Sport for all – or all for sport?

It would be gratifying to assume that Britain had assured such a strong position for 'Sport for All' that it could now safely separate the serious business of sporting excellence from the diversion of general health promotion.

As the United Kingdom develops plans to reform the apparatus of its Sports Councils, still making sure that no government minister of sport shall actually answer for his portfolio in responsible detail, we find that the new arrangements are both a special plea for sports élitism and a cavalier abandonment of the ideals of public health promotion through the precepts of healthy, exercise-based lifestyle. Yet as we change we look abroad and find a growing strength in the international Sport for All movement. No doubt our xenophobic government thinks foreigners are out of step as usual. Does it matter?

Health and sport each need constant and critical review in a changing society. Firstly, we need to look again at sport. De Coubertin's Olympic idealism was always a valid guideline for the general enjoyment of games and sport in the best Corinthian tradition although social progress inevitably called for some modification of eligibility codes. Nobody could nowadays imagine the disqualification of artisans! But it is difficult to admire – or even feel sympathy for – the wholesale destruction of the concept of amateurism in sport's Gadarene rush for gold. Many might feel that the final prostitution of the Olympic movement has created a new brand of highly mobile athletic courtesan selling its wares in a new worldwide slave trade. That the Olympic movement is tainted by doping doubts, notably the great Los Angeles rigged results scandal, merely illustrates the moral compromises implicit in the easy virtues of the new regime. Add to this the perversely excessive influence of worldwide TV on sports details, including new stresses on performers, and we have seriously to ask whether elite sport has become irretrievably harmful to health. Unfortunately, history does not seem to record a society which has recovered from the professional gladiatorialization of its games and this herald sign of a disintegrating society may therefore already have us doomed.

A government hell-bent on crass materialism and the recreation of Dickensian poverty in the re-emerging underclasses may be embarrassed by examination of health policies featuring reductions in health opportunity such as prevention, eye tests and dental care in the name of cost effectiveness and competitive tendering. Pride in public provision is eroded by yuppy health gyms, expensive squash, golf and swimming (and private sports medicine) to ensure their safety from invasion by the common poor. How often has 'privatization' of public facilities ('selling off the family silver' H. Macmillan) led to cheaper exercise costs? And what about the inflated sport shoe costs which cosset our millionaire medallists? How are the underprivileged to enjoy sport? How are undernourished poor children to get fit as their teeth rot and vision remains uncorrected?

So, what about the 'health' aspects of 'sport' as we drop 'For All'? We are vouchsafed the hint that while the elite turn into their umbilicuses, the masses can find their salvation in the good offices of Local Authority provision. If we recall that the story of the last 15 years of British government has been a long and bitter struggle – which continues yet – between local government expenditure and central government control (from the government which offered you more freedom, choice and devolution from central controls!), then we can surmise that there is unlikely to be significant expansion of public exercise and health provision, however defined.

In other words, in a world of relentless public expenditure reduction, the government is caught in its own dogma. It can easily justify an even higher drive for gold medals, especially by tapping the high prestige-by-association market of sponsorship (a.k.a. 'begging'), whereby you, without choice, have to pay more to buy their medals-for-products for them. The Minister Without a Ministry then hands out public honours (the lowest MBE to the sweaty medallist, the knighthood to the perfumed company chairman) and takes the credit.

Meanwhile, who is responsible for Health? A Minister for Health already top of the opinion polls for insincerity for her erosion of a public health service? The visiting Martian might think health concerned only an obsession with AIDS prevention in a spiritually derelict society which had long abandoned love of its neighbours. It is actually *against* government policy to sponsor health as a last ditch matter of public policy, when surveys drive home the politically inconvenient message of poverty as a cause of ill-health? Does a government which brings you tobacco sponsorship of sport really care a damn as it watches 50 000 people a year die from tobacco as it gives the sponsors endless time to regroup their investments?

Devolve 'Sport for All' to local authorities? Baloney!

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