



# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

Meeting commenced 1803

### In Attendance

[Secretariat's note: During an office move, attendance sheets have been misplaced. They will be updated once the sheets have been located.]

### Welcome

On behalf of the Group, the Chairman welcomed new Associate Members:

- Brentwood Eels RLFC, the Group's first community club member
- 1eagu3 as an organisational member
- David Ballheimer as an individual member

The Chairman welcomed new BARLA Chairman Sue Taylor.

### Apologies

Lord Smith of Leigh; Lord Granchester; Simon Reeve MP

Nigel Wood (RFL); David Wilson (Pro-Build Assist Ltd); Paul Cypher; Anton Muszanskyj; Michael MacDonald;

### Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were considered an accurate record.

### Matters Arising

The Secretariat raised the on-going activities:

- Visit to see England Wheelchair games
- Investigating various activities relating to wheelchair rugby league, including Members being made aware of local clubs, attending games and a Political Animals game.
- Compilation of the complete list of the Super League Player of the year.
- Consolidation of Group records.
- Preparation of the process for contacting local politicians regarding Associate Membership of the Group.
- Investigation into events for Women & Girls in sport and inclusivity
- A memorial at the National Arboretum honouring rugby league playing and supporting servicemen and servicewomen.
- Secretariat support of visit of World Cup to the French President.

### Correspondence

#### Sent

- Letter to Queensland Rugby League regarding the alleged murder of the Brisbane Referee's Association President, Tony McGrath.

Our Supporters



RFL



-1-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

- Letter to Spen Allison on his standing down as Chairman of BARLA and being made a Senior Vice President of the Association.
- Letter to Sue Taylor on her appointment as Chairman of BARLA.
- Communiqués with Lord Smith of Leigh and Andy Burnham MP regarding the Leigh East club.
- Emails to X number of Parliamentary Groups regarding the Festival of World Cups

#### Received

- Various correspondence regarding Leigh East club.

#### Pending

- Communication with the Serbian and the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Parliamentary Groups regarding the development of the game.
- Letter to Serbian Embassy regarding the Serbian Armed Forces' involvement in the Armed Services World Cup.
- Awaiting responses from letters to:
  - BARLA re: Group involvement
  - Sheffield Hallam Vice Chancellor re: research used in BBC piece on finances of Super League clubs.
  - Immigration minister re: visa assessment for players
  - Moroccan Ambassador re: recognition of rugby league

## Group Activity Report

### Parliamentary

The Secretariat listed the number of references to rugby league in Parliament since the previous meeting.

### AOB

No other business had been received.

The meeting concluded at 1812

Our Supporters



RFL



-2-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

#### **Presentation: Brian Barwick, RFL Chairman; James Mercer, RFL Commercial Director**

RFL Chairman Brian Barwick delivered a speech to the Group; followed by questions and answers with RFL Commercial Director James Mercer.

#### **Speech**

Good evening everybody – and thanks for inviting me to talk to you this evening. It isn't my maiden speech in the House! I have spoken here before in a previous role as the Chief Executive of the Football Association but I am delighted to be here tonight as the new Chairman of the Rugby Football League.

I began in the new position on February 1<sup>st</sup> – the opening day of the 2013 season – and managed to get to see three matches in three days to kick-start my involvement in the sport – and also to give due notice of my determination to quickly absorb myself in the game.

I have subsequently managed to get to over 20 further matches in my whistle-stop five month re- introduction to the sport.

I am not a novice on the game – but neither do I presume myself to be an expert – but I watched my first rugby league match nearly 50 years ago and have dropped into the sport, both personally and professionally, on a frequent basis ever since.

Born and raised in Liverpool, my mid-1960's sporting brief was watching Liverpool Football club one weekend and rugby league's Liverpool City, the next. From Anfield to Knotty Ash Stadium week about week.

Liverpool City were no world-beaters and were regularly one of the teams that helped prop up the more famous names in what was then one division of 30 teams.

In my student days at the University of Liverpool I was a member of Ed Soc – a society dedicated to the late Eddie Waring. Subsequently, my early working life included a stint as the rugby league reporter on the North-Western Evening Mail in Barrow-in-Furness.

A six month attachment to the famous BBC Television Sports Department took me to London – and the worlds of Grandstand, Sportsnight and Match of the Day.

