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Sport policy and politics in an era of austerity

Daniel Parnell, Peter Millward, Paul Widdop, Neil King & Anthony May

Editorial

Austerity is perhaps the symbol of our times, given the speed at which it arrived and the consequences of its impact upon society. Yet, it is difficult now to look back upon a time where the spectre of austerity was not looming over us. The financial crash was the catalyst for change and, for many governments, the response was austerity. The financial crisis was triggered in America and quickly became a global crisis. Whilst most countries felt the waves of the crisis, it was perhaps America and countries in the Eurozone who felt it, and the subsequent economic recession, most. Wren-Lewis (2015) noted that initially governments utilised standard economic measures approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to rally against this recession, whilst also highlighting that any sensible government should seek to act to stimulate the economy. However, the fear of financial crises that was propelled and inflated by media and social media led consumers and businesses to spend less and save more (Wren-Lewis 2015). This was a toxic combination for economies, as consumers spend less, it leads to less demand and production, which ultimately leads to increases in unemployment, and a negative cascading effect for the economy (Wren-Lewis 2015). Against a backdrop of advice from experts adverse to Keynesian economics, the ideology of austerity grew and became the dominant thinking to steer economies out of recession.

It is difficult to locate a time when 'Austarian' (a term coined by Rob Parentew) ideologies came to dominate discourse in western governments. The ideology centres around the idea of fiscal consolidation (Wren-Lewis 2015). Indeed, Blyth (2013) states that austerity is a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices and public spending in order to restore competitiveness which is (supposedly) best achieved by auditing state budgets, debts and deficits. In simple terms, it involved shrinking of the state and a reduction in financial contributions to the welfare state and other frontline services. For Wren-Lewis (2015), austerity was the result of right-wing opportunism, exploiting instinctive popular concern about rising government debt in order to reduce the size of the state.

In the UK, since 2010, successive Comprehensive Spending Reviews have ushered in ever deepening cuts to public service budgets. The UK was not an anomaly in making these cuts, as similar steps were undertaken in Greece, Italy, the Irish Republic, Portugal, Spain, France and Germany—each of which reduced public spending by different scales (BBC 2012). In many national contexts, such cuts and their assumed effects prompted outrage and resistance from many (Castells 2015) and new anti-austerity alternatives have propelled the popularity of populist parties and leaders (Grierson and Slawson 2017). Indeed, many commentators suggest that the vote by the UK electorate in favour of leaving the European Union might have been partially borne of potentially misdirected frustrations caused by austerity cuts to public services (Keegan 2017). The impacts of austerity cuts are largely difficult to measure but might take into account losses of public services (Farnsworth and Irving 2012, Levitas 2012), changes to the strength and productivity of national economies (Holland and Portes 2012) along with psycho-cultural issues, such as the wellbeing of citizens (Legido-Quigley et al. 2013, Lewis et al. 2017).

In this special issue, our contributors deal with the issues of 'austerity' directly by examining what it means for sport in a wide range of contexts. The issue is current with the term 'austerity' now firmly rooted within the public diction, but with only a modest level of academic research in the area to date. This is particularly the case in the area of sport policy and politics and associated social

scientific engagements with sport management. Ken Roberts (2017) offers a general review challenging whether austerity has stimulated crisis or adaptation in sport. His discussion is focused on spectatorship and participation yet, beyond these issues, there are only limited number of authors and contributions that have attempted to address this topic (see Collins and Haudenhuyse 2015, Parnell et al. 2015, 2017, Giannoulakis et al. 2017, Walker and Hayton 2017). Therefore, articles in this special issue contribute significantly to academic debates.

The special issue

The guest editors are delighted to present a range of research papers covering issues from sports participation and development through to elite sport and extended to social inclusion and poverty, in a variety of organisational contexts and geographies. Drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, this special issue provides a varied and contextually rich insight in the sport, policy and politics, in an era of austerity.

Widdop, King, Parnell, Cutts and Millward examine participation levels in sport in England across socio-demographic groups between 2008 and 2014 in the context of austerity measures implemented by central government that resulted in local authority income and expenditure reductions. The study utilises data from the Active People Survey and offers findings related to the effectiveness of policy goals and raises considerations for policy makers and practitioners seeking to raise participation levels during a period of austerity.

