Public Management Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpxm20

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To cite this article: John Millar & Frank Mueller (09 Feb 2025): Politics and personalities: the 1986 Commonwealth Games as strategic action field, Public Management Review, DOI: 10.1080/14719037.2025.2462256

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2025.2462256

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Published online: 09 Feb 2025.

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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2025.2462256

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Politics and personalities: the 1986 Commonwealth Games as strategic action field

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ABSTRACT
Quadrennial sporting events are a recognized form of megaproject or mega-event and prior literature has examined in depth their motivations, and the reasons why they frequently fail to deliver promised outcomes. Much less attention has been paid in this literature to the interplay between different fields, and the role played by charismatic individuals. We address this lacuna by framing our longitudinal case study of the 1986 Commonwealth Games as a deeply contested strategic action field embedded in a number of key proximate fields, highlighting also the crucial role played by key individuals.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 16 April 2024; Accepted 28 January 2025

KEYWORDS Megaprojects; mega-events; strategic action fields; field theory; politics; personalities

Introduction

Riven with rancour, the 1986 Commonwealth Games (CG) took place against a persistent threat of civic and national humiliation. When the Games were awarded to Edinburgh in 1980 it was at a time when 'it was difficult to find a state willing to take on the financial burden of staging' a mega-event such as the Olympics or the CG (Grix 2012, 4). Indeed, it had been made very clear that the newly elected Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher would provide no financial support, a clear break from precedent and a first move towards neo-liberal, 'stateless' solutions (Rojek 2014, 33). As the Games approached, the organizers realized that a combination of rising costs and substantial shortfalls in their fund raising meant that they had insufficient funds to meet their bills, and the cancellation of the Games was only avoided through the intervention of the businessman Robert Maxwell. Meanwhile, anger over the UK's relationship with apartheid South Africa and Margaret Thatcher's repeated refusal to support economic sanctions against that country prompted a boycott, led by Nigeria and Ghana, which ultimately involved 32 of the 58 countries originally invited to the Games.

Quadrennial international sporting events such as the Olympic and Commonwealth Games and the FIFA World Cup are recognized as an important form of megaproject

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(Flyvbjerg and Stewart 2012; Golubchikov 2017), or mega-event (Rojek 2014, 33), and substantial bodies of work have explored both the motivations and benefits of these events, and the difficulties of organizing and managing them. A small number of studies have hinted at the need to place these events in a broad political context (Gillett and Tennent 2017; Glynn 2008), a theme echoed in the broader megaprojects literature (Clegg et al. 2017) and the sport diplomacy literature (Rofe 2016, 2021). Few studies have, however, examined the symbolic (as opposed to functional) role played by charismatic leaders in such projects (van Marrewijk et al. 2023).

This paper is based around a single longitudinal case study, an approach adopted previously by Gillett and Tennent (2017, 2022), Grix and Brannigan (2016, two case studies) and Rojek (2014). While the focus is the Games held in and around Edinburgh between 24 July and 2 August 1986, the case study runs from 1978 (when the bid to host the Games was put together) to 1989, when their financial difficulties were finally resolved. These events are studied through a range of primary archival materials, supplemented by contemporary secondary accounts. Though we acknowledge that the scale of these Games is small in comparison to more recent sporting megaprojects or mega-events (the cost of staging them was just over £15 million), this is nonetheless a theoretically generalizable case (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2003): the political relationships and conflicts we explore were clearly global in nature and are relevant to a wide range of different megaproject or mega-event contexts. Moreover, the 1980s were, we argue, an important transitional period which laid the foundations for the world we inhabit today – there is therefore particular value in understanding the changing dynamics within this era.

We contribute to the megaproject literature by exploring the possibilities of Fligstein and McAdam's (2011, 2012) field theory, an approach which to our knowledge has not previously been applied in the megaproject or mega-event literatures. In particular, we apply their concept of the strategic action field (SAF), a 'meso-level social order' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012) which is nested in a network of other SAFs, all sharing the same basic structure; this allows us to reflect the different forces which, we argue, made significant contributions to the failure of the event. While we contend that Fligstein and McAdam's work offers exciting possibilities for megaproject and mega-event scholarship, our analysis also highlights a lacuna in their theory, namely the important role played by charismatic leaders and the role of politics; we offer this as a second contribution.

The paper proceeds as follows: a review of the key literature is followed by a description of our methods. We set out our findings in the form of three SAF-related discussions, followed by a reflection on the role played by two charismatic leaders, Margaret Thatcher and Robert Maxwell. In the final section we consider the empirical and theoretical implications of our study and its limitations, and set out recommendations for further work.

Literature review

A growing body of work studies sporting megaprojects, the temporary organizations set up to deliver global sporting events which, like megaprojects more generally, are broadly understood as complex and large-scale ventures that 'take many years to develop, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, and have a long-lasting impact on the economy, environment, and society' (Esposito and Terlizzi 2023, 131).

Global mega-events can be understood as a subset of global megaprojects in which the crucial distinction is a fixed deadline – typically an opening ceremony – which is not present in, for example, a large infrastructure project (Müller 2015). This label covers all quadrennial sporting events.

The sporting mega-event literature is concentrated around two main themes. A first body of work considers the motivations for projects, their costs and their benefits, often discussed in terms of 'legacy' (Flyvbjerg and Stewart 2012; Gillett and Tennent 2017, 2022; Glynn 2008; Golubchikov 2017; Jakobsen et al. 2013; Molloy and Chetty 2015; Müller 2014; Zimbalist 2015). A contrast can be drawn here between the *ex-ante* optimism encapsulated in Flyvbjerg's (2014) four sublimes (Gillett and Tennent 2017) and the *ex-post* reality of cost overruns (Flyvbjerg and Stewart 2012) and negligible economic benefits (Zimbalist 2015). This pattern is consistent with the broader mega-project literature (van Marrewijk's 2017; Clegg et al. 2017; van Marrewijk et al. 2016, 2023); indeed, Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter (2003) identify a 'megaprojects paradox', whereby the demand for megaprojects continues to rise despite ever more compelling evidence of their poor performance in terms of cost overruns, delays and benefit shortfalls. Even where projects leave little tangible legacy, however, their intangible and symbolic legacies can be powerful (Gillett and Tennent 2017; Glynn 2008).

