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Valediction: an industry expert's view of his demise

When *The Leisure Review* heard that one of the longer-standing elder statesmen of the sport, leisure and culture sector was parting company with CLOA*, one of the sector's longer-standing structures, we asked David Albutt, for it is he, to tell us like it is. Or was.

"Before you die," said my buddies at TLR, "can we have a few words of valediction?" I paused (a) to look up that last word; (b) while I considered how on earth their managing editor, Mick Owen (who used to be in sports development), knows such words; and (c) to wonder whether my earlier 'early retirement' in 2000 had confused the fin-de-career issue. Turns out its a farewell speech so it will indeed be published before I die (I certainly hope so) but as I do intend to carry on annoying the right people for a little while longer, it is only a demi-goodbye. I shall, therefore, focus these notes not on the sector but on CLOA, although I hope to stay on there too, albeit as a retired member and general all-round nuisance. But I won't be a 'policy officer' (never did find out what one of those is) or even the honorary secretary, as I was from 2001 to 2008 (John Bell is doing far too good a job of that for my comfort) so I suppose it is a fair time to be asked to reflect.

In some ways, my hon sec period (I think of it as 'blue' rather than 'cubist') was the more interesting; the best and the worst, of times because that is when all the thinking – if there was indeed any actual thought involved – about "one institute" occurred and when there was a question of what CLOA's role was to be in all of it. Didn't we just enjoy all that? My personal advice as a fellow of ILAM was not to waste time or money, just to get on and combine ISRM and ILAM and worry about any personality issues by getting the right people literally 'on board'.

But the key issue for me was that there could be no one institute for the whole sector. Did people not realise how big CLIP (for librarians – look it up) was and would they (the librarians) really join one or both of 'our' puny and warring organisations? The only option, as I saw it, was for ILAM to stop pretending to represent other sub-sectors and focus on sport and so join our baths mates. That will never happen, of course. But it did, although I still have reservations about the addition of that PA.

A major part of my time was spent advising CLOA colleagues that we were rather more widely scoped than this, portfolio-wise. I really will not miss the weird language we use. I felt it wiser to keep well away, even though there were some people who said that CLOA refusing to join in was a major problem. I am very glad that we (CLOA) did stay aloof; but not so pleased that we (ISRM and ILAM, in that order) spent some £600,000 of other people's money, plus most of the price of a rather decent mansion by the Thames, plus lots of time and much hot air, on getting one institute for sport.

The other key event for the sector around that time was probably the ridiculous attempt to host the 2012 Games in London. As if we could beat Paris... Oh. But surely this had to be Good Thing; and let's not undermine Seb's soft legacy promise, eh? Did we really believe Lord Coe when he made the promise? Remember, we thought we had lost to the French anyway so it was either akin to the Lib Dems promising what they would do in the impossible event that they ended up in government (university fees, anyone?) or a last desperate throw of the die.

And then there was the idiocy of "3 x sport" within "5 x activity" (and remember how soon it 'counted' to get someone already involved in sport a little bit more involved, rather than people not involved doing at least something?) where I was once again persuaded that I should follow the corporate line and keep my heretical views to myself. The only chance of increasing exercise, especially with harder to reach groups – not minorities such as women and girls – is through 'non-sport'. So how can a massive spend on elite sport help with that?

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For most of the people who will go to most of the events it would have been no more difficult, and in many cases easier, to go to Paris. We would have had the Games close enough and still have had a few tens of billions to get people more active; and if they were older people, younger people in disadvantaged areas and so on, then we might even have got a half-decent rate of social return; for which, in effect, our French mates would have been paying. A major physical activity promotion programme, with albeit a Gallic flavour, which might have had real outcomes: wouldn't that have been fine?

We will have a new East End of course so why are so many local people still objecting? But a soft legacy? We have about as good a chance of that as we have of increasing 'big society' volunteering while decimating the spend on culture and sport .

