

# The problem with Harriet Harman's proposed gambling tax

Labour think the levy can be used to fund elite sports development as well as grass-roots sports. So, they must be hoping for a lot of gambling in order to generate the sums needed.

By [Martin Cloake](#)

Labour's latest big idea to sort out sport is a betting levy. The shadow culture secretary, Harriet Harman, and shadow sports minister, Clive Efford, are very keen to promote the idea, the centrepiece of an ambitious "sport for all" approach unveiled in one of the policy documents we're sure to see more of in the run-up to the general election.

It has a handy moral element, something Labour is still strangely keen on despite the damage done to the moral approach by that arch moraliser Tony Blair. "We believe it is right," said Efford, "that businesses that make money from sport should contribute to sport". It's the kind of "we're against sin" statement that's recognisable to anyone familiar with the grandstanding approach encouraged by political conferences; a nice general concept without much

attention to specifics. And one that falls apart under serious examination.

No doubt Labour would say a tremendous amount of wonk-power has gone into working the policy out and I do hesitate to bash the idea when at least it leans in a more progressive direction than the awful coalition – although that sets a pretty low base. But I can't get away from the fact the idea is fundamentally flawed. What's more, it avoids the real issues.

Harman flagged up the gambling levy as something that can help fund community facilities and treat gambling addiction. So, in order to stop people gambling so much, we need people to gamble enough to fund programmes that stop them gambling too much.

Both Harman and Efford reckon a betting levy could be used to stop people gambling so much and to fund community facilities. Which immediately sets up a problem. Because if a situation is established in which community sports facilities increasingly rely on funds generated by a betting levy, reducing the amount of money spent on gambling will eventually reduce the amount of money spent on community sports facilities.

The trouble with basing political policy on such an unscientific and subjective concept as morals is that the intellectual basis of the argument tends not to stack up. Which is the case in this instance. Do we want people to

gamble, or not? And how do we decide what is enough gambling and what is too much? How do we compare the burden borne by the individual with the benefit to society?

Harman and Efford also reckon the betting levy can be used to fund elite sports development as well as grass-roots sports. So, they must be hoping for a lot of gambling in order to generate the sums needed. Perhaps they will divert some of the funds from the programmes used to stop people from gambling too much in order to stop those programmes being so successful that they reduce the amount of money generated through gambling to fund elite sport, community sport and any other part of sport that gets tossed in.

Making the interests of sport and the interests of gambling pretty similar, if not the same, is – frankly – bonkers. That doesn't mean I take a puritanical attitude to betting. I'm partial to a cheeky flutter from time to time, and I enjoy my annual, and usually successful, efforts to stay ahead of the game during my annual jolly boys outing to The Oaks at Epsom, one the finest days out sport offers.

But that doesn't mean I am not uncomfortable with the sheer volume of betting noise that surrounds sport. Betting companies advertise at what seems every opportunity, with one company selling gambling as a lifestyle choice for wannabe chaps, and another turning dear old Ray Winstone from national treasure to a figure you would never tire of punching. Although maybe I should change that to "never

tire of seeing someone else punching" in case he's reading this.

The point is you don't have to be a puritan to worry about how all-pervasive gambling is becoming. As gambling around sport grows, so does the risk of fixing, or at least the perception of a heightened risk of fixing. I've said many times before that sport is a successful commercial proposition because people believe in the fundamental honesty of the competition. If sport is not seen as honest, it's not seen as sport. That's why, for example, America's National Football League forbids adverts for Vegas during NFL games. It recognises that a responsible sport governing body needs to do more than look for a tick in the box after the question "Are you going to give us money?" when choosing who it works with.

Labour's plans have been denounced as "a gimmick" by the Conservatives, because they will lead to "higher ticket prices for ordinary people" – a phenomenon the Tories have previously shown absolutely no interest in countering. The criticism is a typically boneheaded response from a party that denies the role a state should play, and comes as no surprise.

The trouble is, Labour's pushing of the policy also reveals the poverty of its ambition, the extent of its surrender to the kind of forces it was brought into existence to counter. It claims to be serious about wanting betting companies to contribute to society, yet it has yet to show any serious

commitment to tackling the industry's move offshore, because this means it would have to seriously address larger issues of tax avoidance that risk it being accused of being 'anti-business'.

Labour bangs on about "strong government leadership" to increase participation in sport, to restore playing fields, to increase the amount of time dedicated to sport in schools, to cure obesity and possibly even secure world peace, and yet it underlines its refusal to intervene in the precious market by basing all this on a gambling levy.

If, as Efford claims, the party wants to "empower the people who do most of the work in our local communities to have more influence over how we plan, organise and deliver sport and physical education at local level" it needs to return real powers to local level, and back them with the strong central power of the state to ensure a genuinely national approach that has the greatest effect and utilises economies of scale most efficiently.

It needs to legislate to ensure sporting bodies behave like sporting bodies, and not simply as commercial enterprises. And it needs to stop scuttling back into the shadows every time someone says this means it's anti-business.

A truly ambitious, genuinely radical but well-grounded policy would, above all, recognise that sport plays an important part in society for reasons of public health, community engagement and, hell, sheer damn pleasure,

and that therefore government should properly fund sport, not dream up schemes to slice a bit here and a bit there from the commercial enterprises to which it has ceded control of policy. And, having established that government has both a role and a responsibility to fund sport, it would then be able to argue that sport has a responsibility, in turn, to obey a set of common standards on governance that would solve many of the problems facing many of our sports today.

That is not a radical solution. It is an achievable ambition that would attract popular support.