The Sportsnight preview for the 1980 Challenge Cup Final sent me, and a new face to television, a certain Desmond Lynam, to Hull to meet that year's protagonists -Hull and Hull KR.

And I still think getting Desmond up and out of his hotel bed at 6 am to go filming in a fish filleting factory to be one of the more remarkable things I've achieved in a career in media and sport that has stretched well over 35 years!

I believe I have always a good friend to the sport and while I was at the BBC regularly fought its corner when time for contract renewals and suchlike were upon us.

Our Supporters



**RFL**



-3-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

My take on it has always been if you come from the north- and you love your sport – you are a football fan who keeps an eye on the rugby league, or a rugby league fan who keeps his eye on the football.

And I comfortably have fitted into the former of those categories for several decades. Once I'd moved down to London I was able to follow rugby league professionally working for the BBC – I was part of the Grandstand team for several years when rugby league was part of its regular output – and personally I dropped into Craven Cottage to see Fulham RFL begin their life at Craven Cottage. And have subsequently followed the 'London' club in its variety of changing names, faces and places down the years.

I did an 18 year stint at the BBC finishing my time there as the Corporation's Head of Sport before I moved across to ITV to become their Controller of Sport as well as Director of Programmes for ITV2, which I was responsible for launching in 1998.

ITV was a different experience. A commercial channel rather than one funded by the licence fee – and I enjoyed the opportunities and challenges that such a change of funding model presented.

From the BBC, then covering close to 30 or 40 sports, to ITV basically covering three – big-time football, Formula One motor-racing and the Rugby World Cup – the other Rugby World Cup. I also extended ITV's sporting brief buying the Boat Race and re-engaging the British viewer with the Tour de France which has subsequently delivered massively for ITV in recent times and which helped, no doubt, when deliberations were made on the Tour coming back to the UK, and Yorkshire, in particular.

Seven years at ITV were followed by four years as the Chief Executive of the Football Association which I started in January 2005. This was an interesting turn in the road for me professionally – and at the time the interest in who would fill the vacant post involved me - as a candidate - getting interviewed on the way into my 'actual interview' – and then interviewed on the way out from having just had it!

I spent nearly four years as the CEO of the FA and enjoyed my time enormously despite the sheer weight of expectation that went with the post itself, and the organisation's day-to-day business.

The media attention on the FA was relentless – and understandable – given its position as the national sport – or national obsession as some would see it. Whatever, it was a job for a grown-up, and despite being a son of the media I didn't expect to be spared by it – and I wasn't. And I didn't expect to be scarred – and I'm not.

Four years, three England coaches, two capital projects – the new Wembley Stadium and 'Burton' which subsequently became St.Georges Park and one RESPECT campaign were part of my working life, the latter, developed to try and bring some better on-field and touchline behaviour in relation to match officials and youngsters starting out in the game.

On leaving the FA at the end of 2008 I was appointed as Visiting Professor in the Management School of the University of Liverpool and later Chairman of the Advisory Board of another Higher Education establishment - UCFB - based at Turf Moor Burnley, which focuses on degrees in the business of football, validated by Bucks New University. The second campus of UCFB will be launched in September 2014 – Wembley Stadium.

Our Supporters



RFL



-4-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

UCFB has also started a series of executive education courses for rugby league players heading towards the end of their playing careers -giving them a useful insight in how the sport works, off the field, and drawing on the experiences of respected speakers from the wider sporting and business worlds. The course is proving a hit with the players taking part.

I run a media and sports consultancy – Barwick Media and Sport – I’ve authored two published books and have been both a national and regional newspaper columnist in the past eighteen months.

So why add the Chairmanship of the Rugby Football League to that busy portfolio? Well, because I felt I had room to have a professional input into a major sport and also felt my extensive and varied high level experience could add value to holding down such a position. And, I have a soft spot for rugby league.

When the RFL position was advertised, I applied, encouraged by significant people in the game to do so, and I’m delighted to now be in post – and quickly gathering a proper working knowledge of the sport. A lot of the issues in the administration of the sport are the same I faced when at the FA – perhaps the quantum is different. But many are ‘old friends’ to me!

