

# Tory Olympians: Conservative Parliamentarians and the modern Olympic Games

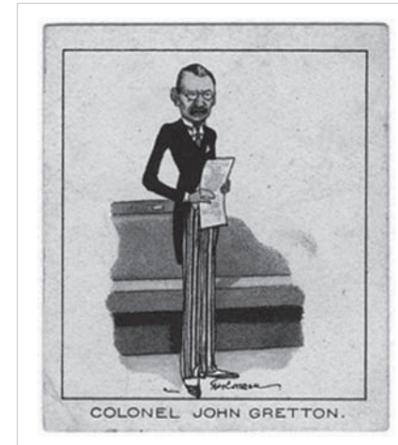
Stephen Parkinson

After the triumph of London 2012, the successes of two Olympic medallists-turned-Tory MPs are well known. **Seb Coe**, mastermind of the 2012 Games, won gold for the 1,500 metres and silver for the 800 metres at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow and repeated the feat four years later in Los Angeles; **Colin Moynihan**, Chairman of the British Olympic Association, won silver for rowing as the cox of the men's eights in Moscow 1980. Both sit on the Tory benches in the House of Lords, having previously been MPs: Moynihan in Lewisham East (1983–92) and Coe in Falmouth & Camborne (1992–7). But how many other Conservative politicians have represented Britain at the Olympics? Rather a lot, as it happens – including some who did so at the same time as they were in the House of Commons.

The UK's first Olympic champion was a politician, but neither a British nor Conservative one. The Irish Nationalist **John Pius Boland**, who sat for South Kerry from 1900 to 1918, won the country's first two medals at the inaugural Olympiad of the modern era, the 1896 Games in Athens. It seems to have been done on a whim: as an undergraduate at Oxford two years

earlier, Boland had heard a Greek student at Balliol, Konstantinos Manos, speaking at the Oxford Union about the modern revival of the Olympics, in which he was involved. The two became friends and Boland 'looked him up' a couple of years later after heading to Athens to see the Games.<sup>1</sup> Boland was only supposed to be a spectator, but – with help from Manos – entered the lawn tennis tournament 'on the spur of the moment', playing in leather-soled shoes with 'a tennis bat of sorts' he picked up at a local bazaar.<sup>2</sup> He won the men's singles and, after the partner of the German he had beaten in that tournament dropped out of the doubles with an injury, Boland stepped into his place and won that too.<sup>3</sup> Luckily for him, the Games 'were held about Easter, and it was possible to be back at Oxford in time for my last summer term'.<sup>4</sup>

At the next Olympic Games, held in Paris in 1900, two gold medals were won by a sitting Member of Parliament. **John Gretton** had been elected to sit for South Derbyshire in 1895. A noted yachtsman, his medals were won for sailing. His Olympic success did not help him to hold his seat in the 1906 landslide, but he returned to Parliament the following year as the MP for Rutland (later, when that



John Gretton, who won two gold medals while sitting as a Tory MP in 1900

constituency was abolished, switching to his native town of Burton). Back on land, Gretton was a 'gloomy, stubborn, and suspicious politician' and 'a sharp-eared gossip who often exasperated his party leaders'.<sup>5</sup> He hated the Lloyd George coalition, resigned the Tory whip in 1921–2 in protest at its Irish settlement, and joined Churchill in a last-ditch fight against the Government of India Bill in 1931–5. His contemporary Cuthbert Headlam found it 'odd that he has had so much influence in politics for he has no parliamentary ability – and is not even an average speaker'. He concluded: 'presumably he is a clever intriguer. I like him'.<sup>6</sup> Whatever his secret, Gretton's apparent lack of ability did not hold back the honours: he was created CBE in 1919, sworn of the privy council in 1926, and received a barony in 1944.

Another sitting MP to win an Olympic medal was Lord Wodehouse – later the 3rd Earl of Kimberley – who competed in the 1908 Games in London while sitting as the Liberal MP for Mid Norfolk. He won a silver medal for polo that year and, impressively, a gold one in the 1920 Games twelve years later (but had lost his seat in Parliament by then).

