

Public Petitions Committee Official Report

9 September 2008

Billy Liddell (PE1172)

The Convener: I thank everyone in the public gallery for their patience. Petition PE1172, by Bill McCulloch, on behalf of the Billy Liddell memorial campaign, calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to consider what support and assistance can be provided to local authorities to erect lasting memorials to local sporting legends. I welcome Bill McCulloch and Mike Payne to the meeting. John Park MSP is here to speak in support of the petition.

The deputy convener, John Farquhar Munro, said that he is too young to remember Billy Liddell, but I am not convinced and wonder whether it is another highlander's tale. In the next three minutes, the witnesses have a chance to explain why they seek recognition of Billy Liddell and others who have contributed to Scottish sport over the years.

Councillor Bill McCulloch (Billy Liddell Memorial Campaign): I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to speak in support of our petition.

Watching the Olympics recently, I was struck by how many of our sportsmen and sportswomen talked about the people who inspired them to take up sport and to reach the pinnacle of winning gold medals in the Olympics. If we want our young people to get involved in sport—which we do—we need to provide the facilities and training to enable them to develop their skills. We also need to provide them with a belief that they can succeed wherever they come from, whether it is a big city, a town or a small village, such as Townhill near Dunfermline. One way of doing that is by recognising and honouring our local sporting heroes. In Scotland, we are not very good at that; many sporting heroes have not been recognised.

Sadly, Billy Liddell is one of those forgotten heroes. The son of a coalminer, he was born in Townhill in 1922. He signed for Liverpool Football Club just before the outbreak of the Second World War, for the princely sum of £3 a week. If we contrast that with the fortunes that are paid to today's footballing stars—if that is the right word—such as Wayne Rooney, we can tell that we live in a completely different world.

Billy Liddell was awarded 29 international caps for Scotland and he scored eight goals—we could probably do with somebody like him today.

The Convener: Certainly tomorrow night.

Councillor McCulloch: He was a good left wing, and he scored quite a few goals coming in from the left. He would undoubtedly have gained many more caps but for the second world war, in which he served as a bomber command pilot and pathfinder. He died in 2001. In 2004, he was the first player ever to be honoured by Liverpool

Football Club with a commemorative plaque at Anfield. Sadly, to date, there has been no recognition for his achievements in his home town, or indeed in Scotland.

I have provided the committee with background information about our campaign and about Billy Liddell, which I will not repeat. The wider aspect of the petition is that it is important that we recognise our sporting legends, not least because it provides our young people with role models that they can look up to and emulate. Billy Liddell fits that bill in terms of his footballing achievements and how he led his life on and off the field. As you said, convener, there are others who probably deserve recognition: in Fife there is John Thomson, a Celtic footballer who, sadly, was killed.

What do we want the Scottish Government to do? One possibility would be to establish a fund or national scheme to which local authorities and community groups can apply. However, the campaign is not just about funding projects; we realise that we will need to do a fair amount of fundraising—but we need local authorities to be encouraged to be more proactive, to put projects such as this on their agendas and to integrate them into their general thinking about sport.

We have had some good support from officials in Fife Council to help establish our group, but when it comes to getting things done this sort of project does not seem to fit into anyone's work plan. It is not really on the radar, so it is difficult to get people to take such a project forward. If the committee thinks that getting local authorities to recognise local sporting heroes past and present is a worthwhile objective, we would invite it to discuss with local authorities how that might best be done.

John Park (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): This is a grass-roots campaign that has been built up around Townhill and in Dunfermline. Billy Liddell is recognised most in Liverpool, mainly because of the number of years he spent there. It is important that he should be recognised in Dunfermline; that is why I have been happy to support the campaign. Bill McCulloch made an interesting point about how role models can be developed in all sports. If Billy Liddell were alive today, he would be a role model; he was a role model while he was playing football. I am more than happy to support the campaign, and anything the committee, the Scottish Parliament or the Scottish Government can do to assist it will be very welcome.

Mike Payne (Billy Liddell Memorial Campaign): I echo what Bill McCulloch and John Park have said. My focus is on Billy Liddell the person and the role model. Today, Billy Liddell would be an unusual football player: he did not smoke, he did not drink, he believed in God, he went to church and he turned up at prizegivings for young people. I try to get across to young people the message that being a football star is not about receiving £160,000 a week in wages, but about what people do when they are in that position.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Do you have links with the people in Hill of Beath who organised a memorial to Jim Baxter? There seem to be parallels between the two campaigns. There was a fund-raising process to pay for the statue that has been put up in Hill of Beath. Have you had discussions with people in the area about how they managed to establish that memorial?

Councillor McCulloch: I spoke to former Councillor Alex Sawyer about it. Billy Liddell's widow felt that a statue would not be appropriate for someone as modest as he was, so we decided to campaign for a cairn, with a plaque, in a community garden.

