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Framing the future: a consultation in Manchester

Invited to go and tell a politician what to think, Mick Owen was more than happy to give half a day to the future of sport on our readers' behalf.

With a number of peers of the realm being investigated for selling their voices to the highest bidder, or possibly just the first bidder, the nation has been reminded once again that the occupants of parliament are not necessarily the brightest, best or most honest. On being interviewed by their stingers, the lords who immediately leapt to what we have to hope are their dooms all seemed rather ordinary men, albeit with serious delusions of grandeur. They were certainly in stark contrast to the three grand dames who sat before the recent parliamentary education committee and put its members straight on the subject of school sport and legacy.

Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, Baroness Sue Campbell and Dame Tessa Jowell had their briefs covered, their sound bites sorted out and their razor-sharp minds focused. Why anyone would convene a committee and use up any number of mornings "hearing evidence" when women like this are available with the solutions at their finger tips is moot and some sense of that frustration did leak from the body language of all three as their questioners exposed their own lack of preparation, perception or basic understanding.

All of which rather brings into question the rationale behind Clive Efford MP's recent national tour. Efford is the shadow minister for sport, which sounds grand enough but he was handing out delegate packs at the National Cycling Centre when his tour came to Manchester and, although British Cycling had gifted him the room, their investment in his gratitude should he come to power did not extend to tea, coffee or those nice biscuits they do if they are trying to woo you.

The invitation to the velodrome was to discuss "school and community sport" with a view to influencing the Labour Party's draft "framework for sport and physical recreational activity" and although the entire two hours spoke almost exclusively of sport, Efford did preface his presentation by establishing that when he said 'sport' he meant "everything from sport to physical activity and recreation". He also said he was there to listen and, perhaps significantly, that he was surprised to see so many people in the room. Perhaps it was the nice weather or just the fact that sport is quite important to people in the north west but some 50 professionals had gathered to listen and later to speak.

Efford is not a charismatic orator and, given that this was the sixth of what will be nine such consultations, he might have been expected to be more polished in his delivery but somehow the implication that he was thinking through what he was saying did offer reassurance that the conversation would actually inform the outcome. The plan is, he explained, to follow the roadshows with a web-based consultation exercise using the questions he hoped to use as pegs to hang that afternoon's conversations on. Too many consultations are empty exercises in which the conclusions have been reached before the questions are framed and when Efford had run through his presentation and explained the rationale behind his own ten questions there was a degree of confidence that should you have a point of view it would be

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heard. Whether it will be listened to is another matter and whether it makes it into the eventual framework another again.

Efford's presentation spoke of changing culture to get more people active, engaging communities, the situation in schools, engaging women, engaging the disabled and using resources better. The questions he asks are sensible, get to the crux of the problems but getting the right answers is the clever bit. This was where the audience were meant to come in.

Which they did. The word 'passion' has been degraded in meaning over the years but Gemma Stokes of the Chorley School Sport Partnership actually has it for her job and the people she works for. Following Adrian Leather from Lancashire Sport – the county sport partnership with which her partnership "partners" – she blew fresh air through the proceedings, arguing that there are "so many layers in the structure" that making the links is a full-time job. People on the ground, clubs and other community associations cannot find their way through the systems and, as Efford himself noted, double funding and double counting are not uncommon.

One of the key features of Efford's presentation was a simplified structure with "local sport networks" linking government, agencies and sponsorship with community deliverers. The conversation did get heated when it touched on the exact level at which that would best be set, with both CSP directors in the room having a say while Andy Howitt of Salford City Council argued against top-down imposition of solutions, asking that "local models be allowed" with "people knowing people locally" being the driver.

Although one or two contributors were a tad self-interested, most really seemed just to want to get it right with Phil Chamberlain of the Youth Sport Trust welcoming the fact that Efford was speaking about a ten-year strategy and Barbara Bell of Manchester Metropolitan University admitting to being "dismayed" that we were still running heavily funded "pilot projects" when we actually do know what works and need to get those practices mainstreamed and funded. While Bell was welcoming of Efford's initiative, Chamberlain did ask what "effort is being made now to create the political will" to implement the ideas that make it into the framework document, as without that will, "Are we not just wasting time?"

Given that Building on the 2012 Sporting Legacy is already in draft and that the likes of Sue Campbell know the answers already, whether an afternoon spent with the current shadow minister will have any effect when the dust of the next election settles is moot. But it was nice to be asked and if Clive Efford does make it through into a Miliband government it will be nice to pretend that we influenced his thinking.

Mick Owen is still managing editor of The Leisure Review.

The Leisure Review, June 2013

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