Use sport as a political instrument for CHANGE IN SOCIETY

The President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, made the official opening speech at Play the Game 2007

by Maria Suurballe

“There is a close connection between sport and society, and reduced to its absolute essentials it is all about good governance. We should therefore make use of international sport movements as a strong political instrument for changes in our societies.”

Opening Play the Game 2007, the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, used his speech to put forward some personal considerations about how we can use sport as an instrument for social improvement, democracy and international understanding.

Illustrating his viewpoints, the President mentioned the Special Olympics, an international world event with seven thousand athletes from more than 140 countries, all of them intellectually disabled. As an International Board member of the Special Olympics Movement, the President visited the Games in China in October 2007.

Hope for China
It is known, that China suffers on an enormous scale from corruption and bad governance. With respect to human rights, hosting the Special Olympics was one of the strongest signals that China has sent.

“It made us in the Special Olympic Board conclude that we were responsible not just for an international remarkable sporting event, but also for helping China to get out of the old system, to find a new framework, to face up to human rights and human responsibilities in a new way,” Mr Grímsson said.

The President of China, Hu Jintao, took two days out of his programme to visit the games, talked to the people and thereby he sent a very strong human message that according to Grímsson gives hope for the future of human rights in China. Sport cannot be isolated from the rest of society in such a way that sport somehow becomes different from other social or business activity.

“To us it is a fundamental question not about sport but about our society, about who we are as a democracy and as a civil society. And it is a fundamental question when we are talking about governance or corruption within sport in different parts of the world,” the Icelandic President stated in his speech.

“So the struggle of the campaign against corruption in sport is fundamentally a campaign for good governance in our societies and in the rest of the world,” Mr Grímsson concluded.

The Icelandic example
According to the Icelandic President, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, sport is an excellent tool to make changes in our societies.

As for the Icelanders, there is no real difference between good governance in sport and the campaign for good governance in their society.

Scientific evidence from Icelandic research shows that there are three elements that carry the strongest messages in the campaign against drugs, and one of them is participation in sport. The other two are spending at least an hour a day with your families, and the third one is waiting at least until seventeen or eighteen to drink alcohol or smoke tobacco.

“If these three things go together, there is less than one percent chance that the youth will suffer from drug abuse later in his or her life,” Mr Grímsson said.

“I fundamentally believe that the connection between society and sport is so integrated that you can’t really reform the sports movements without having a positive impact or even reforming the societies to some extent.”

“I believe the President of Iceland was just superb, and I wish that the Prime Minister of Canada was half as eloquent and committed to young people, to sport and to their health as he is”.

Laura Robinson, Sports Journalist, Canada.