A second body of the sporting mega-event literature focuses more on the challenges of organizing and managing events of large scale and high complexity (Chappelet 2018; Davies and Mackenzie 2014; Gillett and Tennent 2022; Grabher and Thiel 2014, 2015; Müller 2015). Such events are 'part of the political and cultural mainstream and come in three shapes and sizes: minor, major and mega' (Rojek 2014, 33). (Within this taxonomy the CG would indeed count as a mega-event due to its global nature, despite its modest size in comparison to other 'calendarized' events such as the Olympics or FIFA World Cup.) This is compatible with Esposito and Terlizzi (2023, 132) for whom '(t)he empirical definition of megaprojects includes, for example, large-scale infrastructure projects (e.g. canals, airports, harbors, dams, railways, highways, and bridges), events (e.g. Olympic games and other mega sports events, Expo), and public investment programs (e.g. European Union funding programs)'.

A number of studies have addressed the challenges of managing sporting mega-events. Davies and Mackenzie (2014) take a systems integration perspective, showing how the complexity of building the infrastructure for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was managed by dividing the project into levels of systems integration. While Müller (2015) discusses seven different ways in which projects fail, Gillett and Tennent (2022) examine a success story, using the concept of institutional logics to understand how a hybrid organization evolved in order to manage institutional complexity and create a lasting legacy after the 1994 FIFA World Cup.

Grabher and Thiel (2015) use the concept of 'project ecology' developed in Grabher's earlier work (Grabher 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b) – 'a complex, multi-scalar "relational space" that embraces firms as well as various inter-organizational and interpersonal networks' (Grabher and Thiel 2015, 329) – to make sense of the 2012 London Olympics. As Grabher and Thiel discuss, placing the event in this relational space opens up two analytical perspectives: 'a *project-centred* view, that focuses on the need for project management to take pre- and post-project times into account, and a *context-centred* view, that elucidates projects as episodes in longer-term trajectories' (329, italics in original).

Within the broad megaproject literature, Grabher and Thiel's characterization of megaprojects as existing within a broad and complex ecosystem is developed further by Esposito and Terlizzi (2023), who advocate an approach rooted in public administration and political science, two disciplines hitherto under-represented in the megaproject literature. Reflecting this disciplinary influence, Esposito and Terlizzi (2023) argue that where the megaproject literature has hitherto focused on 'traditional project management approaches which tend to focus on day-to-day managerial actions' (132), the development of a megaproject can only really be understood by thinking of it 'not as a rational, straightforward process but rather as a nonlinear, conflictual, and institutionally situated policy shaped by the collective action of a great variety of stakeholders' (132). Megaprojects should accordingly be understood as 'wicked policy fields' characterized by different forms of complexity (technical, political and administrative, social and cultural, financial, legal and regulatory, organizational). Discursive conflict is key: as the project evolves, rival stakeholders construct and mobilize competing narratives and arguments which will shape the development (and outcomes) of the project.

Clegg et al. (2017) adopt a similar position, criticizing the megaproject literature for its cursory engagement with the political dimension and proposing instead an approach which places at its centre the role played by politics and politicians:

> Megaproject [sic] are subject to enormous political constraints and mood swings throughout the project life cycle, since they are often part of election promises, political agendas, or other political decision-making processes, albeit there is rarely public acknowledgement of this fact. Hence, the support for or opposition to megaprojects often depends on the current political climate in which such a major undertaking takes place

(Clegg et al. 2017, 251–252). The approach which Clegg et al. (2017) advocate is exemplified by van Marrewijk's (2017) study of the Dutch high-speed train project which explores how this megaproject served both as a powerful expression of a particular political ambition and, through 'the inherently political megaproject process and by changes in the context' (56) as a symbol of failed liberalization.

The call to 'bring politics in' has also gained some currency in the sporting mega-event literature. Gillett and Tennent (2017) describe how the election of Harold Wilson's Labour government in October 1964 gave a financial boost to the planning of the football World Cup held in England in 1966, while Glynn (2008) shows how the Olympic Games held in large cities were affected by both endogenous and exogenous influences: there is 'a circularity to field-configuring events such that they arise from the endogenous capabilities of fields but, once in place, function through relational and symbolic systems to change those systems' (Glynn 2008, 1138).

The interest in the role of politics is developed further by mega-event authors such as Grix (2012) and Rojek (2014). Grix (2012) describes the dramatic increase in the 'political salience of sport' over the prior 30 years, while Rojek (2014) describes the supportive role played by the state in organizing sporting megaprojects: '(s)elf-evidently, calendarised Global Events like the FIFA World and the Olympics involve lobbying states that wish to act as hosts and, once the Event has been decreed, multi-layered, renewable support from state policing, health and safety and financial auditing agencies' (33). In Rojek's characterization, however, since the 1980s the state has played a secondary role to the forces of commerce; indeed, mega-events 'play into the hands of established, semi-invisible social and economic interests' (33).

A further body of work (Grix and Brannigan 2016; Murray 2012; Rofe 2016) links sport and diplomacy. Murray (2012) discusses how large sporting events are 'co-opted by politics' (584): sport can be used by national governments as a 'punitive tool', a 'vehicle to conflate political relationships' or a 'means to bring old enemies together' (576). Where Murray (2012) focuses on the relationship between sport and nation states, Rofe (2016) calls for the consideration of a more complex network of relationships involving a 'panoply of domestic, international, and transnational actors' (Rofe 2016, 218): 'it is important to stress that the relationship is multi-direction or networked, that it flows from the athletes, clubs, events, or organisations to other constituent parts such as national governments, media corporations, or international organisations and back' (Rofe 2016, 224).

