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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

WHIGHAM, Stuart and BLACK, Jack (2018). Glasgow 2014, the media and Scottish politics – the (post)imperial symbolism of the Commonwealth Games and the push for ‘Empire 2.0’. London School of Economics and Political Science. [Other]

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This is an online article, published for The London School of Economics and Political Science, 'British Politics and Policy' blog.

Whigham, S. & Black, J. (2018). Glasgow 2014, the media and Scottish politics – the (post)imperial symbolism of the Commonwealth Games and the push for 'Empire 2.0'. Retrieved from: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-2014-commonwealth-games-in-the-media/>

Glasgow 2014, the media and Scottish politics – the (post)imperial symbolism of the Commonwealth Games and the push for 'Empire 2.0'

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Glasgow 2014, the media and Scottish politics – the (post)imperial symbolism of the Commonwealth Games and the push for ‘Empire 2.0’

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Introduction

The ties between sport and politics are often evidenced in the ways in which sporting mega-events, such as, the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games, are reported and framed in media discourses. Notably, the Glasgow Games provided a pertinent opportunity to explore the ways in which the UK media sought to frame the event in relation to contemporary notions of the Commonwealth – as a geo-political entity – and to the historical legacy of the British Empire. More widely, these concerns present further evidence of the political symbolism of sporting mega- /media events and, in the case of the UK, the interlinkages that can be made between the British Empire, sport and the UK’s global status.

Glasgow 2014 – the (post)imperial symbolism of the Commonwealth Games

Since the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1951, UK political interest in the Commonwealth has slowly dwindled. Indeed, Commonwealth relations undertook diverging paths in the post-war period as new alliances were formed and the Commonwealth’s utility as an effective ‘global’ force was diminished by the Cold War, the geopolitical dominance of the USA, and the UK’s embrace of pan-European co-operation through its membership of the European Union.

However, given the UK’s recent political and economic pivot away from the European Union following the victory of the ‘Leave’ campaign in the 2016 referendum, politicians have touted the idea of an ‘Empire 2.0’. These attempts have geared towards refocusing attention on Commonwealth trading relationships, despite the fact that the connotations of ‘empire’ remain a contentious topic in both public and intellectual debates. For example, prominent anti-EU ‘Leave’ campaigner, Boris Johnson, argued that [‘\[a\]s we re-examine our relationship with the European Union, we have a vital opportunity to recast our immigration system in just this way. And the first place to start is with the Commonwealth’](#). Such a position illustrates a tendency to resort to the former ‘imperial’ ties and the ‘emotional pull’ that the Commonwealth, and perhaps more noticeably it’s ‘white dominions’, have for the UK when compared to Europe.

The political symbolism of the Commonwealth Games movement is arguably analogous to a number of these broader political developments relating to the decline of the British Empire and the power dynamics of the Commonwealth as a contemporary geo-political entity. Originally entitled the 'British Empire Games' for the inaugural event in 1930, the subsequent revisions to the titles of the 'British Empire and Commonwealth Games' (1950), the 'British Commonwealth Games' (1970) and the current 'Commonwealth Games' moniker (1978) are symbolic of the shifting power relations within the Commonwealth, the declining power of the UK, and the sluggish responses of British governments to embrace the post-colonial era.

Today the Commonwealth Games may reflect a 'ritual of continuity' that simply serves to maintain 'cultural linkages' within the Commonwealth. However, despite these attempts to maintain positive cultural links through events such as the Games, the evolving power dynamics within the post-imperial Commonwealth continued to be asymmetric, dysfunctional and hierarchical in nature, given the dominance of the 'white dominion' nations of the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This inability to sufficiently redress the historical power imbalances within the Commonwealth has therefore led some to question the success of the Games as part of the decolonialisation process.

From right to left: Glasgow 2014 and media framings of the Commonwealth

With regard to examining the media's framing of the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games in both London-based and Scottish-based newspapers, it was evident that representations of the Commonwealth and the British Empire, within the predominantly Conservative-supporting, right-leaning press, tended to reflect upon the continuing legacy of the British Empire in positive terms. For example, [The Daily Telegraph's](#) reflection upon the opening ceremony of the 2014 Games argued that:

'No other post-imperial power has played such a positive role in the life of its former colonies as Britain has done. While France, Belgium and Portugal disentangled themselves from empire in an often violent manner that left behind decades of resentment and tension, Britain has successfully positioned itself as a friend and partner in progress.'

This sepia-tinted reflection upon the nature of the Commonwealth and British imperialism is arguably unsurprising, given the oft-cited preference of certain political commentators in the right-leaning press to promote the possibilities of enhanced trade and diplomatic relations with other Commonwealth countries following Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU), contrasting the somewhat more recalcitrant

approach towards the trading arrangements with Britain's geographic neighbours in the EU.

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the analysis of the Games from the Labour-aligned [Daily Mirror](#) offered a more scathing account of the contemporary relevance of the event and the Commonwealth more broadly:

'The Commonwealth itself is a busted flush, a meaningless relic of Empire. Many member countries don't even pay lip service to its core values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law ... Yet the Games are still paraded as "friendly" every four years.'

Reflections on the Commonwealth and Empire from media sources aligned with the left and centre-left of the political spectrum thus framed their discussion within narrative tropes of a postcolonial and apologist nature. The contrasting positions evident in the left-aligned press thus resisted the temptation to reproduce a white-washed historiography of the Commonwealth's origins, whilst critically reflecting upon the negative legacy of Empire in relation to slavery, racial oppression, economic exploitation, human rights and power imbalances.

Conclusions

Despite these disparities between the left-wing and right-wing press, references to the British Empire did not always fall neatly on a positive or negative dichotomy. Instead, discussions on Scottish/British identity and Scottish independence reflected a multidirectional approach to the British Empire that served to frame media discourse on the 2014 Games. In each instance, the British Empire was brought to light as a form of orientation, from which contrasting political assessments of the symbolism of the Games could be made. Underscoring this multidirectionality was a sense of ambiguity regarding empire. The inherent ambiguity evident within these narratives is equally apparent in the nature of the emergent discourses regarding the Commonwealth Games and the constitutional questions facing the Scottish nation and, in turn, the British state.

Indeed, given the aforementioned touting of an '[Empire 2.0](#)' strategy by the UK involving the development of stronger trading relationships with Commonwealth nations following 'Brexit', the importance of reconsidering the nature of contemporary narratives on the legacy of Empire and the status of the modern Commonwealth has gained political and diplomatic importance. Whilst scholars and journalists from Commonwealth nations have illustrated that successful acknowledgement of the arguments of post-colonial and post-imperial theorists, regarding the negative

connotations of the Empire, facilitates a more critical appraisal of the Empire's legacy, the continued perpetuation of rose-tinted reflections on the British Empire suggests that a similarly critical engagement is lacking as evident within the domains of British politics and media journalism.

It can, therefore, be argued that any attempts to establish an 'Empire 2.0', which places Commonwealth nations on an equal footing within future political and economic relations, will require significant efforts to redress the continued whitewashing of the UK's imperial legacy.