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## What future for sport under the coalition?

**The Sport and Recreation Alliance's first annual conference since a rebranding left the CCPR behind set out to address one of the most basic questions for sports administrators looking to government for assistance. With some big names lined up for the opening session, *The Leisure Review* took its place among the delegates and paid attention.**

The concept of the coalition government's big society creates problems for the sport, leisure and culture sector. While on one hand an understanding of and commitment to community engagement and voluntary service is intrinsic to all aspects of leisure provision in the UK, on the other the big society is widely seen as little more than an ineffective fig leaf for brutal cuts to public services. While such apparent contradictions may have beset the launch and repeated relaunch of the big society concept, they have served to make a strong and engaging theme for debate.

The Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA) put the coalition government and its impact on sport and recreation at the centre of its annual conference, its first under its new name but the 39th annual outing if one includes those under the CCPR banner. Stepping forward as host of the event, Eleanor Oldroyd, doyenne of BBC Sport after 20 years behind the microphone, first reminded the audience of the previous evening's formalities, which had seen Watford FC presented with the professional club of year award and the Deer Park Archers, a club based in Gloucestershire and described by their governing body as having the perfect club template, presented with the overall club of the year title. Her next task was to introduce the SRA chair, Brigid Simmons, who set the scene for the conference. Any new government creates uncertainty, Simmons suggested, and it is the mission of the SRA to establish where the sector stands in relation to government policy. She admitted that the reaction so far among those in the sport and recreation sector had been mixed but was pleased to be able to report that the SRA was working more closely than ever before with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. As an organisation the SRA is well placed to succeed in their aim to work on behalf of their member associations, she noted, adding by way of a slogan in the making, "Our mission is to promote you, protect you and provide for you."

The first keynote presentation brought Brian Moore, former solicitor, former professional rugby player and now journalist, to the stage to offer his thoughts on the issues facing the SRA's constituency and what the government might do to help. The key question for Moore was the relationship between big society and a big state; there will always be both so how they relate to each other is a major factor for sport. Having explained that government should understand that sport was special in that it could achieve so much good for so many people, regardless of their backgrounds, for so little investment, Moore wasted no time in laying into the political status quo. Michael Gove, he noted, has made a hash of school sport funding and but still expects schools to maintain their sporting endeavours. "Funding is now supposed to have gone into schools by osmosis," Moore said. "We all know that money will go elsewhere when pressure comes." Ministers have pointed to a schools Olympics: "It's a complete lie," said Moore.

He continued, calling for a solution to the problems of risk assessments. "It's easy to know what went wrong after the event," he said. "Most people are not qualified to do a risk assessment. There should be general assessments as templates for basic processes." This, he suggested, could be made to work if local authorities held the insurance policy rather than the sports clubs themselves and if government departments got behind it. Similarly, the tax regime should be simplified for sports clubs, freeing them from VAT, corporation tax and the heavy burden of the Treasury.

"The big society might add more independence," Moore said, "but clubs then run smack into the big state. I'm not going to believe any government is serious

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about sport until there's a department of sport with a seat in the cabinet." If the government really wants to help sport Moore proposed that the Treasury should be required to do a proper cost-benefit analysis of sport and nationally accepted numbers should be put on the intangibles. "Then someone should stand up to the Treasury." The problem with the big society, Moore suggested, is that it "needs someone with clout to make it happen".

While the audience pondered just how much clout the big society is going to need if the prime minister himself cannot make it happen, Steve Moore, director of the Big Society Network, took his place at the lectern. If Brian Moore's presentational approach is to brook no contradiction his namesake offered a contrast in style. "Sport does embody the big society," he said. "There is an element, therefore, of 'granny' and 'eggs' with me stepping on this stage." He then offered a political perspective of the big society, explaining the "unique set of circumstances of financial collapse" that put the big society at the centre of government policy. Written into the coalition agreement, the big society is seen by politicians as a policy to decentralise power. "It is focusing on new ways of people giving and engaging," he said. "We're looking for new organisations that can do that at a local level. We'll use technology but we don't want virtual communities."

Steve Moore then introduced Richard Raines, founder of Sport Inspired and the founder of Shoreditch Sharks rugby club. He offered the Shoreditch Sharks as example of how transformational sport can be, both for individuals and communities. "It left me in no doubt of the benefits of community sport," he said. This experience inspired the concept of the Sport Inspired games, a community-based multi-sport event that was first held in Hackney in 2007. The next year saw a big expansion and June 2011 will see 11 community games in London and Edinburgh, which will lead to national community games day in 2012.

To bring a wider perspective to the big society debate, Moores Steve and Brian were joined on the stage by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, celebrated Paralympian and active peer, and Dr William Bird, a GP and also chief executive of Intelligent Health, an organisation that promotes the health benefits of physical activity. Grey-Thompson explained that her work in the House of Lords had demonstrated to her that sport does not enjoy any great profile in the political process. Recognising the contribution that sport could make, she suggested, would increase the chances of the big society policy actually working.

"We hear a lot about saving money but we should be thinking about investment," she said. "I'm worried that we haven't thought enough about the legacy of the Olympics and Paralympics. Allowing disabled children to do PE in school would be a great legacy but we seem to be missing a trick." She noted that receiving the 23rd draft of a strategy document "that I could have written in 20 minutes" did not inspire her with enormous expectations.

Eleanor Oldroyd invited questions from the floor, which came with little prompting. The development of skills across the sports sector, a contradictory view of the risk assessment process ("Most people are qualified to write a risk assessment") and the avoidance of duplication in policy development were top of a long list. While Brian Moore argued the issues of risk assessment from the perspective of his legal experience, suggestions from the floor included "a government department for common sense" and a focus on recreation rather than just sport in the SRA's efforts to shape the big society. With the session drawing to a close, Steve Moore offered a word of hope for those looking to use the big society initiative to benefit sport. "My advice is that there are new ways of reaching out beyond our communities," he said. "Business and philanthropists do want to give their time. The goodwill is there."

With this the session was brought to a close and delegates made their way via a cup of coffee to the various break-out sessions to explore the implications of the coalition government on specific areas of the sport and recreation world. The afternoon promised further keynotes and more panel-based discussion for those with the ability to endure the journey deeper into the big society but for *The Leisure Review* this opening session had encapsulated the problems, the challenges and the contradictions of a main strand of government policy that has been launched and relaunched on numerous occasions and greeted with greater and greater scepticism each time it appears. The big society might still be on the SRA's agenda next year but only if it remains a part of government policy. Many will be watching with interest to see whether anyone has enough clout to save it.

***The Leisure Review, June 2011***

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