If, as we have seen, the role of politics is largely downplayed in the broad megaproject literature, sporting mega-event studies which foreground politics and diplomacy tend in turn to overlook the role of business. We respond to Rofe's (2016) advocacy of a multi-stakeholder approach by adopting a theoretical approach which permits consideration of both fields. Framing the 1986 Commonwealth Games as a politically and commercially contested field, we apply Fligstein and McAdam's field theory, a theoretical approach which to our knowledge has not previously been employed in the megaproject or mega-event literature. At the heart of this theory sits the concept of strategic action fields (SAFs), meso-level social orders which serve as 'the basic structural building block of modern political/organizational life' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 3):

> We hold the view that strategic action fields (hereafter, SAFs) are the fundamental units of collective action in society. A strategic action field is a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules.
>
> All collective actors (for example, organizations, extended families, clans, supply chains, social movements, and governmental systems) are themselves made up of SAFs. When they interact in a larger political, social, or economic field, that field also becomes an SAF. In this way, SAFs look a lot like Russian dolls: open up an SAF and it contains a number of other SAFs (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 3).

Positioning the SAF at the meso-level allows Fligstein and McAdam to synthesize what is going on within fields (the micro-level) and between them (the macro-level); in this vein, Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug (2024), in their recent *Public Management Review* article, use SAF theory to explore conflicts over public value within public service ecosystems at the micro, meso and macro levels.

Looking first at the microfoundations of the strategic action field, like Bourdieu's fields the SAF is a site of contention (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), within which (following Weber) individuals engage in projects of collective meaning making. Skilled social actors play an important 'brokerage' role in this process, 'fram[ing] "stories" that help induce cooperation from people by appealing to their identity, belief, and interests, while at the same time using those same stories to frame actions against various opponents' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 50–51). The last point is important in acknowledging the potential influence of individual agents – though, as our analysis will show, more work is needed to develop an understanding of the different roles (positive or antagonistic) played by central figures.

From a macro perspective, Fligstein and McAdam's key insight is that the strategic action field is embedded or 'nested' in a network of other fields, each sharing the same basic structure: 'Fields do not exist in a vacuum. They have relations with other strategic action fields and these relations powerfully shape the developmental history of the field' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 59). These relations are mediated through internal governance units (IGUs), defined as 'organizations or associations within the field whose sole job it is to ensure the routine stability and order of the strategic action field' (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 77).

Applying this theoretical approach allows us to engage with the different theoretical strands discussed above. Though the role played by individuals is under-played in Fligstein and McAdam's work, the concept of SAFs leaves space for an exploration of the leadership role played by *embedded* agents in the sense that 'actors' collective actions are, to a certain extent, enabled and constrained by institutions' (Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024, 3305). From an empirical point of view, the focus on purposes and relationships within SAFs allows us to synthesize both the bodies of work highlighted above: the motivations for projects and the impediments to their successful delivery.

We address these theoretical and empirical issues through two research questions: 1) which SAFs influenced the preparation for and delivery of the 1986 Commonwealth Games, and 2) how the 1986 Games were influenced and affected by politics and charismatic individuals.

Methods

Following the example of Gillett and Tennent (2017, 2022), we explore these research questions by means of a single longitudinal case study. The case study is 'a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings' (Eisenhardt 1989, 534). As Flyvbjerg (2006) describes, it has historically been criticized as a research method for reasons of generalizability, reliability and validity. Flyvbjerg (2006) rejects these criticisms, and, invoking Kuhn (1987) and Walton (1992) – 'case studies are likely to produce the best theory' (Walton 1992, 129) – argues instead that the development of (social) science requires the systematic production of exemplars. In a similar vein, Ragin (1992, 6) cites Becker's challenge to case study researchers: 'What is this a case of?' Our case – the events leading up to, during and in the aftermath of the 1986 Commonwealth Games – was chosen because it was empirically rich and theoretically generalizable (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2003).

In a public management context, Wond and Macaulay (2011) advocate the specific merits of longitudinal studies over research with a shorter temporal orientation. Building on prior studies (Gill and Meier 2000; Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 2000; Pettigrew 1990), they argue that the 'extended temporality' which longitudinal studies uniquely offer allows for 'flexibility and nuance, a deeper appreciation of context, as well as providing a holistic view of success' (Wond and Macaulay 2011, 310). As such, studies of this nature mediate against the narrow focus on the present which characterizes much of the project management literature (Biesenthal et al. 2015).

Methodologically, our study relied primarily on archival sources, most notably the records of the Organising Committees of the 1986 Games (particularly the Games operating committee, the executive committee and the finance committee) housed at the University of Stirling and material relating to the Games held in the UK National Archives, especially the correspondence between Margaret Thatcher, her ministers in

Table 1. SOURCES.

Primary	
Source	***Examples***
UK National Archives	PREM 19/1978 – Records of the Prime Minister's Office Correspondence and Papers (correspondence with Robert Maxwell, Malcolm Rifkind)
Commonwealth Games Archives, University of Stirling	CG/2/13/1/2 – Directors (materials relating to Commonwealth Games (Scotland 1986) [Games operating company]: Memorandum and Articles of Association, minutes of 49 board meetings) CG/2/13/1/4/1 – Executive Committee (minutes of 44 committee meetings, fund-raising strategy document, correspondence) CG/2/13/1/4/2 – Finance Committee (minutes of 32 committee meetings, budgetary forecasts) CG/2/13/1/6 – Commonwealth Games Federation (*Notes on the Organization of the Commonwealth Games* book, correspondence) CG/2/13/2 – Printed Materials (operations manuals, *Games News* newspaper, *Village View* newspaper)
House of Commons Hansard	Debate on Commonwealth Games, 15 July 1986; Debate on South Africa, 16 July 1986; Prime Minister's Questions, 17 July, 22 July 1986
Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive	Speech at Commonwealth Games reception, 17 March 1986 Interview with Hugo Young, 8 July 1986
Secondary	
The Times and Sunday Times	Relevant articles (1984–1989)
Daily Record	Relevant articles (1986–1989)
The Observer	Relevant articles (1985–1986)
Contemporary accounts	*XIII Commonwealth Games – Scotland 1986: The Official History* (Nimmo 1989) *Unfriendly Games: Boycotted and Broke – Story of the 13th Commonwealth Games* (Bateman and Douglas 1986)
Memoirs and biographies	*The Downing Street Years* (Thatcher 1993); *Conflict of Loyalty* (Howe 1994); *Maxwell* (Haines 1988); *Fall: The Mystery of Robert Maxwell* (Preston 2021)

Scotland and Robert Maxwell. These were supplemented by periodicals and other secondary sources which helped to fill in gaps in the archives (Gillett and Tennent 2017, 2023). These are shown in Table 1 below.