Kenyon, Mason and Rookwood find that austerity politics have also had an impact on the provision of community sports. Focusing on a case study from the city of Liverpool, the authors discuss the resilience required to meet the needs of stakeholders in an environment affected by uncertainty about funding for community coaching initiatives and grassroots sport more generally.

Hayton and Walker investigate the impacts of 'super-austerity' upon third sector sport organisations (TSSOs) in England and how they negotiate both relationships with local and central government, as well as implications of an increasingly constrained fiscal climate. The article reports how TSSOs have acted to negotiate the advances of 'super-austerity' and move to obtain resource sufficiency. The findings also offer an insight into how sustained government spending cuts and the commitment of local authorities to sport are shaping not only TSSOs relationships with the public sector, but also with each other.

Brown and Pappous (2017) focus upon disability sport, noting that Coalition and Conservative governments post-2010 have 'reformed' disability benefits, which has had a negative effect on participation. The authors find that some people with a disability are no longer participating in sport at grassroots level due to fears that this may result in a reduction in benefits. An estimated 1.25 million people have lost some or all of their state benefits due to government policy. By contrast to the strong welfare state in the Netherlands, there has been a marked reduction on welfare spending in the UK. Brown and Pappous also find that there has been an increased focus on the elite level of disability sport, and an associated reduction in spending on participatory levels by governing bodies.

In the context of Denmark, Iverson examines the public management of sports facilities. The particular focus of the article is on New Public Governance, and increasing collaboration between stakeholders in sports services. Stakeholders were interviewed for the article—notably, managers of facilities, the boards of facilities, and voluntary organisations with an interest in utilising facilities.

Iverson finds that increasing collaboration is difficult in the context of austerity and suggests that further development of methods to motivate stakeholders to collaborate is needed.

Ramchandani, Shibli and Kung utilise data from Sport England's National Benchmarking Service to examine the performance of public sport facilities over a period beginning 2005/6 and ending 2015/16. The authors use four performance dimensions: access, finance, utilisation and customer satisfaction. A key finding of the article is that financial performance and efficiency has improved. A business model has been introduced which involves outsourcing management and raising charges for activities. Customer satisfaction has also improved over the period analysed. However, the authors also argue that social inclusion objectives seem to be compromised by the pursuit of increased financial stability and, therefore, austerity can be said to have had a negative impact on those within hard-to-reach or disadvantaged groups.

Reid explores the management of budget cuts in Edinburgh's sport and recreation services. This case study offers an insight into a failed attempt to save a leisure pool in a disadvantaged area, highlighting limits to the concept of resilience in managing austerity. Campaigners were encouraged to develop a community bid but were gazumped by a property company offering the council £1 million to replace the pool with a soft play facility. This produced questions about which facility supported future community resilience. With facility closures politically unacceptable, the trust prioritised income generating sports and taking over after-school management of school sport facilities.

Hoekman, van der Roest and van der Poel examine sport policy in the Netherlands. Their particular focus is on funding for sport at a municipal level, following the introduction of the 'participation society' in the early 2010s. The 'participation society' is a concept that is broadly similar to the 'Big Society' in the UK, within which local voluntary groups take over responsibility for the organisation and maintenance of public services in a period of austerity. Their examination of municipal budgets 2010–2014 found only small reductions in spending. Sport is still seen as a 'merit good' in the Netherlands and, within the context of the strong welfare state, spending on local sport has remained relatively stable. Municipal political strategies 2014–2018 often call for an increased role for voluntary sport clubs to deliver on sport policy, but there remains a strong focus on sport in the coalition agreements analysed. The authors argue that sport policy in the Netherlands remains broadly unaffected by neoliberalism with little call for reliance on the free market and private entrepreneurship, but rather with the voluntary sector expected to play a key role.

Papadimitriou and Alexandris examine the impact of austerity measures in Greece on elite sport, and particularly on elite athletes who took part at the 2016 Olympic Games. Austerity measures have led to a reduction in funding for athletes, coaches and medical staff, and Olympic facilities have closed. The article examines the 'Adopt an Athlete for 2016' scheme, through which the private sector (notably banks, consulting companies and individual supporters) helped to fund Olympic athletes. As Greek athletes won six medals at the 2016 Olympics, the article concludes that a reduction of public funding does not necessarily affect Olympic success, although it does impact on elite sport systems.