Claire Baker: I am interested to know whether you have had discussions with people in Hill of Beath about how the money for Jim Baxter's memorial was raised.

Councillor McCulloch: We have had more contact with the John Thomson campaign. Mike Payne knows a bit about that.

Mike Payne: The difficulty that we face is that whereas most Scottish sporting heroes lived and played their sport in Scotland, Billy Liddell spent his whole football career in Liverpool. Collections were taken at Ibrox for the Jim Baxter memorial, but the distance between Dunfermline and Liverpool makes it extremely difficult for us to do the same. We have spoken to people about it.

The Convener: My question is about the dialogue with folk that needs to take place. The nature of the memorial—whether it should be a statue or a cairn, or whether there should be a plaque recognising the player's birthplace—is probably a matter for private discussion, but there must also be discussions with the likes of VisitScotland. A number of folk from ordinary communities have made a contribution, not just in the sporting sphere.

We want to say to people that, no matter where they live in Scotland, there is someone who can inspire them. At one end of one road in Paul Martin's constituency was the Celtic and Scotland legend Jimmy McGrory, who was, by any standards, the greatest ever goal scorer in British football. At the other end, in Kennedy Street, was the guy who, playing, I think, for the New York Giants—I am not an expert on American baseball—hit what the Americans quaintly called the shot that rang around the world. It rang only around America, but you know what Americans are like. At each end of the street were folk who are really important in sporting history, but it is not recognised in that patch. Are you suggesting that there should be on-going efforts at local authority and VisitScotland level to do a bit of storytelling?

Councillor McCulloch: We are in the early days of our campaign; lodging the petition was one of the first things we did. In our experience, it is difficult to know who to turn to for advice and support. We are looking for some sort of focus, either nationally or locally.

Nanette Milne: Is it possible that the idea might develop into a living memorial that would involve all sorts of sporting heroes and encourage young people? That might involve setting up a fund in the name of some of the bygone sporting heroes to help young people who are coming forward in sport. I wonder whether sportsScotland and other active bodies might become involved. Have you thought about that?

Mike Payne: In Scotland, we are not very good at singing our own praises. We have people who are good at sports and people who are famous throughout the world for other things. I see that you are wearing a Malawi badge. David Livingstone is probably more famous in Malawi than he is here. The Chinese consider Eric Liddell

to be their first Olympic gold medal winner, but he was not known about in Scotland until a movie was made. We need to sing our own praises more.

We see value in working with local primary schools to raise the profile of Scottish sporting heroes and speaking to the kids about what it means to be a role model, or a model citizen, I suppose.

Nanette Milne: I just wonder whether a living memorial might be more effective than something static, such as a cairn or a statue. Perhaps it would be better to have something that will go forward in perpetuity.

The Convener: The concern of the petition is who would take that forward, is it not?

Mike Payne: Yes.

The Convener: If someone comes up with an idea for which they get support from one or two sympathetic people in a local authority, where should they go first to act on that idea? I remember that, years ago, there was discussion about recognising the contribution of the international brigaders in Glasgow because the city was a major place of recruitment. That was a controversial topic, but something was done to recognise the role that those people, who were mostly volunteers, played in the 1930s, before the Second World War. In that case, it was the local authority that acted.

There might be a story to tell about all the different neighbourhoods where ordinary citizens have made a contribution, whatever form that story would take, but I would not know where to start in trying to do that. I think that that is what the petitioners are anguished about.

Robin Harper: I echo that in part. The primary responsibility for erecting a plaque to—or remembering in other ways—people who contributed to politics, science, art, literature or whatever usually lies with the local authority. The statues in Edinburgh were put up with funding from a combination of sources. Some of it came from the local authority, but in many cases the majority came from private contributions. Have you thought about scoping with our 32 local authorities the number of people whom they might want to remember in one way or another and the size of the fund that you think the Parliament should provide to cope with the demand?

Councillor McCulloch: I think that we were hoping that you might do that. No, we have not. Our campaign is focused on one particular sporting legend. We are drawing it to the committee's attention that the wider issue needs attention. Scotland should give more recognition to people who have made a contribution to sport and other fields.

Robin Harper: There are two issues. There is a strong case for Billy Liddell to be remembered in his home town, but it is not necessarily for the Government to provide a large pot of money for which councils can bid whenever they want to erect a statue, a plaque or some other memorial to someone who made a significant contribution to sport or who can be held up as a role model.

Rhoda Grant: I am slightly puzzled by your petition and am trying to get the bottom of what you want. I understand where you are coming from with your memorial proposal but, to my mind, setting up an agency to deal with memorials and the like takes away from the idea of a memorial as something that comes from the grass roots. If a community wants to commemorate a person's life and contribution, surely it is better for it to commission the memorial, carry out the fundraising and so on. After all, the memorial needs to reflect back on the person for whom it has been erected. Simply having an agency that puts up statues all over the place does not accomplish anything; part of the person's legacy must lie in the community's strength of feeling that leads to the memorial being erected in the first place.

