

The Commonwealth Games: A Sporting Encounter Just for the Sport of it?

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Abstract

The Commonwealth Games are a multi-sport competition organised every four years since the first *British Empire Games* convened in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1930. Also known as the *Friendly Games*, they are only open to athletes from the Commonwealth of Nations. This article offers a diachronic perspective showing that the significance of the Games has extended above cultural heritage since the Commonwealth Games were at times used to follow different tracks of diplomacy. It then focuses on Birmingham 2022 (28th July-8th August), the latest expression of a 92-year long tradition. After examining the host city's expectations and the rewards reaped, it scrutinises the opening ceremony and makes use of the Ipsos MORI poll carried out after the Games to look at the reception of the event, thus showing how the Games can enhance the profile of the Commonwealth and foster pride to differing extents throughout the UK.

Les Jeux du Commonwealth sont une compétition pluridisciplinaire organisée tous les quatre ans depuis les premiers *Jeux de l'Empire britannique* (British Empire Games) de 1930 à Hamilton (Ontario). Également connus sous le nom de *Friendly Games* (Jeux de l'amitié), ils sont réservés aux athlètes du Commonwealth des Nations. Cet article offre une perspective diachronique et montre que l'importance des Jeux s'est étendue au-delà d'un simple héritage culturel puisque les Jeux du Commonwealth ont parfois été utilisés pour emprunter différentes voies diplomatiques. Il s'intéresse ensuite aux Jeux de Birmingham de 2022 (28 juillet-8 août), dernière manifestation d'une tradition vieille de 92 ans. Après avoir abordé les espoirs de la ville hôte et les récompenses obtenues grâce à l'organisation des Jeux, il sera question de la cérémonie d'ouverture. Le recours au sondage Ipsos MORI réalisé après les Jeux permettra d'analyser la réception de l'événement et de voir dans quelle mesure les Jeux rehaussent le profil du Commonwealth et suscitent différents degrés de fierté dans les nations constitutives du Royaume-Uni.

Keywords

Birmingham 2022, Commonwealth Games, Commonwealth of Nations, sports diplomacy, soft power, sporting encounter
Birmingham 2022, Jeux du Commonwealth, Commonwealth des Nations, diplomatie sportive, soft power, rencontre sportive

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.” These words were uttered by Nelson Mandela in 2000 (Mandela). They have a particular resonance when examining the Commonwealth Games (from here on CG or the Games), an extra-regional competition which can be considered as the second most important multi-sport competition after the Olympic Games. In New Zealand, TVNZ announced that more than 2.7 million people had tuned into the 2018 CG. Such coverage outran that of the 2016 Rio Olympics by Sky TV (Hembry). In 2022, IPSOS polls revealed that coverage of the 2022 CG had reached 28.6 million people on the BBC, while the event had been streamed 57.1 times. In the face of such popularity, can the CG be considered apolitical?

This article is to be read as the continuation of a reflection carried out during a seminar on “Cultural Encounters in English-Speaking Societies,” which was held at the University of Reunion Island's Institute of Education (INSPE) in March 2022. We then examined three straightforward questions: Where do the Games come from? What are they for? And where

might they lead? Some points of interest overlooking the contemporary Games were mentioned, offering avenues of discussion for the 22nd CG which were then due to begin four months later in Birmingham. Our last recommendation to sports aficionados and sports sceptics alike was to keep a sharp eye on the opening ceremony of 28th July. We here offer an article enriched with a post-event analysis.

In a 2013 speech to the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) General Assembly, Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharm declared: “Our mandate in relation to Sport for Development and Peace aligns with the CGF vision which is to develop sport for the benefit of the people, the nations and the territories of the Commonwealth, and thereby strengthen the Commonwealth” (Sharm). This quotation can be read as a declaration of intent. One may then wonder whether it is not at times contradicted by facts. Birmingham 2022 being the latest manifestation of a 92-year long tradition, we will begin by offering a broad picture of the Games, highlighting the diversity of “the people, the nations and the territories of the Commonwealth.” We will then look at the intricate links between sport, diplomacy and Commonwealth affairs with a diachronic lens, thus showing how the Games have sometimes been used to follow different tracks of diplomacy. We will finally scrutinise the 2022 Games, attempting to assess whether they played a part in strengthening the Commonwealth. We will focus on the host city’s expectations, the benefits of the Games and the reception of the event.