Following the example of Gillett and Tennent (2017), we started by preparing an outline narrative of the Games based on our preliminary collection and review of selected materials. Through an iterative and abductive 'back-and-forth' between theory and empirics (Ketokivi and Mantere 2010), we identified the three key SAFs which we discuss in the next section. At this point we returned to the archives armed, as Gillett and Tennent (2023) recommend, with the empirical questions which we wanted to answer. Material collected during this phase of the project was analysed using the three stages proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): the data collected by one of the authors was reduced (organized thematically) and then displayed in the narratives which we present in the next section and which form the basis for the conclusions we draw in the final section.

Findings

Through our analysis of the material described above, we identify three overlapping – but quite distinct – strategic action fields (SAFs) which affected the design and the delivery of the 1986 Commonwealth Games. These are: 1) the City of Edinburgh, its local government and social networks; 2) the field of global sporting events; and 3) the

international politics of sport, in particular as it related to sanctions against apartheid South Africa. Applying the definition of SAFs proposed by Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 3) and quoted above, in each of these fields we focus on three key elements: the purpose of the field, the rules of the field and the relationships within the field. Throughout, we discuss the substantial influence on the Games of two key individuals: Margaret Thatcher and Robert Maxwell.

'Civic Edinburgh'

The delivery of the Games was managed by a series of overlapping organizations and committees. The Commonwealth Games Council for Scotland (CGCS) made the original decision in January 1978 to apply to host the Games. After the Games had been awarded to Edinburgh in July 1980, a Steering Committee was formed; this Committee was chaired by Peter Heatly, a champion diver in the 1950s who had, as chairman of the CGCS, played a central role in the organization of the 1970 Commonwealth Games, also held in Edinburgh. The other members of the Steering Committee were George Hunter, a rower who had joined the CGCS board in 1962 and was, like Heatly, deeply involved in the 1970 Games, three further members of the CGCS board, three members of Edinburgh District Council and one member of Lothian Regional Council.

This Steering Committee was disbanded in 1982 and replaced by a Main Organising Committee, an Executive Committee and a Games operating company. In each of these structures, however, the initial blend of Edinburgh-based sports administrators and prominent local councillors persisted. Heatly was initially named Chairman of the Organising Committee; when he was subsequently appointed as Chairman of the Commonwealth Games Federation, the international organization which oversees the staging of the Games, he was replaced by Kenneth Borthwick, a former Lord Provost (mayor) of Edinburgh who had served as a Conservative councillor since 1963 and sat on the executive committee of the 1970 Games. Other prominent members of the initial Organising Committee included Cornelius Waugh, a local businessman and Conservative councillor in Edinburgh from 1969; Arthur Campbell, chair of the CGCS and cycling director at the 1970 Games; and Jim Souness, an actuary who chaired the Finance Committee.

Beyond a straightforward instrumental purpose – the desire to organize a successful Games – we identify three broader purposes which motivated this senior cohort. The first was a sense of obligation to the Commonwealth Games Federation: no other cities were interested in hosting the 1986 Games after the financial and political turmoil of the 1976 Olympic and 1978 Commonwealth Games, and if no host city had stepped forward the Games would not have gone ahead. A second purpose expressed by organizers was their desire to showcase Edinburgh as a city; this would boost civic pride and, potentially, tourist income. Here we see the clear influence of patrician councillors who saw themselves as 'city fathers'. Related to this, a final purpose was a nostalgic one. Most of the figures named above were involved in the 1970 Games, which, labelled the 'Friendly Games' had, by common agreement, been a great success, though this reading glosses over the political tensions between a resurgent Scottish nationalist movement and a more 'unionist' framing of Scotland as an integral player within the United Kingdom (Skillen and McDowell 2014). Financial support from the Labour government had funded the construction of a new stadium and swimming

pool, and there was confidence among the organizers that the success of 1970 could be repeated. As Borthwick wrote after the Games, they 'thought that if Edinburgh did well in 1970 it could do better in 1986' (Nimmo 1989, 14).

This can be understood as one of their first mistakes, as there were two critical environmental changes between 1970 and 1986. The first was that a reorganization of local government had downgraded the power of what had been the Edinburgh Corporation, now the Edinburgh District Council, and placed it under the aegis of the Lothian Regional Council. More seriously, it was made very clear to the organizers by the UK Government led by Margaret Thatcher that no public money would be made available to support the Games. Rather, the Games would serve as a symbol of Thatcher's strong ideological commitment to 'an unfettered market, no state intervention to assist industry, and cuts in public spending' (Turner 2010, 9).

This was an important change in the rules of the field, the impact of which was underestimated by the organizers. Beyond that, and reflecting the bureaucratic and administrative origins of the organizers, they built a large infrastructure of rules and regulations. An initial Constitution of the Main Organising Committee was supplemented by a lengthy Standing Orders document in August 1983 which was in turn reinforced by Notes for the General Guidance of Committee Chairmen and Orders for Works. The Games Company produced its Memorandum and Articles of Association in December 1982, and legal agreements were put in place between the Games Company and Edinburgh District Council which owned and operated the main athletics stadium and other venues.

Finally, we have seen that the Games organizations were built on a series of established and overlapping relationships: between Conservative city councillors, between long-serving Edinburgh-based sporting administrators, and between those who had played prominent roles in the delivery of the 1970 Games. Beneath these formal relationships sat a network of more informal ones: Borthwick, Souness and Blair Grosset (appointed Chief Executive of the Games in 1984) all attended the same school (George Heriot's), while Heatly and Waugh both attended Leith Academy.

