could try banning the 'school run' and force children to walk or cycle to school - but that would alienate Daily Mail-reading mums who insist on taking their kids to school in their four-wheel drives. You could make it safer for children to walk or cycle by lowering speed limits on residential roads - but then Jeremy Clarkson would lampoon you on 'Top Gear' and in the 'Sun'. You could end the nonsense of 'choice' in school canteens and supply nutritionally balanced meals - and get rid of the soft drink vending machines in schools - but then you'd alienate the manufacturers of processed foods.

That's the problem. Labour is afraid to confront the powerful vested interests who benefit from excessive car use and junk food. Instead, it prefers to engage in publicity stunts and petty 'nanny state' initiatives.

In a liberal society, when it comes to questions of individual lifestyles, the role of government is to inform choice, not to make choices for people. Government's role is to facilitate, not prescribe. It is to supply adults with unbiased and reliable information - and let them make their choices and live with the consequences. But where are the targets in that?