Walters and Panton explore sport-led regeneration through a case study of the stadium-led regeneration project involving Tottenham Hotspur FC and the London Borough of Haringey. The research focuses on community perceptions of urban regeneration. Two implications arising from this research are that while community groups in Tottenham had limited success in gaining major changes to the stadium-led regeneration they have arguably been able to slow down the process.

Moreover, they have been successful in bringing together diverse groups across the community to share knowledge in order to challenge further proposals from the Haringey council.

Rossi and Jeanes discuss the potential impact of austerity on sport for development (SfD), noting that austerity is as much an ideological position as it is an economic policy. Influenced by Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (2010), the authors produce a theoretical framework for understanding SfD in terms of the development of 'capabilities' in the communities that SfD programmes aim to benefit. The argument is made that rather than welfare-based models, or corporate intervention, capabilities should be developed within communities through shared notions of integrity, selfdetermination and sustainability.

Finally, Haudenhuyse offers a research paper that attempts to address the question of why, to this date, we still know relatively little empirically about the impact of austerity policies in relation to sport (non-)participation of people living in poverty. It is reasonable to assume that austerity measures spanning many life and policy domains, such as housing, energy costs, transport, employment, healthcare, social welfare, childcare, education, pension, public services and sport provisions, might have had an impact on the leisure participation opportunities and outcomes of people in poverty. However, such assumptions remain under researched. This paper offers some rationale for the current knowledge gap and highlights areas for future potential research.

Our call to arms for future research

In light of this special issue, and the remaining paucity of research that sheds light on the complex context surrounding the impact of austerity on sport, we have developed several areas of potential future research. A non-exhaustive list of research ideas in this area might include the following.

Further empirical research on the impacts of austerity measures on sport participation: there is a shortfall of quantitative and qualitative research that explores the actual impacts of austerity cuts to sport policy budgets across Europe. The continent has different levels of data which exist, yet further critical scrutiny of this data and the breadth of relevant data sets available in different nations, needs to be operationalised to draw up a localised and comparative picture of whether or not—or to what extent— sport policy cuts have reduced sport participation at a grassroots level.

The impact of sport policy cuts on 'hard to reach' populations: some sectors of European societies are well recognised to be hard to reach with respect to facilitating physical activity and, in particular, sport participation. Some state-resourced sport and leisure facilities have closed or had opening hours reduced, because of reduced state resources. Alongside this, aligned community sport facilities that work with public sector departments have experienced challenges associated with reduced funding. We hope this special issue may support future research in listening to, and analysing the narratives of, those who used those sports facilities that have closed due to budgetary cuts, especially if those populations are part of the hard to reach populations.

Managerial dilemmas faced by decision-makers: the processes of gaining more (or at least the same) for less presents challenges for senior and middle managers of state sport facilities on all geographical levels across Europe. Research by Walker and Hayton (2017) has offered insights into management practices. Nevertheless, substantial investment by researchers is required to listen and hear the voices of decision makers, as concerns and/or challenges have so far not been heard.

Opportunities for public-private partnerships: the reduction in public spending in areas such as sport facilities is assumed to be negative. Yet such changes in the nature of budgets may open up possibilities for new public-private partnerships, which throw up a host of new questions for sport policy and management scholars. In the same respect, university and third sector partnerships appear pertinent to examine. Academic institutions, particularly those in higher education, are facing their own respective challenges regarding reduced research and heightened need for impact. As such, universities may take opportunities to develop meaningful applied research activities and partnerships with third sector sport organisations (Parnell et al. 2015) and developing these partnerships may help organisations respond to the economic downturn and in turn develop research outputs and tangible impact within the industry.

Finally, challenges for elite sport provision and future achievements: so far, the suggestions for further research have veered towards amateur sport participation. Yet this is but one (sizeable) part of the web of sport in Europe. Building on the work of Giannoulakis et al. (2017) to further examine the impact of budgetary cuts and changes on elite sport provision is required. This research agenda needs to include the voices of coaches and athletes in order to understand the complex set of management issues that are at stake.

Our hope for the special issue is to trigger ideas and interest across a number of potential research contexts so as to develop and extend our understanding. Ultimately, we feel that this important debate has just started and there is much more to add. To do this, universities have a real opportunity to develop meaningful, collaborative, research-based partnerships that have a high probability of impact in sportbased organisations which need strategic and operational support. Finally, we call upon researchers to extend this preliminary list of ideas and take up the challenge to address this gap in academic and policy understanding.

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