“Sport for the benefit of the people, the nations and the territories of the Commonwealth”

The Commonwealth of Nations (“the Commonwealth”), in its contemporary form, is home to 2.5 billion people and includes 56 countries in Africa, Asia, North and South America, Europe, and the Pacific. The Commonwealth is a political and free association, a network of states rather than a union since no government exercises power over the other countries. It is not ruled by any formal constitution. Its members include major industrialised nations as well as small states, and developing countries in the Global South. Such diversity renders the balance of interests difficult. Not only do the nations share ties of friendship, educational and cultural links, but they enjoy practical cooperation targeting health and economic development. Since 2013, the Commonwealth Charter has set out the values of the Commonwealth: it ensures it is formally committed to equality, democracy, and human rights.

Britain remains the nucleus of the Commonwealth; however the question today is whether it is still calling the tune or not. Described by Encyclopedia Britannica as “an evolutionary outgrowth of the British Empire” (Britannica), the Commonwealth can be perceived as a legacy of the Empire. While it began by coexisting with the Empire, it has recently been joined by countries which have never been British colonies: Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony; Rwanda, a former Belgian colony and a member of La Francophonie; and Gabon and Togo, two former French colonies were admitted as the 55th and 56th Commonwealth members in 2022. Admission is nowadays discussed on a case-by-case basis, and the Commonwealth has now increasingly little to do with the British empire, although some critics consider it merely as an updated form of empire, and thus offer the label “Empire 2.0” (Hirsch).

72 nations and territories took part in the 2022 Games. There were 4,822 participants, including 311 para-athletes, 21 American and Caribbean teams, 19 teams from African nations, 8 from Asia, 10 from Europe and 14 from the Pacific. Competitors are eligible to represent a Commonwealth country when they are “in possession of a current valid passport of the Commonwealth Country which enters them; or are a subject who can demonstrate ‘Belonger Status’ in Great Britain or relevant British Overseas Territory of the Commonwealth Country which enters them” (Constitutional Documents of the Commonwealth Games Federation [CGF], 2020). Athletes competing for a common passport country (Great Britain, New Zealand,

and Australia) at the Olympic Games or other major sporting events are allowed “to choose to represent their home Affiliated CGA¹” at the Commonwealth Games (Constitutional Documents of the CGF). Three overseas territories have their own National Olympic Committee and represent themselves at both events (British Virgin Islands, Bermuda, and the Cayman Islands).

A symbol for Britishness, the official British Olympic team “Team GB” gathers athletes from the four home nations (Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, England), Crown dependencies (Isle of Man, Jersey, Guernsey), and some British Overseas Territories (Anguilla, Turks and Caicos Islands, Montserrat, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar...). However, this team breaks apart during the Commonwealth Games. The CG split may be practical, but it is not without consequence. Acknowledging the singularities of each Commonwealth nation or territory through sport boosts “Commonwealth spirit”—a sort of sense of supranational identity which thus helps gather a wide diversity of nations, strengthening ties and increasing visibility.

Although the origin of the Games is associated with the 1911 Festival of Empire held in the Crystal Palace in London, the first Games were convened in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1930: 400 athletes from 11 countries were then gathered. Only dominions and UK nations participated in 1930 (as well as British Guiana and Bermuda), and women took part only in aquatic sports (swimming and diving). The event was then referred to as “The British Empire Games,” and it retained this name until 1950 (there were no Games during the War, in 1942 and 1946). Between 1954 and 1966, the Games were called “The British Empire and Commonwealth Games”; between 1970 and 1974 they were known as “The British Commonwealth Games,” before eventually becoming “The Commonwealth Games.” The name change thus echoes the shift from the British empire to a post-imperial association.

The British Empire Games Federation was established in 1932 following the success of the first Games in Hamilton. From then on, the federation was in charge of the organisation of the games, it controlled the program and selected host cities. The name has now been changed to the “Commonwealth Games Federation” (CGF) or “Commonwealth Sport.” The Federation also organises the Commonwealth Youth Games and it is the governing body of the “Commonwealth Games Associations.” The different partners involved in the Games are the Commonwealth Games Federation, the Commonwealth Games Associations, the international sports federations, and an organising committee set up for each Commonwealth Games.

Are the Games More than Cultural Heritage?

We will now look at the intricate links between sport, diplomacy and Commonwealth affairs. Kamallesh Sharm’s statement mentioned in our introduction openly suggests that one of the Games’ objectives is to strengthen the Commonwealth. From its beginnings to post-Brexit UK, there has indeed been a constant wish to enhance its reputation within the UK and abroad, and to intensify the connections between the Commonwealth nations. “Global Britain” was predictably an argument used by Brexiteers to emphasise post-Brexit opportunities.