The first London Games saw quite a crop of political competitors. **Philip Richardson**, Conservative MP for Chertsey 1922–31, won a silver medal in the team military rifle event. (He also competed in the 1912 Games but could not repeat his success.) Another member of the 1908 shooting team placed fourth in the 1,000 yard competition:

**Richard Barnett**, a former Irish rifle champion and later Conservative MP for St. Pancras South West (1918–29). Two more medals – a gold and a bronze – were won by **John Jacob Astor** in the men's rackets. He was elected MP for Dover in 1922, the year he bought *The Times*, and sat until 1945, later entering the Lords as Lord Astor of Hever.

Politicians showed their support for the London Games of 1908 in surprising ways. Using public money to pay for the first British Olympics was out of the question, as Lord Desborough, chairman of the organising committee (and a former Conservative MP for Wycombe, 1900–5) made clear:

*It is a well-known and generally accepted maxim of English life that undertakings such as these should be carried out by private enterprise, and without help of any sort from the government.*<sup>7</sup>

Private individuals, rather than taxpayers, therefore paid for the 1908 Games. This included Members of Parliament, thirty of whom made personal contributions of £30 each – around £2,500 in modern money.<sup>8</sup>



Robert Bourne, 'A Good Stroke' (Vanity Fair, 29 March 1911)

A team from New College, Oxford won the silver medal for Great Britain rowing at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm (they were beaten to gold by another British team comprising seven men from Magdalen College and one from Trinity Hall, Cambridge). Among the New College eight was William Fison, the son of a former Tory MP for Doncaster. Their strokeman was **Robert Bourne** – who, despite having lost the sight of one eye in a game of rounders as a child, enjoyed a glorious rowing career. He stroked the winning Oxford crews in the Boat Races of 1909, '10, '11 and '12 and was a member of the winning crew in the Stewards' Challenge Cup at Henley in 1912, '13 and '14. This impressive run came to an end when he had his hand crippled and a lung seriously injured in the Dardanelles in August 1915. After a career at the bar, he was elected as the Conservative MP for the city of Oxford in 1924. He became a Deputy Speaker of the Commons in 1931 and his wife, Lady Hester, was a very active Party organiser, becoming president of the National Society of Conservative and Unionist Women Organisers. Bourne's sudden death at the age of 50 – while moor-walking in Scotland – triggered the infamous Oxford by-election of 1938, held in the wake of the Munich Agreement.

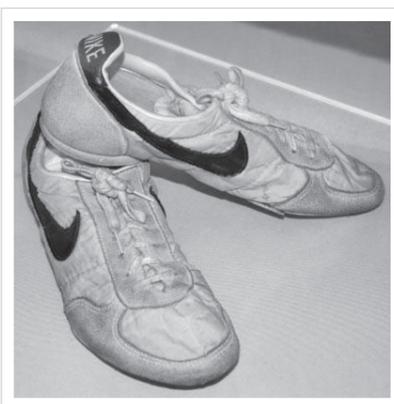
Seb Coe had a strong forerunner in David Cecil, the 6th Marquess of Exeter – but known for most of his life as **Lord Burghley**. Like Lord Coe, Burghley was a runner, a Conservative MP and oversaw the preparations for a London Olympiad. A 'striking blond-haired, aquiline-featured young patrician', he was selected at the age of nineteen for Britain's 1924 Olympic team, but hurdled poorly. In the years between then and the next Olympics he 'emerged as the world's pre-eminent hurdler', winning eight Amateur Athletic Association titles and three British Empire titles. He set English hurdling records for the 120 yards high and 220 yards low categories and, in 1927, briefly held the world record for the 440 yards.<sup>9</sup> By the 1928 Games in Amsterdam he was at his peak. Competing in the 400 metre hurdles, he deliberately ran for third place in the semi-final so that he was still fresh for the final. Despite drawing the disadvantageous outside lane, he won by a clear margin, setting a new Olympic record in the process.



Lord Glentoran's Gold Medal, 1964 (loaned to the Parliamentary Archives)



Lord Higgins's blazer badge from the 1952 Games (ibid.)



Lord Coe's running shoes (ibid.)

