



The return of supporters to The Den for the Sky Bet Championship game against Derby last Saturday should have been a cause for celebration, but a section of Millwall fans booed as their players and Championship opponents took a knee in support of the fight against racial injustice at the start of their match.



# Sport must be involved in politics to create a fairer society

Dr Colm Hickey

Why do people enter politics? The answer surely is to make a positive difference to people's lives and while we can be cynical at the activities of some, few could rationally argue that all politicians are corrupt. They are just like you and me. They come from our communities. We elect them and if we do not like them can vote them out of office.

At all levels they impose regulations and make laws: from where you can park and how much it will cost, to deciding on applications for extensions to your house, to the opening hours of the local library and swimming pools, or the organisation of education, of health, of taxation or even, as in Brexit, the discussions around 'deal' or 'no deal'.

Indeed, as Covid-19 has shown politics affects when and where we can work, where we can eat, where we can drink, where we can pray,

and, yes, even where we can play. At times, this year you could go grouse shooting, but not play football, run by yourself but not with others, swim outdoors, but not indoors, not go to a gymnasium, play tennis or arguably, the most socially distanced sport of all, – golf.

If it was not you or I who came up with these impositions, then who was it? Politicians of course! The notion that sport should have nothing to do with politics is, if you think about it for a millisecond, ridiculous. There is a government Department for Culture Media and Sport. The government invests in and funds sports. It supports bids for World Cups, UEFA tournaments and Olympic games. It regulates Health and Safety at Grounds. It polices matches. It dictates when and where games can be played and at what times.

Governments are very keen to become involved in sport when it suits

them. Hosting receptions at Downing Street for successful teams and athletes is always considered good PR and there is the hope that some of the 'stardust' of the sports stars will be sprinkled onto the shoulders of ambitious politicians.

Ah, yes, but there is a sting in the tail. What if sports stars start doing things that 'rock the political boat'? What if they dare to express an opinion that might make political life more difficult for governments? The answer is simple. Punish them, ignore them, criticise them or patronise them. Let us look at some examples. Tommy Smith banned from the US Team after the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Mohammed Abdul Rauf suspended by the NBA and losing \$31,707 for refusing to stand for the national anthem and Colin Kaepernick's 'taking a knee' which saw him lose his job career.

To return to the 'stardust' element what could be more political than the Government awarding Marcus Rashford an MBE for his efforts in getting free school meal funding in holiday time a campaign that met some government resistance?

So, as politics is involved with all aspects of peoples' lives, because politicians want to build better societies in the words of the Government to 'Build back better', it is incumbent on it to do everything that it can to make society fairer and there is no greater manifestation of such a fundamental commitment than to promote equality and in doing so, attack racism in all its forms. Politicians cannot be spectators in the match against racism; they must be players.

This brings us to the Environment Secretary George Eustice. Asked for his reaction to the booing of Millwall fans to their own team 'taking a knee' before the match against

Derby County he first told Sky News: "Well, look, I didn't see that event." He continued: "The issue of race and racial discrimination is something that we all take very, very seriously." However, he then argued: "My personal view is that Black Lives Matter, capital B, L and M, is actually a political movement that is different to what most of us believe in which is standing up for racial equality. But look, each individual can take their own choices about how they reflect this, and I know a lot of people feel quite strongly about taking that approach." When played a clip of the booing, he said it was difficult to hear because he was appearing via a video link from a busy street. He concluded: "And if people choose to express their view in a particular way, that should always be respected."

Does this sit well with you? Arsene Wenger had a reputation for myopia when asked about any controversial incident involving fouls by his players always famously saying: "I didn't see it." Well nor did George Eustice who also could not hear the booing because he said it was noisy on the street. Perhaps that is true, yet to argue that the 'Black Lives Matter is a political movement that is different to what most of us believe in which is racial equality' is indicative of a lack of sensitivity or understanding. I do not know if he has read what the BLM movement aims are, but I have and wonder what he might disagree with:

'We stand together across the globe to change the world; we kneel together in peace and solidarity asserting black people are treated as equals to white people. It is a human right to receive racial equality, social and criminal justice



George Eustice, Environment Secretary.



Micah Richards (L) and Dion Dublin (R) have criticised the fans that booed the gesture.

in the societies we live and to receive parity as full citizens of the country and as a united nation. We are a non-political, non-partisan, non-violence platform'.

Former players such as Manchester City and England defender Micah Richards and Dion Dublin who played for Millwall were appalled by the booing. Dublin commented: "They don't agree with taking the knee, which means they are racist. They don't agree with Black Lives Matter; that says they are racist to me." While Richards asked: "How do these fans get allocated to the games? There are 2,000 so you can pinpoint the people going. There are no excuses. I am sick to death of talking about this situation. It is so disheartening because it is like we have come so far but we have so far to go. I do not even like talking about the matter. It feels like it falls on deaf ears. It is time and time and time again."

Richards and Dublin are right. The booing at Millwall was outrageous and for Eustice to suggest that it was acceptable is unforgivable. Everyone has a role to play in eradicating racism from society. Sport and politics cannot be separated because they are both expressions of human activity and are based on values. Indeed, they should not be separated rather integrated even more playing their role in building a better fairer society for the good of us all.