My remit as independent, non-executive chairman of the Rugby Football League gives me a chance to both support and test the executive at Red Hall as they deliver for the game – the whole game – and although the expectation is that I will do six days a month – nobody’s counting, certainly I’m not.

It is important for me to acquaint myself with the issues that face the game and quickly assimilate a view based on current practice and previous experience. It is not how many days you do that is important – it is what you do with those days.

What is immediately apparent to me is that we have a great sport – and certainly recent Sky broadcasts from the Super League have shown the quality of the product when the game is played to its full potential. It is exhilarating, full-on, physical and yet fair-minded. No quarter asked, no quarter given but truly athletic, authentic and aspirational.

The crowds reflect well on the game too – a brilliant range of ages – from grand-parents to tiny tots – and both men and women present in big numbers. The atmosphere in the stadiums is lively but lacks any sense of menace. This, too, a bonus for the game.

The Magic Weekend at the Etihad Stadium recently underlined that - a seven game, two-day rugby league festival with fourteen different sets of supporters enjoying both the matches and the Fanzone and creating a marvellous atmosphere in the bargain. And the sun shone!

I’ve also got myself to some Championship rugby league including a cracking top of the table scrap between Featherstone Rovers and Halifax and will be attending the RFL’s Community Board later this month.

In fact the next few weeks give you an idea of my remit and my approach to the role. Later this evening I am off to Warrington for tomorrow’s RFL AGM and Council Meeting, next week it will be two days at Red Hall, a Super League CEO’s meeting, a day with the trade press, attendance at the Festival of World Cups, Wheelchair World Cup Finals in

Our Supporters



RFL



-5-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

Medway – one of the five disciplines in the Festival already discussed – the others are the Armed Forces, Students – at which Greg Mulholland is the chief guest, the Police and Women’s competitions. I’ll also be off to a Challenge Cup quarter-final, the Northern Rail Cup Finals at Halifax and the latest Rugby Football League Board takes place before the month is out.

Of course, as well as some top-class televised Super League matches of late on Sky Sports, long-time supporters of the game; the Kingstone Press Championship has also had weekly live coverage on Premier Sports.

Add BBC and Sky’s live coverage of the Tetley’s Challenge Cup competition and you get an idea of the spread of coverage the game gets on television – something in truth it struggles to replicate in the traditional print media.

Of course, this autumn also sees the staging of the Rugby League World Cup, to be televised on the BBC and Premier Sports, and I look forward to seeing many of you at the matches.

The Opening ceremony is at Cardiff’s Millennium Stadium and will be followed by a huge match – Australia v England, and Wales v Italy will follow it. Games will be played at 21 different venues – Some very big, Cardiff, Wembley and Old Trafford for instance, and some smaller – but all playing a very important role in spreading the game’s wider message.

I recently went to see the England team preparing for their match against The Exiles. Based at Loughborough University, coach Steve McNamara and his players showed a focus and determination that augurs well for coming challenges.

Sadly I can’t be with Steve for his latest meeting with England players who are doing so well in the NRL – his get together with the Burgess brothers and James Graham, on the beach at Coogee in Sydney tomorrow is not without appeal!!

McNamara’s ‘two team’ philosophy – a player’s club side and England – has clearly burnt through and the group of players seemed determined to put on a big show in the Autumn – as does the off-field team making all the preparations for the big event. They are working day and night to make it a memorable five weeks. And a real huge showcase for the sport in this country.

And it will climax a year which has seen the game having to wrestle with some issues key to the future welfare of the sport. They include a challenging economic climate in which to deliver new sponsorship to the game. A lot has been made of the Super League being without a lead sponsor and whilst that isn’t where we’d like to be there are other ways of slicing the commercial cake – a ‘range of partners’ instead of a single lead sponsor is just one of them – and the RFL’s Commercial Director, James Mercer is also here tonight to answer any of your questions in this area. We have had lots of expressions of interest in commercially being tied to a sport but getting that interest over the try-line is the target we must strive for.

