

# THE CONVERSATION

## Scotland Decides '14: could the Commonwealth Games swing it for either side?

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England flag bearer Nick Matthew demonstrating how you keep politics out of the games. Andrew Milligan/PA

You may have thought that politics-as-usual was only put on ice during war time. But, no; politicians on both sides of Scotland's divide have been promising in recent days that they won't sully Glasgow's Commonwealth Games with the battle over September's independence referendum.

As the glow fades from the opening ceremony and the first events get underway, we asked our panel whether this was credible or even feasible, and in what ways the games could

affect the coming vote.

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### **Neil Blain, Professor of Communications, University of Stirling**

A large part of the decision that people make in September has to do with whether Scotland has the ability to run its own affairs. A potential effect of the games on the don't-knows is that if there's a general sense that the event has been successful, and that Glasgow might even have helped preserve the games' future – which is very much in doubt – it might to some extent offset the “Project Fear” negative economic warnings about independence.

One of the things you noticed in the run-up to the opening ceremony was the visibility of Glasgow on national television. You're getting reports that are not just about deep-fried Mars Bars for once. We have also heard a lot from Westminster about the viability of the regions outside London economically. They're talking about Glasgow making satellites, being a player in life sciences, things like that. This is already a different message to what people in Scotland have been used to hearing.

The fact that this is happening in Glasgow is significant because it is where the Scottish parliament is not; it is where a large proportion of the Labour vote is, many of whom are no and don't-know voters. Normally they just hear about the percentage of people on benefits or not working, and all the problems and deprivation – and the preservation of the UK is somehow seen by many of them as the way to solve these things.

But we've already seen some of them moving over to the yes camp. If Glasgow comes out of these games with a sense of being a major European city that can do things well, it's an answer to a lot of the concerns. On the other hand, if it's judged not to have been staged successfully, that would reinforce the notion that we need a broader pair of shoulders behind us.

As to the question of keeping politics out of this event, the Olympics in London was very heavily politicised. Nobody ever suggested it shouldn't be. It was used by David Cameron until the very recent past as an emblem of the virtues of British unity and unionism. The Olympics were inseparable from the display of the Union Jack and the links between Scottish history and the rest of these islands. If that was anything to go by, the Commonwealth Games will be heavily politicised too. Bear in mind that sport is one of the biggest carriers of national identity that we have, if not the biggest.

Also remember that we are talking about a whole series of countries that as part of the games will be celebrating their independence. I can't think of another historical instance where a country can seriously discuss independence as a negative in front of so many countries for whom independence was in the end a great achievement.

I don't buy the analogy that we Scots were subjects of the empire, or victims of it. We were at the forefront. So you do have to be careful here. But you can't get away from the fact that you have got this substantial body of people that are presenting independence as a threat, yet you have these games going on that are partly by definition a celebration of independence from the British Empire. It's something we should all be reflecting on. How you stop the politics emerging from that, I don't know.

### **Karly Kehoe, senior lecturer in history, Glasgow Caledonian University**

It will be impossible for the politicians not to use the games as part of their campaigning. There are thousands of people descending on Glasgow and they are all going to be curious about what's going to happen in September.

Most sporting events are politicised. We just had the World Cup in Brazil, for instance, where there was plenty of focus on the struggles of Brazilians – the poverty, the environment and

so on. And it's particularly ironic for the politicians to say they won't use the games when the Commonwealth is symbolic of the former British Empire and the decision taken by its colonies to negotiate a different relationship with the centre in an attempt to define their own futures.

The games include those nations that were part of Britain's empire and represent a retention – in some form – of that relationship. So it's intrinsically political. And remember that you have 71 nations participating and Scotland is represented as one of them. Not as GB but as Scotland, along with England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Having said that, the politicians probably do have to be seen to be ruling out making political capital of the games because the focus needs to be on the athletes who have to be focused on and ready for their events. It would be inappropriate, unless someone volunteers their position, for the press to ask athletes for their opinion on the referendum. Their job, at this point, is getting themselves mentally prepared for the task at hand – which is competing.

But the reality is that Scotland is going through a process of referendum and the games are being hosted in Glasgow, so it would be strange if politics didn't come into it. In any case, it's very close to the vote now and both sides have to be doing all they can to ensure that they bring over to their side the undecided – which is still a significant number.

On the question of who will benefit from the event, if the games come off without a hitch, if everybody enjoys themselves and the athletes feel they had a successful competition, if Glasgow shines and stands out as a world-class host city then it will be a boost for the yes campaign.



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