One may wonder whether sport has historically played a part in helping Britain maintain its influence over other nations. Although it is difficult to support such a statement with irrefutable evidence, it seems that sport played an important role in generating connections between Britain and its former colonies (Kobierecki). Indeed, sport helped the colonisers dominate, yet it also helped the colonised resist and emancipate themselves from British control. For Perkin, sport “helped the Empire to decolonize on a friendlier basis than any other in the world’s history, and so contributed to the transformation of the British Empire into the Commonwealth of Nations” (Perkin 145). Beating the English at a sports game was also highly symbolic. The All Blacks

¹ Commonwealth Games Association (CGA).

won 31 out of 32 matches in 1905 in the British Isles, and the Springboks (South Africa’s national rugby team) won most matches during their 1906-1907 tour. McDevitt notes that these “rugby defeats struck a warning chime among English commentators and were seen to be a portent of doom for the future of the British Empire” (McDevitt 1). In Britain, defeat on British soil triggered mixed feelings of despair and hope, offering the prospect of regeneration thanks to “muscular Christian” colonials.

Today, the message conveyed by the Commonwealth Sport Foundation emphasises friendship, cooperation, and even the family links of the nations in keeping with the professed objectives of the Commonwealth. Such a message, boosted by the catalytic effect of the games, helps sustain ties, especially when they tend to weaken. The Games are meant to foster *rapprochement*, hence the appellation “Friendly Games.” Yet this appellation can also appear merely as a way to fend off political contestation during the Games. The website *lexico.com*, managed by *Dictionary.com* and Oxford University Press, traces the origins of this informal name for the Commonwealth Games to the 1960s and identifies the earliest use in *The Times*. The Games were however deemed “friendly” before: in 1930, *Port-Glasgow Express* mentioned the Empire gathering and announced competition “in all kinds of games in friendly rivalry” (“Empire Games. Gathering of British Athletes”). By 1986, the name was settled—a *Toronto Star* article began with the following words: “They are called The Friendly Games, but 200 private security guards will protect athletes at the Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland, July 24 to August 2” (Sokol).

Historical studies have shown that sport was often a vehicle for core values deemed indispensable to the running of the British Empire. In his opening chapter on “Gender and Imperial Sport,” McDevitt mentions “organized games and the doctrines of Muscular Christianity, which held that athletics in general and team games in particular were uniquely able to foster the manliness which an Empire needed in order to prosper” (McDevitt 1). Since the nineteenth century, sport has indeed been seen as a training tool for young men. Unsurprisingly, team sports and athletics were included in the most prestigious public schools which were attended by Commonwealth Office diplomats. Team games were used as a pedagogical tool, in particular rugby and cricket. As a “combination of individual prowess and group co-operation” (Perkin 147), they were entrusted with the promotion of core values such as loyalty and respect. These values recall the Victorian model of civilization, which included a component of “muscular Christianity.” This movement, which flourished in London in the nineteenth century, gave rise to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and later spread to other countries. In 1859, Thomas Hughes published *Tom Brown at Oxford* in a serial form and entitled chapter 11 “Muscular Christians.” Here is the definition of the notion he provided:

Our hero on his first appearance in public some years since, was without his own consent at once patted on the back by the good-natured critics, and enrolled for better or worse in the brotherhood of muscular Christians, who at that time were beginning to be recognized as an actual and lusty portion of general British life. (...) Whereas, so far as I know, the least of the muscular Christians has hold of the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man’s body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men. (Hughes)

Victorian muscular Christianity linked Christian morality to physical fitness and manliness. Physical training was thus portrayed as a necessity to perform service overseas, help others, and develop strength of character. Sport was thus seen as a vehicle not only for the doctrine of muscular Christianity, but for the same core values as the ones required to run the Empire in

the colonies. The cover of the 1930 British Empire Games programme may be seen as an illustration of the values encouraged through muscular Christianity and, more broadly, through sport: it featured a disc-thrower sharing the strength, application, calm, perfect balance and proportion of Myron's sculpture *The Discobolus*. The godlike figure is standing above a background of palm trees, behind the Lion of England, yet another symbol for bravery, valour and strength.

Sport should not be considered as a peripheral institution in the history of the Commonwealth, but as a central one, since it is "at some level always political" (Stoddard qtd. in Dawson, 2006, 6). From the organisation of the Games of New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) in Indonesia (1963) and Cambodia (1966) to ping-pong diplomacy,² examples abound shedding light on the links between sport and domestic or foreign policy. The Commonwealth Games are no exception. They have at times been highly political. Diplomacy, like conflict resolution, is a polymorphous art. Different tracks for diplomacy can be identified: traditional diplomacy, involving government to government meetings or official leaders is known as "Track One diplomacy." "Track Two diplomacy" (Montville 162), also referred to as "back-channel" diplomacy, is carried out by non-governmental actors; when governmental actors meet non-governmental actors a "Track One and a Half" is followed, while "Track Three" refers to the increase of contacts between people(s), and "Multi-Track diplomacy" is made up of all of the above. Our point here is that the Commonwealth Games have at times been part and parcel of a variety of forms of diplomacy.