What else did I keep quiet on? Oh yes, realpolitik also informed Active People too. The argument for the expenditure on this friendless survey is that it is only a small percentage of Sport England's spend and should we not measure impact? But when we get the wrong answer... To be fair, at its onset the Active People survey was an important factor in getting sport into the latest best value regimes, which was undoubtedly vital, if only so we did not fall even farther behind. I can live with that one, even though there were options that would have been much better value for money. I particularly liked how suddenly the sample size could be halved and councils could pay for the full sample. How many did?

Which brings me to the best bits of the work I've been doing, which can be generalised as 'working with Martyn Allison'. Specifically, because of this work there are tools designed by and for the sector that can support excellence – and even a few people using them. But I'm not getting too pleased with myself just yet . Why is it that people will not employ their own tools, even when experience shows that people who do so thrive and in some cases win substantial funding from commissioners on the back of it?

Then there is the National Culture Forum (NCF), that had its time in the sun and may prove to be a phoenix (watch this space) by combining all the professional institutes across the sector. Now there is a model for one institute, association by federation. Through the NCF we were able to source some half a million smacklers around improving the sector; saw dozens of graduates from the excellent leadership programme; and created two 'bibles' on how culture and sport can contribute to the adult care, and the crime and anti-social behaviour agendas. Thanks to the existence of the NCF there have also been three major conferences, which brought together people from all the culture and sport sectors. All in all, pretty good stuff and more to come, I hope.

What else have I had on my policy officer work programme? Lots of input to strategy reviews and stuff, not least those of the non-departmental public bodies (NDPB). That is a key characteristic of CLOA, that our strategic partners bring us early to the table when issues arise. This included, after a fashion, the free swimming idea although there was a great deal of 'Tony says' on that one so there was always the danger of our "going through the motions". I helped to establish a set of advisory panels and working groups within CLOA to react to such things, and to be proactive, although somebody's law has determined that this system is only beginning to work well as I bow out. Ah well.

I think the fact that we increased CLOA membership year on year and seem to be keeping numbers up in recent, financially challenged years is a sign of something good. Of course, it is the work with all of the members that I will miss most – well, nearly all of them – and with others including our all-important sponsors and colleagues from across the sector.

As I have to disappoint Mick and do my best to survive for some time yet, I will hope to keep in touch at some level. I am creeping up quietly on 'proper' retirement but do intend to stay involved, even if it means I have to charge people a very competitive day rate. I shall still be doing that 'associate' thing, with Leisure-net particularly but also with people like Colliers.

In terms of the future for our sector I am prepared to accept that it might survive my apparently imminent demise. In fact, in the current landscape of adversity we have a unique opportunity, presumably the same unique opportunity I seem to remember we had in the early 70s as modern leisure centres were opening and, as I recall, every few years since on a regular basis. I am sure, though, that we do have a genuinely unique situation this time where CLOA could pretty much disappear. There are fewer and fewer 'proper' chief officers, so increasingly we are not at the strategic tables and, although there is a benefit for

me insofar as I will not have to use ludicrous jargon any more, this is a real threat. There is also bound to be a funding reaction post 2012, not least if all that dosh fails to deliver. I am confident it will but will that stay the austerity axe-man's hand?

The abiding sound track to what I like to call my career has been the incessant sound of leisure professionals moaning about how 'they' don't get it when the bottom line is that if they don't it is really all our fault, isn't it? Whoever you are, if you are not making time to work for the solution, then you are the problem.

Whatever, as the young folk say. You can't blame me any more; and you could never blame Sarah, whom I cannot thank enough.

***CLOA is the common acronym for what was the Chief Leisure Officers Association and is now the Chief Cultural & Leisure Officer's Association (their ampersand). Membership is open to "strategic leaders working directly in the public sector environment, and who hold direct cross-sector managerial responsibility for a range of culture and leisure services".**

David Albutt will cease to be CLOA's policy officer at the end of January 2012 but will continue in his role with Leisure-net Solutions as an associate consultant. The views expressed in this article are his and his alone although we did enjoy reading them.

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