



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1233](#)

Main Petitioner: Craig Brown

Subject: Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider what impact the creation of a Great Britain football team at the Olympics or other sporting event would have on the promotion and support it and other public bodies such as sportscotland provide for football as a means of encouraging healthy lifestyle as well as generating economic and social benefits.

The structure of world football

The worldwide governing body of football is the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). All national associations are members of FIFA as long as they adhere to its rules of association. However, its Executive Committee is made up of representatives of a number of regional confederations, including the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), which has more representatives on the Committee than any other Confederation, and of which the four British Associations are members. However, the four British associations also have a representative on the FIFA Executive Committee, which stems from its special Member status as founder members of FIFA.¹

It is this special status which is one of the key issues in the debate concerning a Great Britain (GB) football team for the Olympics in 2012.

Previous GB teams

There have been GB football teams in the past.² Indeed the GB men's team won gold medals in the 1908 and 1912 Games. However, these teams were amateur. It is possible that the increasing professionalisation of the game, together with the creation of the football World Cup in 1929 (first held in 1930 and quickly becoming the premier tournament for the sport), and the fact there were four British associations all submitting teams to FIFA and UEFA tournaments, made the idea of entering an amateur GB side increasingly complex. There has been no GB team entered for even the preliminary stages of the Olympics since the 1960s, and the last game involving a UK or GB football team took place in 1972. The current rules were drawn up by the IOC and FIFA in 1992, and stipulate that each team must be made up of

¹ See FIFA Statutes, p 24-25:

http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/federation/fifa_statutes_0719_en_14479.pdf

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_national_football_team

players under the age of 23, with only three places for players over that age allowed per squad.

The arguments for and against the creation of a GB Team

Whilst there have always been some calls to reinstate a GB football team for the Olympics, with London being awarded the 2012 Games such requests have become more numerous and vocal, particularly amongst the organisers of the Games and politicians, including the Prime Minister. The basic point made by those in favour of a GB team is that, as the Olympic Games is the largest sporting event in the world, it might appear strange if the host country did not enter a football team in the Games, particularly as football is our national sport. In addition, having such a team would help to promote the Games even more across the country.³

However, as discussed above, one of the key areas of debate centres on the status of the four British associations within FIFA. The fear is that, if a GB men's football team is formed to compete in the Olympics, this could lead to a situation which would undermine this status. This concern is based on previous attempts⁴ by confederations outside Europe to end or limit the privileges of the British associations, one of which is to compete separately in international football tournaments. Another is that the four British associations have their own representative on the FIFA Executive Committee, on which UEFA already has more representatives than any other Confederation. Arguably, as well as giving Britain more influence in world football, it also gives Europe a bigger say in decision making. Secondly, having four separate British teams helps to maintain the higher number of European teams in the World Cup finals, compared to other Confederations.

Until now the special historical status of the British associations, and the fact that they do not come together to play in a professional GB team, appears to have ensured the status quo. The concern is that if a UK or GB team is formed this would give weight to the argument that the UK should only have one team participating in FIFA competitions, and that, as a result, Scotland and the other home nations would lose their national teams and possibly their separate membership of UEFA and FIFA. Whilst the Scottish Football Association (SFA) has offered the strongest opposition to the proposal for these reasons, it is known that the associations in Wales and Northern Ireland share these concerns. Other arguments the SFA have put forward, include that the Olympics is not the pinnacle tournament for football, which it is for other sports, and that football is the only sport in the Olympics that discriminates by age.^{5 6}

FIFA President Sepp Blatter has recently said that he would guarantee the special status of the British Association if a team were created for the 2012

³ Examples of the arguments for are contained in the following news article:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympics/football/7529807.stm>

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/internationals/7586869.stm>

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/internationals/7849888.stm>

⁶ <http://www.scottishfa.co.uk/news.cfm?newsid=4029&pageid=155&back=1>

Olympics⁷. However, the SFA has argued that no-one can make such a guarantee as it would not be binding on any future FIFA administration. In addition, both David Taylor⁸ (Chief Executive) and most recently Michelle Platini⁹ (President) of UEFA have both stated that the special status of the four British Associations could be under threat if such a move took place. It has also been pointed out that for a GB team to progress, FIFA rules state that all four of the British associations must agree¹⁰.

Scottish Government Action

The petition calls for wide ranging research to be carried out to ascertain the impact a GB team could have on the economic and social benefits football brings to Scotland. Both the Scottish Government and sportscotland have advised that they are not aware of any such research having ever been carried out, or any research that considers the impact of the Scottish national team on the economy and well being of Scotland.

Scottish Parliament Action

The issues raised in the petition have not previously been discussed or debated in the Scottish Parliament.

Jude Payne
Senior Research Specialist
6 February 2009

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⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/olympic_games/7785935.stm

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/internationals/7586869.stm>

⁹ <http://sport.scotsman.com/sport/Platini-joins-opposition-to-Team.4910979.jp>

¹⁰ <http://sport.scotsman.com/sport/Platini-joins-opposition-to-Team.4910979.jp>