

PLANNING & EXECUTION OF DEBATE EVENT, THURSDAY 8TH MARCH 2018

The original proposal for a debate on the topic of fracking regulation was mine. It was a response to the situation that Third Energy seemed to be about to commence fracking at Kirby Misperton. At this point, the question about fracking turned to whether the process would be safe. Our MP, Kevin Hollinrake, had repeatedly made the case that UK regulations would make it safe. The proposition for debate was therefore “This house believes that UK regulations make fracking safe”, with Mr Hollinrake invited to propose.

From the very start, it was essential to the concept that every aspect of the debate must be arranged to be fair to both sides. Whatever our personal views, the debate would be of less value if it was slanted towards one side or another.

I held a number of private discussions in the search for a speaker to oppose the motion, and eventually alighted on Mike Hill, a chartered engineer who had been involved with fracking issues and was prepared to speak on the subject. I passed Mike Hill’s details to the town clerk

Although the initial assumption had been that the council chairman or another councillor would chair the debate, I heard that Bishop James Jones had expressed willingness to be chairman. Although now retired, he had been a very senior bishop in the Church of England, and had also chaired various bodies, including the Hillsborough Panel. I was very pleased to have an offer to chair the debate from such a respected figure. At that time, I knew nothing of the bishop’s views on fracking. The bishop’s details were also passed to the town clerk.

Mike Hill was very keen to have a larger audience than we could manage in Kirkbymoorside, and it was becoming clear that there would be a good deal of interest in the debate. The suggestion that it should be held at Lady Lumley’s School was therefore mooted. The various details were put to the council as a proposal, and agreed by the council.

More recently, I became aware that the bishop had expressed an opinion against fracking in the Yorkshire Post. However, I did not feel that this altered the situation. The format of the debate was calculated to give both sides equal opportunities, and I believed that the bishop was perfectly capable of conducting it fairly, whatever his personal views. The bishop offered to withdraw, both to me ahead of the event, and on the night to both the speakers. Kevin Hollinrake and Mike Hill both expressed total confidence in the bishop’s ability to act fairly and I agreed.

The distribution of tickets was managed by the town clerk, who has given her own description of how this was done. I have complete confidence that it was carried out impartially and judiciously.

Some of you were at the debate and know most of the rest from your own experience. I was nominated as the main contact, as the town clerk did not attend. Councillors Watson and Dowie checked tickets as people arrived. Councillor Chapman managed the car park and directed people to the correct entrance. I was involved with checking that the AV setup was working and advising the speakers in its use and generally running around.

After a welcome from our Mayor, Bishop James Jones took over and directed the event until the final speech of thanks from our Deputy Mayor. It was widely agreed that the bishop was a very effective chairman and scrupulously fair. Speakers were held to their allotted times, and contributions from the audience were taken turn and turn about, for and against the motion. Any disorder was swiftly squashed. Speakers from the HSE, EA and Third Energy were allowed to speak twice, partly to answer criticisms and partly because there were too few people wanting to speak for the motion.

The original concept had been a debate, including speeches from the floor. During the planning stage, this had been modified to be questions from the floor. However, the bishop was very keen to return to a full debate, and pressed everyone involved to agree to this change. He increased the time available to the two main speakers to give them an opportunity to respond to points raised from the floor as well as to sum up. In my view, the standard of contribution from members of the audience was generally high.

The only slight issue occurred before the summing up speeches from the main speakers. The bishop sought to put Mike Hill first. However, the running order agreed by everyone ahead of the event was that Mike Hill would speak last. He insisted on this, with some justification, given the prior agreement.

After the summing up, it was always intended to hold a vote. I mentioned counting to one or two other councillors. Ahead of the event, I had no idea how the vote would turn out. As the audience reactions emerged, it became clear that opinion was strongly on one side. I therefore suggested to the bishop that we could avoid the delay involved in counting. He asked for a show of hands, and it was clear that many more (maybe ten times) people voted against the motion than for. The bishop declared the motion overwhelmingly defeated.

There were some practical issues such as my slowness in finding a way to turn off the projector after the speakers' presentations had been completed. Some interference occurred with the microphones at times, which the school's AV technician believes may be connected with the presence of smartphones linking to the school wi-fi system. These are the sort of difficulties that would get ironed out if we were running regular debates, but are difficult to fully anticipate for a one off event!

Overall, I believe the event was very successful and that the audience appreciated the opportunity to hear the issues debated, as well as having an opportunity to make their own contributions. I also believe that it has reflected credit on Kirkbymoorside Town Council.

Martin Brampton
Kirkbymoorside Councillor

13 March 2018