If we put that to one side, the next question is how a community with such strength of feeling goes about getting a memorial. Are you suggesting that we need someone who would guide a community or group of people through the whole process of commemorating someone or something, present the options available and explain what permissions and so on are needed?

Councillor McCulloch: Yes. The community is a very important element in all this and, as John Park said, this is a grass-roots campaign. However, when we sought to take this proposal forward, we were looking for some support from national Government or local authorities for groups such as ours. A national approach, for example, might invite applications for proposals whereas local authorities might focus more on sports provision and on encouraging more people to get involved in sport. One aspect of that, of course, might be the creation of role models.

Rhoda Grant: We have discussed things such as statues, gardens and plaques, and Nanette Milne talked about a living memorial that young people are encouraged to get involved in. No one body can happily accommodate such a range of proposals, so perhaps what we need is someone who can take a more cross-cutting approach and say to groups, "Have you thought about this or that? If that is where you want to go, so-and-so or such-and-such an organisation might be able to help." Instead of having an agency that takes away a proposal and gets it done, we probably need someone who provides help and guidance.

Councillor McCulloch: That is the idea. I am not criticising the council, but this kind of project is just not on its radar. I looked for an answer in the single outcome agreement—

The Convener: I do that, too.

Councillor McCulloch: Although the agreement contains many worthy things, nothing in it really fits our proposal. We need to get councils to accept that they should be doing these things.

The Convener: We are still waiting for responses to a petition on blue plaques that we discussed at a previous meeting; in fact, we expect the Government to respond before Christmas. I certainly think that someone should be beaver away at co-ordinating some options here. As the planning authority, the local authority is responsible for the erection of statues and other such memorials and will therefore play a key role in this matter. However, we want guidelines that provide folk with

points of reference. I do not think that it would be inappropriate to use this petition as a means of addressing some of those issues. We will certainly see what we can do in that respect.

As Mike Payne tried to emphasise, the other issue is to do with showcasing Scotland's history. After all, when you look at the names of those commemorated in our municipal squares, you might recognise many of them, but there will also be many that you will scratch your head about and think, "Why did that person receive such recognition?" The answer, of course, is that they were probably very important or very powerful at the time. However, very ordinary citizens from very ordinary communities have made a contribution to sport, popular culture or whatever, and memorials to them provide those communities with inspiration and a sense of lineage.

We should write to the Government to find out how this petition might fit in with that debate. We could contact the likes of the Historic Environment Advisory Council for Scotland—if, of course, it still exists by that time. It is, after all, on the radar in the clean-out of the quangos, but getting a lovely suggestion from that organisation might serve as a good parting shot. We should also get in touch with VisitScotland.

I am open to suggestions on which local authorities we should contact. It is certainly worth exploring the views of a couple of our big city authorities, but we should remember that tourism is important in other parts of the country. I suggest that we ask Highland Council for its views, given the area that it covers.

Do members have any other suggestions on how we might go about exploring the issues in the petition? What about, for example, the hall of fame proposal? How far have you got with that, incidentally?

Councillor McCulloch: I have to say that it is not very clear to us how people get inducted into the Scottish Football Association's hall of fame.

The Convener: Well, we are talking about the SFA.

Councillor McCulloch: Our application has certainly been received and we should hear something in October.

The Convener: Good luck with that. It could be helpful. However, we need to pull together suggestions for dealing with statutory and Government agencies.

Nanette Milne: It might be a long shot, but is there any point in getting in touch with the organisers of the Commonwealth games? They are looking for a legacy, after all.

The Convener: That is not a bad idea. We could write to those who are organising the legacy debate. I had better choose my terms carefully, but I imagine that the success of the Scottish athletes and the Great Britain team will be used to extol the virtues of sport and physical activity in the six or seven years leading up to the Commonwealth games.

The Government and Glasgow City Council are also putting together consultations on legacy issues, so it might be useful to get in touch with those who are involved in that activity.

Nanette Milne: Would sportscotland have anything to do with that?

The Convener: It could have.

Robin Harper: I nominate the City of Edinburgh Council, given the huge number of plaques and statues in the city.

The Convener: I realise that, coming from a member for the Lothians, that suggestion contains a reasonable degree of self-interest.

I hope that this discussion has been useful to the petitioners. Essentially, you are asking us to try to open the door a little bit.

The committee wishes you well both in your campaign and in your endeavours with the hall of fame proposal. It is good to see that other football legend, John Park. I have seen John play for the Scottish Parliament football team—and I cannot imagine that there will be any rush to put up plaques for him. I should say, though, that I am just as bad.

I hope that we can secure some support for your proposals. I thank you for your time and patience this afternoon.