

CONTEMPORARY POLICY DEBATE

A remarkable absence of women: A comment on the formation of the new Event Industry Board (EIB)

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Planned events are now seen as big business by British policy-makers. Although ministerial responsibility remains in the somewhat marginal Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the movers and shakers in the events sector have seemingly persuaded officials to take events more seriously than in the past by establishing the Events Industry Board (EIB). According to the Business Visits & Events Partnership (BVEP), the EIB will (i) act as a bridge between industry and government so that effective ways are found to attract more visitors to events held in the UK, (ii) help promote the contribution events make to inward investment, and (iii) champion messages that show how events boost visible as well as invisible export activity (BVEP, 2016).

The creation of the BVEP itself was heralded by many as progress. It was established to champion the interests of the sector. More specifically, it was formed to overcome the fragmentation of representation, illustrated by the number of trade and professional associations claiming to speak for the various inter-related constituencies involved in planned events, with a view to promoting policies for growth. Its terms of reference also incorporate sharing best practice and encouraging quality (<http://www.businessvisitsandeventspartnership.com/about-bvep/about-bvep>, accessed 19th May, 2016).

Understandably, the EIB is seen as a major breakthrough by the BVEP. Its promotion is inflected with the language of representativeness, inclusiveness and collaboration which appeals to many with an interest in the sector, including universities. As their commercial counterparts in travel and tourism will surely testify, however, the real challenge is to be working with the power-house departments such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). This seems as distant for events as it does for travel and tourism. Nevertheless, it would surely be to their advantage to use whatever influence they have to promote positive messages, directly and indirectly, about the diversity of the sector and its potential to improve social and economic welfare in the UK.

The recent BVEP newsletter which celebrated its apparently influential role in helping to establish the EIB is disappointingly anachronistic. Even without undertaking a formal

contents or discourse analysis, the dominance of men in the BVEP's reporting is striking. Of the 16 images used in the Spring 2016 newsletter, 8 were of men, 2 were of mixed groups, 1 was of a woman (that was for the launch of a charity) and 5 were of children (part of the feature on the charity). So, excluding the charity feature, there were 8 non-group images, all of white men; to many, these do not represent the multi-cultural and female dominated sector that actually characterises events. Of course, the BVEP report may simply be a reflection of the EIB itself. It comprises 9 members, 8 of which are men, as well as representatives that are not listed on the official web site from Visit Britain, Visit England, Visit Scotland and Visit Wales (<https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/events-industry-board#membership> accessed June 24th 2016).

As readers of this journal will know, images are not neutral; they wittingly or unwittingly convey the values of the individuals or organisations who have chosen to use them (see, for example, Salkeld, 2014). More than forty years after the Sex Discrimination Act, since when factors influencing discrimination have been explored (exposed) at length (e.g. Dipboye and Colella, 2012; Ellemers, and Barreto, 2015), it is staggering that the BVEP chooses to bring what appears to be such a gendered perspective to the leadership of policy formation in the sector, notwithstanding the fact that two of its Vice Chairs are women. It is perhaps predictable that some of those who are uncomfortable with the favour afforded to men within parts of the sector have started to protest (<http://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/>).

It is well documented that stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination in employment blight many organisations and sectors of the economy (see, for example, Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2016; Wright and Conley, 2016). It is also clear that the socio-economic dynamics which lead to gender inequalities are complex and probably best understood within wider theorisations of intersecting multiple inequalities (for a discussion, see Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012). Nevertheless, there is social scientific evidence, albeit mixed (Eagly and Heilman, 2016; Adams, 2016), supporting the efficacy of some policy initiatives designed to act as positive countervailing influences to inequalities in employment. The BVEP's triumphalist tone conveys little recognition of this or a sense of its potential role in challenging inequality in the events sector.

Women comprise about 75% of the events workforce but there is a promotion and pay gap that favours men (e.g. Carter, 2015). This is not unique to events. It is an issue which has vexed many across several sectors. Perhaps the most prominent advocates of diversity, equality and inclusion in this context over recent years have been those making the 'business case' for change. For example, a recent and highly regarded report produced by Tomorrow's Company (2014: 3), argued that:

We need a different debate with different language that puts diversity firmly within the context of future long-term business success ... a debate that recognises that what is holding talented women back ... is a dominant culture that has been shaped and reinforced by beliefs, values,

structures and practices designed to maintain the status quo and the position of those in power.