In the 1931 National landslide, Burghley won the Labour-held seat of Peterborough with a majority of over 12,000; he held the seat until he became Governor of Bermuda in 1943. Fast in speech as well as on the track, *Hansard's* stenographers had to let him make more than the usual, limited corrections to their accounts of his parliamentary contributions. But Lord Burghley's political career did not stop his athletic one: he travelled to Los Angeles for the 1932 Olympics, winning a silver medal in the 4 x 400m relay. He was the British Olympic captain in both 1932 and 1936, and – like Lord Coe – chairman of the organising committee for the London Games in 1948.<sup>10</sup> Burghley's task was rather tougher, though. While Lord Coe had seven years to prepare for the 2012 Games, Lord Burghley had just two to organise the first post-war Olympiad. He 'worked tirelessly in surmounting all the difficulties in an era of rationing, bomb damage, and national austerity' and the success of the 1948 Games – which turned a profit of more than £29,000 – 'was a credit to his zeal'.<sup>11</sup>

Burghley was successively chairman (1936–66) then president (1966–77) of the British Olympic Association, and a prominent member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It was in this last role that he found himself in conflict with the Thatcher government over the question of whether British athletes should boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics. President Carter had announced that the USA were pulling out from the Games in protest at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Mrs. Thatcher applied considerable pressure for Britain to follow suit. She sent four letters to the British Olympic Association (BOA) making the Government's view clear:

*The Games will serve the propaganda needs of the Soviet Government ... I remain firmly convinced that it is neither in our national interest nor in the wider Western interest for Britain to take part in Games in Moscow.*<sup>12</sup>

The row rumbled on for months, becoming increasingly bitter, but Lord Burghley remained resolute, backed

up by his fellow IOC members Lords Killanin and Luke. He also had the firm support of athletes like Seb Coe – already a rising star in the Conservative Party – who came under considerable pressure too. Coe's father (and manager) was summoned to a secret meeting with Douglas Hurd, then a junior Foreign Office minister, to urge his son to join the boycott. Lord Coe remembers it 'very clearly':

*In the nicest possible way they were essentially saying to my father, 'Can you not keep your troublesome son quiet?'*<sup>13</sup>

For Coe, the 'clinging moment which hardened my resolve to go' was hearing Sir Denis Follows, the BOA chairman and 'a classic northern Tory' being described in the House of Commons 'as basically a dangerous communist'.<sup>14</sup> Colin Moynihan was also called in to see Hurd at the Foreign Office, and recalls being told 'in no uncertain terms what the Government felt about us'. He even received letters telling him his parliamentary career was over before it had begun.<sup>15</sup> But neither man seems to have been held back by their clash with Mrs. Thatcher: she appointed Coe to be vice-chairman of the Sports Council and made Moynihan Sports Minister seven years later (giving him permission to attend the 1984 Olympics after he had become an MP). Sixty-one teams pulled out of the Moscow Games, but Great Britain took part; Coe's and Moynihan's were among the 21 medals the British team brought back.<sup>16</sup>

Lord Burghley died in 1981, a year after the Moscow Olympics – and seven months after the appearance of *Chariots of Fire*. The character of Lord Andrew Lindsay, played by Nigel Havers,<sup>17</sup> was based in part on Burghley – but he reportedly refused to see the film, which inaccurately transferred his triumph in the 'Great Court Run' to Harold Abrahams. Lord Burghley was the first of only two people who have completed the challenge – to run around the Great Court of Trinity College, Cambridge before the chapel clock strikes twelve. His achievement was unmatched for eighty years. Seb Coe attempted during a charity race in 1988, but was beaten by the clock, which had been wound

the day before. It was not until 2007 that Burghley's feat was equalled: Sam Dobin, the Trinity undergraduate who did it, is now a Conservative councillor in Hertsmere.

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A number of Conservative MPs have come close to Olympic glory. **Reginald Bennett**, an international yachtsman and Conservative MP, was a reserve at the 1936 Olympics. Suitably, he represented the nautical towns of Gosport and Fareham in Parliament (1950–79). **Terence Higgins** (MP for Worthing, 1964–97 and now Lord Higgins) was a member of the British Olympic Team in 1948 and 1952 – but it was in the 1950 Commonwealth Games that he won his silver medal.<sup>18</sup> **Sir Christopher Chataway** (MP, Lewisham North, 1959–66; Chichester, 1969–74) also competed in two Olympiads – 1952 and '56 – but again, it was in the Commonwealth Games (of 1954) that he won gold for the 3 mile race. He was a

close friend of Roger Bannister, and was one of the pacemakers when Bannister ran the first four-minute mile. But when Chataway entered Parliament, he did not wish to be pigeon-holed, and turned down Ted Heath's offer to make him Sports Minister.<sup>19</sup>

Conservative sportsmen have been represented at the Winter Olympics too: Robin Dixon – now **Lord Glentoran** – was granted leave from the Army to participate in the 1964 Winter Olympics at Innsbruck, where he won gold for the two-man bobsleigh. He had been introduced to the sport by Lord Lucan (a distant cousin) after a chance breakfast encounter in St. Moritz with the moustachioed and mysterious earl: 'He asked me if I'd ever thought of going bobsleighbing, which I hadn't. Never even seen it. So he said "Why don't you come up to the run this afternoon to the run and see what you think?" So I went up to the run and I found myself on a sled going down it.'<sup>20</sup> Lord Glentoran was later president of the jury at the 1976 Winter Games.