These strong social and professional connections attracted criticism, most notably from Labour councillors in Edinburgh who emerged as a significant antagonistic force as the Games approached. (By this stage, the Scottish National Party's influence on Scottish politics had diminished.) Alex Wood, leader of the Labour Group on the Council, wrote an angry letter to Kenneth Borthwick in February 1984. Having been appointed to the Executive Committee, Wood started his letter by expressing his disappointment that new community sporting facilities across the city were now unlikely to be built. Highlighting the prominent positions occupied by Conservative politicians, Wood extended this into a criticism of Borthwick and his cronies: 'Your petty political nepotism does not assist in building a professional approach. It threatens the profits of the Games. It consequently threatens the future creation of new, permanent sports centres in Edinburgh'.[1]

Labour attacks on the Games gained in intensity after the Labour group won control of the Edinburgh District Council in May 1984. While they campaigned for, and achieved, greater representation on the Games organizing committees, they also acted as a disruptive force. The most notable example of this came in July 1985 when they hung an anti-apartheid banner on the scoreboard at the Dairy Crest Games, forcing Channel Four to abandon their planned television coverage of the event. Shortly afterwards, Rank Xerox withdrew their sponsorship of the

Commonwealth Games, an illustration of the destructive power of fractured political relationships.

As the Games approached, further cracks appeared in the organizing consortium. On 22 April 1986, Arthur Campbell, Chairman of the CGCS and a core member of the organizing entities from the Steering Group onwards was interviewed on BBC Radio Scotland shortly after his organization had discussed a vote of no confidence in the Games Organising Committee. In his interview he criticized the 'great insensitivity' of the committee to the interests of the sports community, the unlikelihood that the Games would leave any lasting legacy, and the inadequacy of the arrangements which had been put in place: 'the technical officials and the organisers are working under serious handicaps'.[2]

The field of global sporting event administration

Now we examine the field of global sporting events, again looking at the purpose, rules and relationships which underpin them. Where the first field we explored was cramped and parochial in nature, this has a far wider span. We focus in particular on the administrative infrastructure around the Olympic Games and the Commonwealth Games, and the relationships which we are able to observe between them. The purpose of these fields can again be understood primarily in instrumental terms, namely to organize events which showcase athletic excellence for their duration and leave some form of social and economic legacy.

In both cases the temporary local organizing committees are accountable to a higher, permanent body, respectively the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF). These bodies are responsible for awarding their games to cities and thereafter oversee the design and delivery of the Games. In our case, the rules for the 1986 Commonwealth Games were set out in a book published by the CGF in 1980, *Notes on the Organization of the Commonwealth Games*[3] which recognized the unique circumstances facing organizing committees but also set out recommended timelines and mandated actions: 'Departure from some of the details set out in the Notes is inevitable, but in the main they should be complied with and it is hoped will provide a useful background for the work of the Organising Committee' (4). The progress of the Edinburgh Organising Committee was closely monitored – the Commonwealth Games Federation visited Edinburgh in June 1985 and June 1986. In addition to the rules of engagement set out in the *Notes* book, the 1986 Organising Committee operated within other specific restrictions. Most notably, their fund-raising appeal was limited to Scotland alone – the Commonwealth Games Council for England had the first right to approach the many major UK companies which were headquartered in England.

Beyond these formal rules, the 1986 Commonwealth Games were staged for the first time without any government support, a dramatic shift in their operating environment which rewrote the nature of the Games' relationship with the UK Government. A similar challenge faced the organizers of the 1984 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. After Los Angeles won the bid for the Games, local political leaders made it clear that 'not a single penny of taxpayer funds would go to the Olympic venture' (Dyreson 2015, 173). Peter Ueberroth, a successful entrepreneur in the travel industry, was appointed chair of the organizing committee and, out of necessity, set about raising funds through aggressive sales of television rights and corporate sponsorships.

Core to this approach was his recognition that firstly the Olympics had great telegenic appeal, and secondly that the global broadcasting rights had up to that point been significantly undervalued (Dyreson 2015).

As with the Commonwealth Games, Ueberroth as President of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) operated within a long-established hierarchy of National Olympic Committees (NOCs) sitting beneath the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Ueberroth and the LAOOC were widely praised for the great financial success of the Los Angeles Games: they sold the global television rights for $287 million, double what had been paid for the 1980 Moscow Olympics and ultimately generated a profit of $220 million. Importantly, Barney, Wenn, and Martyn (2002) place this success in the context of a shift in strategy in the IOC under the leadership of Juan Antonio Samaranch which sought to increase the commercial revenues generated by Olympic Games, particularly with respect to television rights. Frustrated at the tendency of Olympic Organizing Committees to undervalue television rights (the 1976 Montreal and 1980 Lake Placid Organizing Committees had both signed US deals with ABC without any open bidding process, for example), in 1977 the IOC made changes to the Olympic Charter so that it would become a full partner in the rights negotiation process.

No such change had taken place in the Commonwealth Games movement, and the Edinburgh Organising Committee accordingly had autonomy in negotiating their television deal. This is one example where the relationships between the Commonwealth Games and the Olympic Games appear weak; though a fact-finding delegation visited the Los Angeles Olympics, there is little evidence that they changed any aspects of their planning in response to what they had seen. Indeed, the decision to sell the television rights to the BBC had been taken much earlier: in September 1982 Michael Dolbear of the BBC offered £300,000 for the UK broadcast rights or £460,000 for the world rights,[4] and this offer was firmly accepted in January 1983. When Bryan Cowgill, a former BBC executive brought in by Robert Maxwell in the weeks before the Games, reviewed the contract, he described it as 'ridiculously cheap'. It therefore appears that the Edinburgh Organizing Committee, while deeply embedded in the systems of rules and regulations imposed by the CGF, maintained weak relations with the broader field of sporting megaproject organization. In sharp contrast to Peter Ueberroth's success in Los Angeles, their lack of commercial acumen contributed to the significant financial problems which created the opportunity for Robert Maxwell to become involved with the Games.