We will continue to push the newspapers to get greater coverage for the sport – and that needs to be a concerted effort from all of us. It is tough getting the space we want – but equally also we have to be alive to the opportunities now available across the digital and social media –and recognise this is increasingly the way people –especially younger people – are accessing their information and news. I intend to directly help the RFL in this crucial area

Our Supporters



RFL



-6-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

We also need to 'push' our game hard. I sense the game is good at talking to itself but lacks a little confidence when speaking further afield. We have to overcome that issue – and also any prejudice –perceived or otherwise - there may be against our sport based on the strength of its regionality. We are a national, indeed international sport, broadcast on national broadcast networks; equally we are proud of our roots, origins and growing footprint in the UK. We must market the game strongly and with confidence – and find the money to do it.

We must also be conscious of some of best players choosing to ply their trade – or a spell of it – out of our game, and out of our country. It is one of the reasons we need to look how the elite end of our sport is constructed going forward.

We were disappointed to suffer a funding grant cut from Sport England, which has cost the sport jobs and opportunities but the RFL, lead by CEO, Nigel Wood, will continue to produce a strong argument for recognising the need for government funding for our game- and the development of youngsters in our community game.

Obviously we are also in the middle of a re-structuring debate, a product of last year's Watkins Governance Review. The RFL is making sure we are going out to all constituents of the game to hear their views and ideas- and, of course, there are plenty....plenty!

Tomorrow's Council meeting at Warrington will be the latest opportunity to debate the future structure of the game – the potential resumption of promotion and relegation – something I support, and the style of competition that will create exciting, well contested matches – all season long- and at all levels.

The RFL would like to think we will be in a position to have the game to make its choice by late August or September.

An indication of how the RFL is listening is its revised 2/12's - 3/8's solution which has attracted the most newsprint and comment. But that is what consulting and conferring with the game is all about – considering the options and listening to all range of opinions – and then leading from the front -and I applaud and support this approach.

Lots to do then, exciting days ahead, a Challenge Cup Final, a Grand Final and a Rugby League World Cup- and for me a great introduction to a great sport in a critical year - and I'm delighted to be on board.

#### Questions

The Chairman thanked Barwick and Mercer, highlighting the importance of looking outward and what had worked well in the heartlands.

Barwick noted that he had not positioned himself as a rugby league expert, but as someone who would bring a range of experience. After working at the FA, he had not taken the decision lightly to re-enter sport. He would take a direct role with a fresh viewpoint focused on moving forward. He felt the sport had to work harder, and consider how it talks to itself. It's very positive when talking to itself, but not when talking to anyone else. He knows rugby league to be a well-respected sport by other sports; something that needed to be utilised.

Our Supporters



RFL



-7-





# All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

## Ordinary Meeting Minutes

### 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 Committee Room 13

It was felt by Members that the frank nature of Barwick's speech and initial comments was welcome news, but the game had a number of problems, with little time to address before the World Cup. Barwick recognised the need for the sport to be canny, but that it was not alone in facing problems.

Mercer felt the sport was underrepresented commercially and had not evolved; previously focusing on one or two major partners. However this had changed and the sport was in a good place commercially and was developing as multiple partners from national brands were getting involved to the point where the game was close to previous levels under a single sponsor. An additional benefit was all brands being active and speaking to one another to grow the sport collectively.

He noted that the focus could not be purely about Super League, and there was a need to develop the community game. Whilst it was well-known that the sport's roots were in the north and was an important part of the game's offer, 24% of rugby league's market is in the south of England and there were very high numbers of schools playing the game in the south.

Barwick knew the London market well. There was a need to be grown-up about London. He felt the game should be played at the centre of the capital but needed a watching brief. A major challenge was getting people to watch a London club. The change of grounds had not helped, but activation was key and it seemed challenging to convert community players in London to watch the professional game.

Attention moved to the Rugby League World Cup 2013, particularly as the opportunity to showcase the sport and as the first major multinational sporting event to be held in the UK since the London 2012 Olympics.

Barwick felt there would be a step change from the World Cup and that having the game on the BBC would carry benefits, including national broadcasting as well as national and local radio coverage. He was hugely impressed and encouraged by the base at Media City and the work the team had been undertaking.

Mercer stated that 76% of tickets sold had gone to new fans, not on the RFL database and would be a great showcase for brands and a legacy for partners. This was due in no small part to the amount of effort, work and exposure generated by the RLWC2013 team, particularly through social media as well as traditional.

In concluding the meeting, the Chairman reiterated the Group's offer of support.

Meeting concluded at 1928.

Our Supporters



RFL



-8-