Let us put forward the examples of the 1978 and 1986 Games, which can be considered as expressions of Track One diplomacy, at a time when South Africa's apartheid policies were central to world politics. The 1978 CG were held two years after the 1976 Olympics Games in Montreal which had been subject to corruption, budget overruns, doping suspicions, and had been boycotted by 29 countries protesting against the All Blacks tour in South Africa, despite a UN sporting embargo.³ In the aftermath of 1976, the Canadians walked a tightrope to avoid a similar boycott in the 1978 Commonwealth Games that they were to host in Edmonton. Diplomatic efforts conducted by the Department of External Affairs, the creation of a specific Task Force for the Commonwealth Games, negotiations, the signing of a Declaration in Gleneagles and a policy denying visas to South African athletes finally led to "a diplomatic triumph for Canada and was to help set the stage for future Canadian leadership in the Commonwealth in the fight against apartheid in South Africa" (Macintosh et al. 51). Nigeria and Uganda were eventually the only two countries to boycott the 1978 Games. Canadian officials thus managed to avoid economic sanctions while using sport to show opposition to apartheid.

Although it also aimed at the apartheid regime, the boycott of the Edinburgh Games in 1986 was much more significant than in 1978. The state of emergency imposed in South Africa in 1985 implied draconian measures and the use of extreme force by the regime. In October 1985, Commonwealth leaders signed the Nassau Accord "after a long weekend of negotiations during which the British Prime Minister found herself totally isolated over sanctions" (Ashford). The measures were called "tiny little measures" by Thatcher, and her words upon the final agreement were thus reported: "It was worth paying a price to get an agreement, it was worth paying a price to keep the Commonwealth together" (Ashford). However, the accords remained

² Preceding Nixon's visit to China in 1972, American and Chinese table tennis players met during the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships held in Japan. The event remains a famous symbol since it marked the beginning of diplomatic overture between the US and the People's Republic of China.

³ The New Zealand rugby team had toured South Africa earlier in the year 1976; yet the International Olympic Committee refused to ban New Zealand from the Olympic Games. Consequently, when it met in Mauritius in 1976, the Organization for African Unity, the parent body of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, called for the boycott of the Olympic Games by African countries (Macintosh, Greenhorn and Black, 1992).

fruitless and when Thatcher refused to sever sporting contacts with, and impose stricter sanctions on South Africa, many Commonwealth nations heeded the call for a boycott. Official government representatives were consequently involved. Eventually only 27 teams took part in the Games and 32 boycotted them. The 1986 Games ended up being a very white affair and a financial black hole. Kobierecki considered that “the country that was the target of the protest was also the host of the event, so the boycott struck the proper target, not an innocent victim, which has sometimes occurred during other sports boycotts” (Kobierecki 40). One should however remember that although the period was that of pre-devolution Scotland, the Games were not played in England, and the city of Edinburgh suffered great financial losses.

The Games are used as a springboard for Commonwealth sports. The schedule of the 2022 Games comprised 280 medal events across 19 different sports,⁴ including some sports which are not Olympic Games sports, but are relevant to the Games since they are traditional sports deeply rooted in British, imperial or Commonwealth culture (such as lawn bowling, netball, cricket, squash...). The CG rules are however planned to be changed in 2026. Currently, the list of compulsory or core sports is defined in Byelaw 14, in the *Constitutional Documents of the Commonwealth Games Federation* (Commonwealth Games Federation). The list⁵ includes, to mention but a few, swimming, athletics, cycling, boxing, and lawn bowls... Optional sports, such as archery, cricket, and disciplines like clay target, full bore, pistol or small-bore shooting may also be selected from a list.⁶ There is a limit of four team sports on the program (with some exceptions concerning cricket and basketball para). However, a specific clause states that “the CGF Executive Board from time to time may recommend to the CGF General Assembly the recognition of International Federations governing and developing a sport practiced in the Commonwealth which are not compulsory or optional sports (disciplines) on the Commonwealth Games sports programme. Such recognition will be granted with the designation of ‘CGF Recognized Sport’” (Commonwealth Games Federation). At times, tennis (Delhi, 2010), or fencing (1950-70) were introduced. “Demonstration sports” or “exhibition games” may also be hosted, such as lacrosse, in 1978, in Canada; Australian rules football, in 1982 in Brisbane; the martial arts silat, wushu and silambam in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, 1998... The inclusion of these sports is highly significant and conveys soft power. The introduction of demonstration sports allows organisers to offer more visibility to Commonwealth local or traditional sports, and hence increases the visibility of the Commonwealth host nation or territory (Track Two diplomacy) while also influencing attitudes and openness towards singularity and local traditions (Track Three diplomacy).