As the Games approached, the Board of the Games operating company, Commonwealth Games (Scotland 1986) Limited, started to become concerned about their financial state. While Borthwick outwardly maintained an optimistic tone, telling the *Glasgow Herald* on 4 March 1986 that all the funds needed to stage the Games had already been raised, at their meetings on 15 April they discussed a projected shortfall of £426,000, a figure which had risen to £892,000 by 16 May. At that meeting the directors sought legal advice as to whether it was lawful for the company to continue trading given their knowledge of the shortfall of income relative to expenditure, and by 10 June the forecast deficit had reached £1.8 million through a combination of increased costs and a large shortfall in the amount raised by the external Marketing Consortium, which ultimately secured just £5.6 million of the £15 million they had initially forecast.

Faced with a deficit of this scale, a renewed appeal went out for new sponsors. The only positive response came from Robert Maxwell, a prominent business figure in the

UK and owner of Mirror Group Newspapers (MGN), but someone who had up to that point played no role in the organization of the Games. Maxwell first noted his interest in getting involved on 12 June and by 19 June had agreed to come in as Chairman of the Games Company, bringing with him a new Executive Deputy Chairman (Bryan Cowgill) and three additional directors of the Games Company, each of whom occupied senior positions in 'UK plc'. In the short term, Maxwell offered an undefined sum from MGN which would assure the short-term financial viability of the Games alongside 'massive' media coverage.

True to his word, Maxwell's newspapers (the *Daily Mirror* in England and the *Daily Record* in Scotland) hailed him as the 'saviour' of the Games, and his messaging in the run-up to the Games was relentlessly positive: 'We may now look forward with confidence and great pleasure to a great event'[5]; 'I guarantee unconditionally that the Games will go ahead [. . .] We are united in our determination to ensure that the preparation and the events are a credit to Scotland, Great Britain and the Commonwealth'[6]; 'I can guarantee you that these Games will bring a lot of pleasure and satisfaction to people both at Meadowbank and Scotland and throughout Britain – and, indeed, the Commonwealth'[7]; 'the people of Scotland and all over Britain can be very proud of what they have achieved'[8]; and so on. During the Games he was a visible and 'boosterish' presence, stepping in to repair the Scottish team flag during the opening ceremony, awarding medals and taking the acclaim of the stadium crowd (a sharp contrast to Margaret Thatcher who was loudly jeered and pelted with eggs and tomatoes when she visited Edinburgh).

In many respects Maxwell can be seen as personifying Rojek's (2014) characterization of mega-events after the neoliberal turn as '"stateless" in that they are hatched outside the parameters of government, do not rely on government sponsorship and appeal to "the people", not party-political concerns' (33). There was a strong populist tone to Maxwell's public pronouncements, a commitment to private capital, a mistrust of 'incumbents, such as politicians' (Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024, 3308), an unwillingness to follow rules, and (in public at least) a clear strategy of distancing himself from government.

The international politics of sport

The third field which affected the 1986 Commonwealth Games was the international politics of sport, especially as it related to protests against South Africa. As a result of South Africa's implementation of the apartheid racial segregation and discrimination policy in 1950, it was expelled from the Commonwealth in 1961 and excluded from both the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup in 1961. These sporting sanctions can be understood as part of a broader international campaign whereby sport was 'used as a punitive tool' (Murray 2012, 576) in order to isolate South Africa economically, politically and culturally.

Despite the blanket exclusions of South Africa from quadrennial sporting mega-events, the administrators of sports exported through Britain's imperial project (most notably rugby and cricket) maintained active relations with the country, with, for example, a white-only South African cricket team touring England in 1965 and its rugby team visiting England in the winter of 1969–70. In 1976 the New Zealand rugby team toured South Africa, in contravention of the United Nations' call for a sporting embargo. This led to calls for New Zealand to be banned from the 1976 Montreal

Olympics; the International Olympic Committee's refusal to impose such a ban prompted 28 African states to withdraw their athletes from the Games (Cottrell and Nelson 2010).

The Commonwealth Games' imperial origins left them particularly vulnerable to further damaging boycotts (Jefferys 2012), and with the Canadian government concerned over the viability of the 1978 Commonwealth Games due to be held in Edmonton (Payne 1991), in 1977 the rules around Commonwealth nations' sporting relations with South Africa were strengthened by the agreement which was signed by the Commonwealth heads of state at the Gleneagles Hotel in Scotland. In the Gleneagles Agreement, the Commonwealth leaders

> accepted that it was the urgent duty of their governments to combat vigorously the evil of apartheid by withholding support for and by discouraging contact or competition with sporting organisations, teams or sportsmen from South Africa or from any other country where sports are organised on the basis of race, colour or ethnic origin (Commonwealth Secretariat 1977).

The Gleneagles Agreement was unambiguous in its wording and rigorously adopted by most Commonwealth countries. The only notable exception was the UK, where Margaret Thatcher, on taking office in 1979, inherited the obligations set out in the Gleneagles Agreement but was reluctant to apply them, preferring instead to leave decisions to governing bodies and individual sportspeople. Although Mrs Thatcher was consistent in condemning the apartheid system, she was also a steadfast opponent of sanctions on the grounds of their supposed ineffectiveness and the risk of South African retaliation against the Front-Line States. In an interview with Hugo Young for *The Guardian* in July 1986, she set out both sides of her position: 'Apartheid is wrong and it has to go' but also 'I do not believe that punitive economic sanctions will bring about internal change. I know of no case in history where that has happened'.[9]

Emboldened by Mrs Thatcher's tacit support and a largely positive fact-finding report published by the British Sports Council in 1980 (Llewellyn and Rider 2018), sporting relations between the UK and South Africa resumed to the extent that the United Nations described the UK as the main collaborator with apartheid sport (Fieldhouse 2005, 103). Perhaps most provocatively, following a campaign by the *Daily Mail* newspaper, the 17-year-old South African-born runner Zola Budd was granted fast-tracked British citizenship which allowed her to represent the UK at the 1984 Olympic Games, a move which, argued the Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe, risked undermining the Gleneagles Agreement and could lead to withdrawals from the 1986 Commonwealth Games.

