

Smith wants further football funds

ON THE SPOT
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and that governments have to make priorities when it comes to spending. However, I cannot see an argument against investing in sport and fitness. Spending the money now will surely result in long-term savings when it comes to the National Health Service. The health of our nation and the success of our football teams are linked together. We cannot have success if we do not invest in fitness.

"We need to do more. We need to have a fundamental change in the way we approach health and fitness. We have to make sure that sport is an essential part of school life. We need to have proper facilities, open at appropriate times. All of this will make a difference to our sport and to our country. It is only by taking action and putting our money where our mouths are that we can make a difference."

This was strong stuff from Smith, a call to arms, although I doubt he said it with any great hope that it would draw the political response he wants. A couple of weeks ago I saw him at a press event at the new, £15.7 million regional football centre at Toryglen in Glasgow. It is an enormous, magnificent facility, so good that it was impossible to resist asking him "so, where are the other five?". Smith asks himself the same question. There were to be six indoor football centres around the country as part of the SFA Youth Action Plan announced in 2004. Scottish Labour politicians were all over that at the time, milking the credit for the government's £12.2m contribution to the project. And now? The full amount never materialised, land deals became a problem, building work stalled at the planning stage and – five years on – instead of six centres there is still only Toryglen.

We can talk until we are blue in the face about how well everything works in Holland or Sweden or Denmark. The comparisons are meaningless because the governments or lotteries in those countries commit resources for community sports facilities at a far, far greater level than has ever been the case in Scotland.

Last year, the Scottish Government launched a scheme called CashBack for Communities which redistributes money to sport which has been seized from the assets of convicted criminals. Every little helps and Smith has been



SFA chief executive Gordon Smith attends Hampden Park with First Minister Alex Salmond for the European Championship qualifier between Scotland and Ukraine.

Photograph: Jeff Holmes/SNS

effusive in his praise of that initiative, but on the other hand First Minister Alex Salmond and MSP Stuart McMillan have advocated Scotland international games being shown live on free-to-air television channels. The mind boggles.

That would drain £15m a year out of the SFA, money the governing body secured by selling the rights to Sky and spends on, among other things, employing dozens of youth football coaches around the country. Give away the television rights for free and countless coaching courses and sessions would be wiped out a stroke. Tub-thumping politicians don't want to know about that part, of course.

Across the whole of Europe only England, Germany, Holland, Ukraine, Norway and Finland have the "Six Star Status" bestowed by Uefa. In other words the SFA is doing more for football across the country than the French, Spanish or Italian football associations are doing for theirs. Can the same be said of the government?

Smith must try to remain diplomatic. Still, his plea for greater investment came out of a deep-rooted frustration that the SFA swims against a tide of political indifference. It isn't likely to get much better given that an estimated £13m of lottery funding which would have come into Scottish sport will be diverted instead towards the £9.3 billion cost of the London Olympics. Glasgow's Commonwealth Games will devour another £298m of public money. Let's face it, those five other Scottish football centres aren't ever going to see the light of day.

When nine British tennis players tumbled out of Wimbledon in the first round last week UK sports minister Gerry Sutcliffe's response was: "If the results don't come, reducing the money is something that has to be looked at."

Just watch for Sutcliffe trying to muscle in on the spotlight if Andy Murray wins the tournament next weekend. That, in a nutshell, is the political attitude Smith railed against yesterday.

Blatter's fraternising with human rights abusers continues

THE INSIDER

Fifa president bestowed medal on Moldova's Vladimir Voronin, the Communist leader who is suspected of vote-rigging and torture. **Andrew Jennings** reports

"I am a prisoner in my own country," Natalia tells me, on what I hope is a safe phone line. "They will not let me leave."

Sepp Blatter doesn't have that problem. Last month, with his imperial Fifa retinue, he descended on Moldova for a few hours to praise President Vladimir Voronin – ignoring international outrage at the rascal's dodgy vote-counting only three weeks earlier.

"I wish to congratulate you and your party's victory in the recent elections," insisted Blatter, handing over Fifa's Presidential medal to Voronin.

Natalia Morar and her generation – she's 25 – didn't see it that way. When Voronin announced his Communist Party's overwhelming victory on April

6 in their small nation, sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, the opposition parties shouted "Fraud!" and she and her friends cranked up their Twittering.

Within hours an astonishing 20,000 protestors were outside the country's parliament building in the capital, Chisinau. When Voronin's riot police had completed their work, hundreds had been arrested and three young men had allegedly been tortured to death in the cells.

Natalia is a distinguished journalist but, being under house arrest, missed the chance to confront Blatter. What did she think about the Fifa president's visit? "I was surprised," she told me. "Everybody was shocked. We want to

know why he came here. Why did he give this honour to our president? Other countries condemn what he is doing to our people."

Curiously, Blatter's press release didn't mention giving a Fifa medal to Voronin. He couldn't fail to know about Moldova's dreadful human rights record – it has been slammed by every reputable international body. Reporters without Frontiers ranks Moldova's press freedoms 98th among 173 nations.

Natalia told me this week that she may be put on trial and face up to 15 years in jail for "inciting mass disorder".

I met her in Norway last year at a journalism conference. She told me about being deported from Russia the previous year for investigating Putin's secret police using illegal funds to rig elections. Back home in Moldova she found the press were forbidden to reveal President Voronin's personal fortune. And now they've taken away her passport to keep her out of the international spotlight.

Blatter arrived in Moldova from Kazakhstan where he was equally



Why did he honour our president? Other countries condemn what he is doing

flattering towards former Communist boss Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has remained in power since 1991 by making life hard for opposition parties. Critical opponents can die young. Blatter praised him for his fight against corruption. Kazakhstan is rated 125th in the world press freedom ranking.

Five years ago Blatter led his entourage on a vote-gathering tour of Central Asia, taking in countries where people live in fear of poverty, organised crime, arbitrary arrest and torture. Blatter's team saw none of that, reporting, "every day is a celebration of tolerance".

Next month will bring back special memories for Blatter. His old friend Charles Taylor takes the stand on July 13 in The Hague when his trial for horrendous human rights abuses in Liberia continues. Ten years ago, when Taylor's appalling activities were well known, Blatter visited him to beg for votes and accepted Liberia's highest honour, The Humane Order of African Redemption. I have some photographs of the two pals on my website, www.transparencyinsport.org.