Birmingham 2022

The examples of the 1978 and 1986 editions show that the Commonwealth Games have, at times, directly been involved in conflicts requiring Track One diplomacy, but the Games can also be considered as a soft power resource, as well as a form of non-governmental track Two and Three diplomacy. The term “soft power,” first coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 (Nye), is to

⁴ Some sports are split in different disciplines: aquatics thus comprises diving, swimming and para swimming; cycling includes mountain bike, road race, time trial, track and para track.

⁵ Aquatics (Swimming), Aquatics (Swimming Para), Athletics, Athletics (Para), Badminton, Cycling (Road), Boxing, Gymnastics (Artistic), Hockey (Men and Women), Judo, Lawn Bowls, Lawn Bowls (Para), Netball (Women), Rugby Sevens (Men & Women), Squash, Table Tennis, Triathlon, Weightlifting, Powerlifting (Para), and Wrestling (Freestyle). Byelaw 14, “Sports in the Programme of the Commonwealth Games,” 2020 constitutional documents of the CGF.

⁶ The list includes: Archery (Recurve), Aquatics (Diving), Basketball 3x3 (Men and Women), Basketball Wheelchair Para 3x3 (Men and Women), Cricket (Men and Women), Cycling (Mountain Bike), Cycling (Track), Cycling (Track Para), Gymnastics (Rhythmic), Shooting (Clay Target), Shooting (Full Bore), Shooting (Pistol), Shooting (Small Bore), Table Tennis (Para), Triathlon (Para), Volleyball (Beach).

be understood as persuasive foreign affairs policies relying on persuasion and attraction, on cultural or economic influence rather than coercion. The following analysis of the Birmingham opening ceremony will provide an illustration showing how the Games may increase people-to-people contacts, influence attitudes (Track Three diplomacy), and increase the visibility of Commonwealth nations and territories (Track Two diplomacy).

The 2022 games were originally awarded to Durban, but financial constraints however led the South African city to withdraw in 2017, showing the difficulty of the Global South to be part of top-level sports as hosts. Birmingham being the sole candidate, the bid turned out to be an easy win. Birmingham had initially planned to submit a bid for the 2026 games, yet opting for an earlier bid possibly appeared as a post-Brexit opportunity for the UK. “Brum, Brummagem, the City of a Thousand Trades, the Workshop of the World, Second City,” Birmingham’s various appellations are reminiscent of the city’s manufacturing and industrial past. As a former industrial city facing inner city problems, Birmingham intended to benefit from the Games to rejuvenate itself. Games are regularly seen as catalysts for change, participating in the transformation of cities, and in particular deprived cities. Another former industrial city, Glasgow had benefited from the 2014 Commonwealth Games, and East London was also metamorphosed in the aftermath of the 2012 Olympic Games. Birmingham, the second UK city after London, was thus expecting the Games to bring about impacts, and in many ways, the expectations were met. Facing shorter notice than usual, most venues took place in revamped buildings rather than new ones, although a new aquatics centre was built. We still don’t have much hindsight today and it may take years to assess the full picture, yet the data and legacy reports published provide helpful information on the ways in which Birmingham benefited from the Games. Among the highest expectations were economic benefits and infrastructure improvements; they were three-fold and included benefits ahead of the event, during the event and following the Games. The documents published (Birmingham 2022 Legacy Plan) implied a public investment of £ 778 million, among which the city council and regional partners in Birmingham were set to contribute £ 184 million. A £ 72 million investment was carried out to revamp the Alexander Stadium, and £ 73 million was devoted to Sandwell Aquatics Centre. 30 £ million was invested to redevelop Perry Barr station. More than 1 million tourists were expected in the city, 1.5 million ticketed spectators attended the Games in 15 venues across Birmingham, the West Midlands, and London, as well as nine free Festival sites in Birmingham. The Birmingham Brand advertised the creation of 40,000 games-time jobs, volunteering and skills opportunities. Subsequent economic benefits are expected to continue until 2027. Ahead of the Games, Alex de Ruyter, Professor at Birmingham City University and Director of the Centre for Brexit Studies, called Birmingham “Global Brum” and described the city as a regional hub of services with firms in law, accountancy, architecture, finance, buoyant universities, and a 14% city economy still reliant on manufacturing. He considered that the presence of major companies with Commonwealth connections (HSBC, with Far East connections; Jaguar Land Rover, owned by Indian firm Tata Motors) as well as, to a lesser extent, Commonwealth diaspora communities, “showcased the appeal of the Midlands for other emergent investors from India, East Asia, and elsewhere in the Commonwealth.” Therefore, he concluded, “the 2022 Commonwealth Games are everything to play for...” (De Ruyter). The Legacy Plan published provides an evaluation framework split in three phases: Phase 1 provides the baseline for further evaluation; Phase 2 assesses the immediate impact (beginning March 2022); Phase 3 will capture the long-term impact of the Games (beginning mid-2023).