At the next Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting held in Nassau in October 1985 Mrs Thatcher continued to argue against economic sanctions, leaving her in a very isolated position vis-à-vis a united coalition of Commonwealth leaders. Even so, after intense negotiations, an accord was agreed which balanced 'sanctions, threats and inducements to encourage the South African Government to begin a dialogue [. . .] on ways of replacing apartheid', a further tightening of the rules in response to the UK's intransigence on sporting and economic sanctions. President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia described this as 'a moment of great joy'.[10]

As the Games approached, however, threats against the UK started to emerge: Dr Obed Asamoah, the foreign minister of Ghana, and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda both threatened to leave the Commonwealth if Mrs Thatcher did not change her position.[11] The Edinburgh Commonwealth Games soon emerged as a focal point

for protests against the UK's stance on sanctions. In mid-June, Bishop Trevor Huddleston, president of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, called for a boycott, a call which was summarily dismissed by George Hunter: 'I have heard no suggestion that there should be withdrawals to support this particular cause. [. . .] There may be protests but that is all'.[12]

The *sang-froid* expressed by Hunter was shared by his colleagues. Even after the sudden and surprising withdrawal by Nigeria and Ghana on 9 July in explicit protest against Mrs Thatcher's opposition to economic sanctions, Peter Heatly, chair of the CGF, said 'I think that if more countries were going to withdraw then it would have happened by now'.[13] This proved wrong: within 10 days a total of 18 countries had joined the boycott, including 10 of the 15 African Commonwealth countries.[14] In the final analysis, 32 countries withdrew, and only 26 took part, making this the largest boycott in sporting history and a powerful punishment of the UK for its refusal to back economic sanctions and to adhere to the rules forbidding sporting engagement with South Africa.

The aftermath: resolving the games

Relentlessly positive in public up to and during the Games, behind the scenes Maxwell's tone was very different. In a letter to Malcolm Rifkind in July 1986[15] he highlighted a 'number of gross misjudgements [. . .] and serious mistakes made'; these included a lack of effective management control, a failure to recognize the poor delivery of the marketing consortium, and an overall 'atmosphere of undue optimism'. This was the start of a long campaign to minimize the amount of money Maxwell and his company would have to contribute to settle the Games' final accounts; even before the Games had started, he pledged that '(i)f I end up with a deficit, then Mrs Thatcher can look forward to getting a bill from this organisation like everybody else. She's a tough lady, I'm a tough hombre'.[16]

True to his word, Maxwell employed a number of aggressive negotiating tactics. He sent a letter to the boycotting countries demanding compensation, expressing his hope to Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, that 'your Government will pay its fair share of the financial loss which the Games have suffered as a direct result of your last-minute decision to boycott'.[17] Having promised a donation of £2 million (£1.3 million from a Japanese benefactor, Ryoichi Sasakawa, and £0.7 million from Maxwell's Pergamon Press), Maxwell sought to make these donations contingent on the UK government contributing an additional £1 million, threatening in a letter to Margaret Thatcher that he would withhold the £2 million and immediately put the Games company into liquidation if public money was not forthcoming.[18]

Alongside these and other threats, Maxwell's second tactic, as noted in a briefing note prepared for Mrs Thatcher[19] was to prepare scapegoats in case the recovery effort failed. The prime targets for this were the members of the first Organising Committee, whom he attacked in his letter to Rifkind of 31 July and, in a furious letter to Cornelius Waugh,[20] criticized for their 'massive incompetence' adding: 'If I had known that it would become my privilege to work with rats and cowards, such as yourself, I am not sure that with the benefit of hindsight I would ever have undertaken it'.

The debts of the Games Company were finally settled at the end of January 1989. All small and medium-sized creditors were paid in full, and large creditors including Edinburgh District Council and the University of Edinburgh received 67p in

the pound, a 'contribution' of £1.8 million which, along with the £2 million previously pledged, cleared the final deficit of £3.8 million. Mrs Thatcher's position did not change and no public money was contributed.

Discussion and conclusion

In this section we set out our contributions to the megaproject/mega-event literature and to Fligstein and McAdam's theory and discuss the limitations of our study and some suggestions for further research.

In the paper we have applied Fligstein and McAdam's field theory to the planning, delivery and aftermath of the 1986 Commonwealth Games. By doing so we have responded to the call from Clegg et al. (2017) and Gillett and Tennent (2017) to address the important role played by politics and politicians in the planning and delivery of megaprojects, and we have critically discussed and integrated ideas from mega-event theorizing (Rojek 2014). Building on Esposito and Terlizzi (2023), the paper aims to contribute to the megaproject literature by using Fligstein and McAdam's work to explore megaprojects as 'nonlinear, conflictual, and institutionally situated [and] shaped by the collective action of a great variety of stakeholders' (Esposito and Terlizzi 2023, 132). This approach chimes with Rofe's (2016) understanding of a relationship which is 'multi-direction or networked' (224).

The paper has framed the IGUs involved in the planning, delivery and aftermath of a sporting megaproject, the 1986 Commonwealth Games, as being embedded in a structure of strategic action fields; we argue that it is impossible to make sense of the Games without understanding the dynamics within these fields and their influence on the Games. Each of the fields we examined was characterized by the three common elements which Fligstein and McAdam (2012) identify: shared understandings about the purpose of the field, relationships (including power relationships) and rules (see also Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024). In the first field we examined, that of civic Edinburgh, we identified the tight network of relationships which bound the key actors together, but also – consistent with Fligstein and McAdam's notions of contestation and conflict – the ways in which party politics, and in particular the enmity of the ruling Labour administration to the Conservative 'old guard' who dominated the organizing entities, created powerful disruptive forces. The main feature of our second discussion, of the field of global sporting administration, was that the rules of the game had been totally rewritten, with event organizers no longer able to rely on financial support from the public sector. Peter Ueberroth and his Los Angeles colleagues took advantage of the opportunities these changes presented but the Edinburgh organizers, anchored to the local context and their memories of 1970, did not. Faced with a substantial financial deficit, the organizers turned to Robert Maxwell, a significant figure in British business, who saw a significant commercial (and personal) opportunity from positioning himself as the 'saviour of the Games'.