The report goes on to suggest practical ways in which organisations might improve their practices. The starting point, of course, is to be 'clear about what meritocracy means' (Tomorrow's Company, 2014:7), to recognise the existence of bias and to reflect upon the analysis of those who challenge the status quo. Drawing upon case study evidence from successful companies, the report recommends a set of measures that includes presenting positive perspectives and opportunities for those currently disadvantaged. The flavour of the BVEP report suggests that they do not subscribe to this perspective.

Other prominent actors in the events sector have considered the issue of gender and leadership. The EventHuddle programme of monthly topical debates (www.eventhuddle.co.uk), for example, held a discussion forum in 2015 which considered many of the issues raised by this paper. It was welcomed by many because it appeared to signal a recognition of the importance of taking action on diversity and equality among influential actors. The event will have been illuminating for many, presenting as it did a range of perspectives. It is disconcerting, however, that the panel of speakers for previous and subsequent EventHuddles have been dominated by men (www.eventhuddle.co.uk). This may be instructive; it conveys an impression that senior female figures in the industry must be incorporated into discussions of diversity but to little else.

There is more room for optimism elsewhere. Fay Sharpe, Managing Director of a leading events company, for example, has created a progressive mentoring programme for talented women, entitled Fast Forward 15 (www.fastforward15.co.uk). It is designed to encourage and empower them to achieve progression within the sector. To that extent, it represents the kind of modern, dynamic and enlightened leadership that will, no doubt, help retain talent and serve the sector well.

By chance, the creation of the EIB coincides with the twentieth anniversary of the formation of the UK Centre for Events Management (UKCEM) at Leeds Beckett University (to celebrate what represents the start of event management education in the UK, this journal is providing all of its events-related papers free of charge during 2016 (<http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/pgas/rprt-events-2016>)). As has been pointed out elsewhere (Thomas and Thomas, 2013), this was pivotal in the construction of 'event management' as an occupational identity. Such an identity is essential for the professionalization of the sector and for productive outcomes to emerge from developments such as the EIB. The Centre currently has some 600 students enrolled on its courses and, by now, a significant community of alumni. Other major university providers have similar numbers. Indeed, in total, there are approximately 10 000 events students enrolled on courses in the UK. Informed estimates suggest that about 80 - 90% of these students and graduates are women. Not surprisingly, universities are often at pains to

promote positive images of professional women and the career opportunities available in the events sector.

Many universities across the world are engaged in research and teaching about the events sector. In recent years, for example, the UKCEM produced the UK's most authoritative economic impact assessment of the meetings industry (funded via the Meeting Professionals International Foundation) (<http://www.mpiweb.org/UKCEIS>), spoke at almost all major international events trade fairs (on three continents), and provided keynote speakers for major academic conferences such as the Global Events Congress (USA). Each of these was led by the academic work of a woman; all of whom are excellent role models for students.

In an attempt to build bridges between universities and industry, I joined the Board of the Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (ABPCO). ABPCO is led by talented women who hold senior positions within the sector and are making significant strides towards the professionalization of an important sub-sector, namely association events. The composition of the Board and the messages it sends to wider constituencies sits in sharp contrast to those associated with the BVEP (and the EIB), at least as represented by its latest newsletter.

By introducing this policy debate paper, my intention is to challenge policy-makers and those working in representative organisations related to events to take equalities more (conspicuously) seriously. Their role as leaders affords them the opportunity that others lack to ensure that the sector genuinely embraces the diversity of talent available. I also hope that this short commentary will encourage researchers to undertake work which will assist policy-makers. As others have recently pointed out, casual generalisations are to be avoided and progressive interventions and programmes 'should not be trusted merely because they are well-intentioned' (Eagly and Heilman, 2016: 351-2). Social scientists have an important role to play in revealing 'truths' and in contributing to policy debates that result in socially desirable interventions.

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