Yet the Games did not receive unanimous praise. Dissonant voices were heard, and the Games were seen by many as “anachronistic, offensive, and a waste of time,” or celebrations of “exploitation, slavery and subjugation” (Pender). The CG have often been seen as a product of British colonialism or a vestige of the past, at times called “a metaphor for empire” or a “reminder of Britain’s bloody past” (Cardwell). Kehinde Andrews, a Professor of Black Studies

at Birmingham City University, said that “the event is seen as a nuisance [by students and colleagues]. There’s a genuine apathy otherwise. I don’t know anyone who is positive” (Cardwell). In such a context, the way the organisers pitched and presented the event was of great importance, hence the mission advertised on the official website and the publication of a legacy plan resting on five pillars: “A mission to bring people together; to improve health and wellbeing; to help the region to grow and succeed; to be a catalyst for change; to put us on the global stage” (Birmingham 2022 Legacy Plan).

Similarly, the ingenuity of the artistic team in charge of the opening ceremony resided in the anticipation of criticism and careful attention to the messages conveyed. As artistic director Iqbal Khan explained, “It used to be the Imperial Games. [The team] decided to challenge head on the really uncomfortable, problematic imperial connotations of that word” (Nathan). The dark side of the industrial revolution, oppression and exploitation were thus part of the show. A raging animatronic bull made of aluminium and steel was dragged into the stadium by fifty women, chain makers from the Industrial Revolution making chains for the slave trade. The bull caused pandemonium before it was tamed by Stella and the Dreamers (Commonwealth athletes) and turned out to be a symbol of love and unity.

The Games have been subject to a post-imperial and more progressive rebranding launched by the CGF. A long-term strategy including guiding principles and strategic priorities was put forward with a strategic plan, *Transformation 2022 (2015-2022)* and *Transformation 2022 Refresh (2019-2022)*, which endowed sport with a mission to promote social change. The CGF strongly advertises equality, diversity, and inclusion. The 22 Games broke many boundaries: the medal event program showed there were slightly more medal events for women (136) than men (134), which was a first; para sports were fully integrated within the program, and they were more numerous than ever before in CG history. In 2020, in the wake of Black Lives Matter, Commonwealth Games Federation President, Dame Louise Martin, and CGF chief executive, David Grevemberg, produced an open letter to sport #BlackLivesMatter, which ended with the following words: “It is our passionate belief that athlete advocacy and activism humanizes, rather than politicizes, sport. We must use our voices and continually seek to reduce inequalities and build peaceful communities” (Grevemberg and Martin). Such a stance was rather different from the one taken by the IOC.⁷ Although protests would be subject to guidelines, athletes were allowed to raise a fist on the podium and to wave Aboriginal flags and pride flags during victory laps.⁸ The Aboriginal flag and Ngarrindjeri flag were thus seen in Birmingham after maiden victories for the Australian women’s 3x3 basketball team.

However, support for equality, diversity and inclusion varies greatly within the Commonwealth. British Olympic diver Tom Daley carried the baton in the stadium accompanied by six LGBTQ+ athletes and advocates. Ahead of the ceremony he published an Instagram post reminding that “in over half of the Commonwealth countries, homosexuality is still a crime and in 3 of those countries the maximum penalty is the death sentence. These laws are a legacy of colonialism...” (Daley). The official discourse appears particularly necessary since issues of inequality, racism and discrimination remain common throughout the Commonwealth.

The opening ceremony of July 28th was the official starting signal before the action got underway. The significance of such a ceremony should not be overlooked. Games opening ceremonies set the tone, convey political messages, and are much more than mere bombastic

⁷ The International Olympic Committee has a strict policy of political neutrality. Relying on Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, it bans any form of political protest during the Games.