Our third discussion played out primarily at the macro-level. The purpose of the strategic action field we studied was to ostracize and punish South Africa for its apartheid policy; we focused on sporting boycotts and sanctions but placed this in the context of a wider programme of economic, cultural and political sanctions. Again, this was a field characterized by antagonism. As the UK, personified by Margaret Thatcher, become increasingly labelled as an ally of the apartheid regime, a large group of Commonwealth nations joined together to punish the UK for behaviour and ideas

they regarded as transgressive. These were the conditions which created the boycott; the common perception was that responsibility rested with Mrs Thatcher and that there was little, if anything, that the organizers could have done to prevent it.

Although we have presented each of these fields discretely, it is important to emphasize the dynamic nature of the relationship between them. Where powerful incumbent figures from civic Edinburgh occupied dominant positions in the Games at the start of the period we cover, strong macro-level political forces (the Reagan/Thatcher revolution, the Commonwealth backlash against the UK's relationship with South Africa) transformed the fields of global sporting event administration and the international politics of sport. The failure of Kenneth Borthwick and his colleagues to make sense of these transformations weakened the Games' financial position, creating the opportunity for Robert Maxwell (a 'challenger') to fill the most powerful position in the Games. Change in one field produces transformative effects in another: civic Edinburgh could no longer remain separate but had to change in order to accommodate Maxwell and his colleagues.

In our use of Fligstein and McAdam's work, we note that our analysis places a greater emphasis on politics and personalities (as distinct from power) than they do. This allows us to develop an inductively derived critique of their work. It can be argued that two individuals towered over the Games. The first, Mrs Thatcher, features in each of the three fields we described, whether refusing to provide any public financial support, avoiding any involvement in fundraising, or attracting the condemnation of the Commonwealth nations. The second key individual, Robert Maxwell, was invited into the field of global sporting event administration by virtue of his prominent position in business; this reflects the growing influence of commercial interests in the sporting megaproject or mega-event field. We frame Maxwell as a charismatic figure, but also a chaotic and lawless one who thrived on conflict and was very happy to resort to aggressive bullying and *ad hominem* attacks, as in his letter to Cornelius Waugh. This is a very different characterization from the description of individuals by Fligstein and McAdam (2012, 50–51) as socially-skilled brokers building cooperation based on shared meaning – we suggest that this underplays the potential influence of powerful (and sometimes renegade) actors.

We end with a brief discussion of limitations and suggestions for further work. We acknowledge that the 1986 Commonwealth Games took place during the period of transition towards the financialized, deregulated, 'small state' world in which we now live. Methodologically, we acknowledge our reliance on primary and secondary archival sources; the 'limitations of personal memory' (Gillett and Tennent 2022, 387) or, more bluntly, mortality, were a restricting factor in terms of our chosen methods.

Our paper looks at a very specific moment in time where a model of state funding of sporting megaprojects gave way to one in which private capital plays the dominant role. While there is a specific merit in studying the dynamics at play during this transitional (and foundational) phase, we also argue that the SAF framework we employ has a versatility – and openness to the empirical material which emerges from case studies – which makes it suitable for the study of sporting mega-events (and megaprojects more generally). Which SAFs matter most for any given project or event is clearly a matter which ultimately can only be decided empirically. In some cases, the state will play a prominent role, whether for reasons of sport diplomacy (Grix and Brannigan 2016; Murray 2012) or 'sportswashing' (Skey 2023); recent examples would include the Winter

Olympics in Sochi and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. In other cases, as Rojek (2014) describes, the state will be more or less absent, and 'established, semi-invisible social and economic interests' (33) will assert their dominance. In either case, the SAF framework offers rich analytical possibilities, which we encourage other researchers to explore.

Notes

1. Letter from Alex Wood to Kenneth Borthwick, 6 February 1984. Accessed at CG/2/13/1/4/1.
2. Radio Scotland interview with Arthur Campbell, 22 April 1986. Accessed at CG/2/13/1/2.
3. Accessed at CG/2/13/1/6.
4. Letter from Michael Dolbear to George Hunter, 9 September 1982. Accessed at CG/2/13/1/4/1.
5. *Daily Record*, 20 June 1986
6. *Daily Record*, 26 June 1986
7. *Village View*, 25 July 1986. Accessed at CG/2/13/2.
8. *Daily Record*, 26 July 1986
9. Margaret Thatcher interview with Hugo Young, 8 July 1986. Accessed at Margaret Thatcher Foundation Archive, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106265.
10. *The Times*, 22 October 1985
11. *The Observer*, 15 June 1986
12. *The Times*, 14 June 1986
13. *The Sunday Times*, 13 July 1986
14. *The Sunday Times*, 20 July 1986
15. Letter from Robert Maxwell to Malcolm Rifkind, 31 July 1986. Accessed at PREM 19/1978.
16. *Daily Record*, 22 July 1986
17. Letter from Robert Maxwell to Rajiv Gandhi, 29 July 1986. Accessed at PREM 19/1978.
18. Letter from Robert Maxwell to Margaret Thatcher, 11 September 1986. Accessed at PREM 19/1978.
19. Briefing note for meeting between Margaret Thatcher, Malcolm Rifkind and Robert Maxwell, 22 October 1986. Accessed at PREM 19/1978.
20. Letter from Robert Maxwell to Cornelius Waugh, 29 October 1986. Accessed at PREM 19/1978.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Karl Magee and Rosie All-Mulla at the University of Stirling archives for their help in finding the material which formed the basis for this study. Professor Chris Carter made valuable suggestions on the framing of the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No funding was received for this study.

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