All in all, then, eight Conservative MPs or peers have won Olympic medals. Just one Labour MP – Philip Noel-Baker – achieved the same (silver in the 1,500 metres at the 1920 Games in Antwerp).<sup>21</sup> But this impressive tally of Tory Olympians has not enthused all of their parliamentary colleagues. When Margaret Thatcher appointed Colin Moynihan as her Sports Minister in 1987, she revealed that she was one politician immune to the attractions of sport:

*As he left No. 10, she told him: 'For some extraordinary reason, the press are fascinated by sport. It's likely your appointment will lead on the Six O'clock News. Please keep it quiet until then.'*<sup>22</sup>

■ **Stephen Parkinson** covered the *Culture, Media and Sport* brief during his time in the Conservative Research Department, 2004–6.

- John Boland, *Irishman's Day: a day in the life of an Irish M.P.* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1944), p. 32.
- G. Martin Murphy, 'Boland, John Pius (1870–1958)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
- Although he came first, Boland won a silver medal and an olive wreath; gold medals were not awarded to victors until the 1904 Games. When the Olympic organisers hoisted the Union flag for him, Boland objected that there should be an Irish flag – a golden harp on a green background – but it was too late to procure one (*Irish Examiner*, 31 July 2012).
- Boland, *op cit.*, p. 32.
- Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Gretton, John, first Baron Gretton (1867–1947)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, 2004). Curiously, Davenport-Hines neglects to mention Gretton's Olympic achievement.
- Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Baldwin and MacDonald: The Headlam Diaries, 1924–1935* (London: The Historians' Press, 1992), p. 297.
- David Runciman, 'London's Olympics: Political Games', *History Today*, vol. 62, issue 6 (June 2012).
- ibid.* Currency calculation based on retail price index ([www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com)).
- Norris McWhirter, 'Cecil, David George Brownlow, sixth marquess of Exeter (1905–1981)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
- The organising committees for all three London Olympiads have therefore been overseen by Conservative peers who were also MPs.
- Janie Hampton, *The Austerity Olympics: When the Games Came to London in 1948* (London: Aurum Press Ltd., 2008), p. 8; McWhirter, *op. cit.* The Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, attended the opening ceremony at Wembley Stadium but then retreated to play golf in Ireland during the rest of the Games, staying at his remote coastal lodge without even a telephone (Kevin Jeffreys, 'Prime Ministers and the Olympic Games', Number 10 website (July 2012); <http://www.number10.gov.uk/history-and-tour/prime-ministers-and-the-olympic-games>).
- The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher MP to Sir Denis Follows, 20 May 1980 (House of Commons Library); <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104366>.
- The Guardian*, 26 February 2006.
- ibid.*
- BBC Parliament, *First Past the Post: Olympians in politics* (first broadcast 25 July 2012).
- Because of the dispute over the boycott, British winners received their medals under the Olympic banner rather than the Union flag, and to the music of the Olympic anthem rather than 'God Save The Queen'.
- Havers's father was the Attorney-General and Conservative MP for Wimbledon at the time.
- Higgins was another Olympian who remonstrated with Mrs. Thatcher over the proposed boycott of the Moscow Games. He argued that athletes shouldn't have to sacrifice a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity but 'she couldn't understand this. I had several discussions with her and this wasn't a point which seemed to have occurred to her' (BBC Parliament, *First Past the Post*, 25 July 2012).
- BBC Parliament, *First Past the Post* (first broadcast 25 July 2012).
- ibid.*
- Philip Noel-Baker (1889–1982). Labour MP for Coventry (1929–31); Derby (1936–50); Derby South (1950–70). President of the Cambridge Union (Easter 1912). Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (1959).
- Mihir Bose, 'And gold goes to the sponsors', *The World Today* (June & July 2012) (London: Chatham House, 2012), p. 6.