⁸ This recalls Cathy Freeman’s lap with the Australian flag underneath the indigenous flag after winning the 400m Gold in 1994, an act for which she was reprimanded. She repeated the act following her victory at the 2000 Sydney Olympics; yet this time she carried both flags, which was interpreted by some as an opening towards reconciliation.

events. The opening ceremony of the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games had faced criticism from the British political right (it occurred before the Windrush Scandal erupted in 2018). Directed by Danny Boyle and entitled “Isles of Wonder,” its “Pandemonium” section pictured social change from the Industrial Revolution to the 1960s: suffragettes, soldiers of the two world wars, NHS nurses; and the arrival of *Empire Windrush*, the former troopship which brought 492 migrants to London in 1948 and symbolised the immigration of hundreds of thousands of African-Caribbean people, encouraged by the British government, to respond to shortages in the labour market after World War II. Following the ceremony, Tory MP Aidan Burley had written a Twitter comment calling the show “leftie, multicultural crap,” which had led Prime Minister David Cameron to strongly criticise his own Tory backbencher calling his view “idiotic” (Rawlinson).

Artistic director Iqbal Khan could expect a comparison with Danny Boyle’s 2012 ceremony. In many ways, the 2022 opening ceremony was as impressive as the one in London and the show was widely acclaimed, receiving little criticism. Khan managed to produce a spectacular show celebrating both singularity and diversity. The two-and-a-half-hour ceremony took place in the Alexander Stadium, but the challenge was to achieve visual perfection not only for the 30,000 in the stadium, but also on television screens, since millions were watching live. The opening was technically spectacular, featuring telescopic LED towers, screens, a central bullring made from LED and including ramps for vehicles as well as a removable section. It featured Birmingham’s rising stars (singers Indigo Marshall and Gambini...) and culminated with Ozzy Osbourne (who was born in Birmingham), a Duran Duran performance (the band was formed in Birmingham), and fireworks. The show told the story of “Stella and the Dreamers,” Commonwealth athletes, and offered a journey through history. The parade then began with 433 Australian athletes, since Australia was supposed to host the next Games in Victoria in 2026.

Unsurprisingly since Birmingham hosted the Games, the ceremony can first be read as a panegyric on Birmingham and a celebration of local pride. The mascot of the Games, the “Perry mascot,” was a bull. Named after Perry Barr, the area where the Alexander Stadium stands, it is a direct reference to the “Brummie bull” and the “Bullring,” a famous meeting place in the city, built in the twelfth century and used for bull-baiting and as a market. The Bullring hosts a public sculpture of 4.5 metres long, a figurative bronze bull of 6.5 tons by British sculptor Laurence Broderick. Hence the presence of the Perry mascot, of a bullring stage, and then of a giant animatronic bull, were nods to Birmingham. Local pride also appeared through references to key figures (Chaplin, Shakespeare...) as well as to car manufacturing in the Midlands. The national anthem was performed by a Birmingham opera singer atop a Land Rover with number plate HRH PP (a tribute to the late Prince Philip). Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall arrived in a vintage Aston Martin, while 72 cars drew the Union Jack as the Royal Air Force aerobatic team, the “Red Arrows,” were flying above the stadium. Objects invented in Birmingham were also pictured in a “Carnival of Firsts,” as an illustration of the city’s eighteenth and nineteenth centuries epithets “City of a Thousand Trades,” “Workshop of the World.”

However, the ceremony can also be seen as a celebration of inclusion, and of the riches bought by different communities (for example, the Irish community was pictured helping dig the canals). Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani woman who settled in Birmingham after being attacked by the Taliban, spoke about health and education; an inclusive dance collective was composed of 45% of disabled performers; drag performer Ginny Lemon flew in a lemon shaped hot-air balloon, and comedian Joe Lycett introduced the Asian contingent saying: “I’m going to do something now that the British government doesn’t always do, and welcome some foreigners” (Glendenning). Such a statement was in stark contrast with another famous Birmingham speech—the 1968 “Rivers of blood” speech delivered by Enoch

Powell.⁹ The Birmingham ceremony offered an opposite perspective although the diversity emphasised by the Birmingham Brand, and the Tories’ national anti-immigration policies, were potentially dissonant (Fitzpatrick in Coleman *et al.*).

