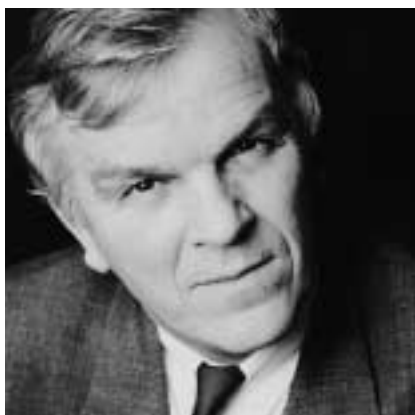


Tony Hodges, Non-Executive Director of Locum Destination Consulting, profiles **Matthew Evans**, Labour peer and Chairman of *re:source*.



Photograph courtesy of Jamie Bell

There is more meat, more intellectual and philosophical substance, in Evans' Labour background than in many a spin-doctored New Labour CV



The New Art Gallery, Walsall: living proof that you don't have to dumb down to make culture more accessible

Photograph courtesy of Helene Binet

Lord Evans

Making *our* cultural assets accessible

One gloomy, traffic-clogged morning in September, Tim Ambrose and I found ourselves in a small, unprepossessing office at Faber & Faber, publishers in the parish of Bloomsbury. There to interview Lord Evans, Faber's long-standing Chairman, we came away tingling, genuinely stimulated.

The subject of our meeting with Evans was *re:source*, the new strategic agency for museums, archives and libraries, which he has chaired since its launch in April 2000. The *Sunday Times* calls it 'the quango which oversees Britain's museums', as ever confusing brevity and precision.

That *re:source* is important cannot be gainsaid, as Tim's analysis in these pages shows. Yet our post-interview reaction owed as much to Matthew's intellectual electricity as the enthusiasm with which he defines *re:source* and its challenges.

At first glance, Evans' track record might suggest to the average *Sunday Times* journo a classic example of New Labour luvvie. Leading publisher, house in the Cotswolds, famously beautiful and successful wife, founding member of the Groucho, director of *Which?*, recreation cricket, LSE with bars.

Look further and listen to the man before you buy the easy caricature, however. Young Evans was brought up in a staunchly socialist household, attended a Quaker school, and sat at the feet of one of Britain's most notable oral historians. His father, George Evans, was an author, lecturer, broadcaster and communist, not necessarily in that order. (Matthew and I have a mutual friend, the novelist and ex-*Omnibus* editor Nigel Williams, who describes George Evans' *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* as 'an outstanding piece of social history'.) The extremes of the father's politics were not shared by the son: 'He pushed me to the right', avers Matthew. Nonetheless, young Evans joined CND and has always voted Labour, from LSE days until the New Jerusalem Mark II of recent memory.

There is, therefore, more meat, more intellectual and philosophical substance, in Evans' Labour background than in many a spin-doctored New Labour CV.

Flash he is not. The modesty of his Faber office reflects a parsimonious approach to the daily round. Along with the benefits of T.S. Eliot's bequest, perhaps it is this careful husbandry that has helped keep Faber, against the modern grain, independent. Some writers have been known to think him mean.

His thrift does not stretch to the time he has devoted to public service, however, particularly to affairs of the nation's culture. English Stage Company, British Council Literary Advisory Panel, Arts Council National Lottery Advisory Panel, Royal Opera House, British Film Institute, all have felt Evans' presence, as have many other worthy panels and boards. Just another fully paid-up member of the great and good, then? Hardly. His commitment to spreading the word, literally, runs like a shaft of steel right through his extra-curricular life. This is what

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brought him to the Library and Information Commission in 1995 and thus to *re:source*. Not just to talk, rather to make things happen.

His experience has compounded an intellectual fascination with vested interests. 'If Britain is to be modernised, the nerves of vested interests have to be touched', he states, with perhaps a little relish.

His Quaker determination ('to make himself an expert, know more than anyone else, not be deflected by specious arguments' – was Matthew here describing his father or his own inheritance?) seems to inform his approach to applying new technology. In 1997 he chaired the Working Group on the New Library: The People's Network. This role handed us another key to his effectiveness, his unswerving commitment to *access*. This is where his home background, education, publishing career, and public service come together, much to the benefit of *re:source* and the government which funds it.

Consider these Evans statements:

'Access is about placing people near the top of the agenda. It is about recognising that the collections, and the stories they tell, only come to life when they react in some magical way with the people that use them.'

'Whilst we can celebrate the fact that two-thirds of the population have a library card, we must also be concerned about the one-third that doesn't.'

'Therein lies the nub of the access issue – how do you provide services and manage collections in the way that engages as broad an audience as possible?'

'Digital TV could be in every home in the land by 2010. We will need to move fast to exploit the opportunities for enormously greater accessibility that it will offer. There's not much time and there is a great deal to do.'

'We are being drawn into a fallacious argument which implies that increasing access to collections is incompatible with maintaining standards of professional excellence in their management and development.... The reality is that they are not in opposition at all, but are two sides of the same coin. The great collections have always had a dual *raison d'être*: to aggregate and preserve fine examples of our cultural legacy and to make them available to a broader number of people than would otherwise see them.'

'When 90% of all artefacts are in storage rather than on public display, we have an obligation to come up with a solution.'



'We should dispel the myth that collections and their management are in opposition, and recognise them as two sides of the same coin'

Photograph courtesy of Marcus Leith

Evans is clearly no one-man band, as the quality of *re:source* board membership emphatically declares and his self-drawn learning curve dictates. Yet if *re:source* sets out its stall to provide 'strategic leadership, advocacy and advice' (as it does), then this is one quango with a chairman to respect.

During our interview, I discovered a rarely reported fact about Matthew Evans. Publishing did not provide his first career step. That privilege was bestowed on the world of advertising where Evans began work as a market researcher. This experience seems to have informed his utterly professional view of marketing: that it is about putting consumers first and listening to their needs. Hence his clarion call to the cultural sector to gather and analyse the facts, to adopt a root-and-branch marketing job on *our* collections. This is no spin doctor talking. Evans clearly understands the difference between embracing consumer marketing and plastic daffodil promotions.

As New Labour struggles to deliver on its promises and persuade us that it can listen, it might do well to consider the example of Matthew Evans, busying himself at the Lords four afternoons a week. A businessman who has always voted Labour, from Quaker school through market research into publishing and public service. A Labour peer who sees marketing as the tool of public access. A shrewd, likeable, twinkle-eyed operator who makes the idea of 'champagne socialist' less of an oxymoron than most people would think possible. He has, after all, earned a glass or two.

After Tim Ambrose and I left Faber's offices, Matthew Evans was preparing for his next meeting, that afternoon, with Gordon Brown. The Chancellor could do worse, we thought, than listen.