Some of the most interesting data to question representations comes from the Ipsos MORI poll commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). A sample of 2,279 adults aged 16-75 was interviewed online from 8th to 10th August 2022, right after the Games. 572 interviews tackled adults living in the Birmingham/Sandwell area. The poll shows that only six in ten people (60%) living in Birmingham and the surrounding area agreed that “the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games has had a positive impact on the economy in Birmingham and Sandwell, providing jobs and supporting local businesses” (Ipsos MORI poll). 8% disagreed, and 12% neither agreed nor disagreed. More interestingly, the youngest generations were the least positive: only 46% of the adults aged 16-34 agreed on the positive impact on the economy, while 69% of the adults aged 55-75 agreed. Lower-income respondents (with an income up to £ 19,999) were also less positive and more neutral than higher-income respondents (£ 55,000+). The richest and oldest were thus the most enthusiastic. This perhaps suggests that they were the social bracket, possibly local business actors, who benefited the most. The polls used here do not offer indicators to corroborate this hypothesis.

Three in four people (75%) agree events like the Games “give people the opportunity to come together nationally,” 9% disagree and 14% neither agree nor disagree. However, it is worth noting that the numbers vary greatly according to the region of the respondents. Most respondents being in England, numbers are unsurprisingly similar for the Midlands (76%) or London (70%). However, 83% of the Welsh and 81% of the Northern Irish agreed, but only 66% of the Scots agreed. The preceding question asked was whether events like these gave people the opportunity to “come together in their local community.” This suggests that the national gathering mentioned in the following question refers to Britain. The discrepancy then observed between Scotland and England may stem from a lower sentiment of Britishness in Scotland. However, the polls do not provide enough information to confirm it. Another explanation may simply be the split of Team GB into Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish teams, which logically increases support for local teams rather than a British one, and may then boost Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish sentiments. Yet, more surprisingly, more Welsh than English respondents agreed on the fact that the Games gave people the opportunity to come together nationally.

These elements may be completed by the analysis of answers to another question: 54% of the Scots agreed on the fact that “events like these make (them) feel proud of the UK” (16% disagreed, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed); so did 59% of the Northern Irish, 60% of inhabitants of the Midlands, 62% of Londoners, and 63% of the Welsh (18% of the Welsh disagreed, 19% neither agreed nor disagreed). Here again, the Scots and the Welsh take the two extremes, and these events seem to boost UK pride in Wales more than they do in England.

During a pre-event webinar organised by The Foreign Policy Centre which asked: “Can the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games help UK’s post-Brexit sport diplomacy get out of the starting blocks?” Grey Thomson declared: “I do find it really strange that we talk about there being no politics in sport. There’s so much politics in sport. [...] The medal table in every game is very political” (Coleman *et al.*). As this article begins its journey towards publication, Ukraine has announced a potential boycott of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, were Russian athletes allowed to enter the competition.

⁹ On 20th April 1968, MP Enoch Powell delivered a xenophobic speech in front of a Conservative audience, strongly criticising Commonwealth immigration to the UK. The speech was highly controversial and unleashed a political storm.

Conjuring history, sports diplomacy, and scrutinising the 2022 Games, we have tried to demonstrate that this international sporting encounter was definitely not just for the sport of it. Birmingham 2022 proved a successful post-Brexit and post-Covid event free of major controversies or health and security issues, and its opening ceremony emphasised British heritage, diversity, and social change. We showed that the CG were also catalysts for change, encouraging dynamic links between Commonwealth members, using sports rivalry to increase unity and visibility, and consequently bolstering the profile and reputation of the Commonwealth. Just like the connections between sports and Empire, the Games are “complex and multifaceted events” (Dawson 7), not solely about sport and performance. Likewise, the Commonwealth Games should not be analysed solely through a British prism. Although the Ipsos MORI polls mentioned here were of a certain interest since the Games were strategically held in post-Brexit England, Britain alone doesn’t call the shots at the Commonwealth Games Federation. An analysis of representations within other Commonwealth nations and territories would be highly pertinent. The 2026 games were to be held in Victoria, Australia, henceforth promising reflection on the promotion of social change, but also on the recognition of Indigenous Australians. However, Victoria has now withdrawn as host for 2026, and the province of Alberta in Canada also withdrew its bid for 2030, citing projected cost overruns. Questions about the benefits and the relevance of the Games today are raised on a regular basis. It comes as no surprise that Indian online news website *Firstpost* asked whether the sun should finally set on the Games (“Why the future of the Commonwealth Games is in peril”). Yet, although leading athletes are often absent from the CG and TV profits are little compared to those of the Olympics, future Games will probably remain noteworthy for various reasons including the fact that mega events can produce positive emotions, a sense of excitement, and have the power to galvanise public opinion. Nevertheless, the withdrawals of Victoria and Alberta shed light on the skyrocketing costs of the competition and seem to suggest that the global image of the Games is on the wane.

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