



All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

Ordinary Meeting Minutes

26th November 2013 Committee Room 13

Meeting commenced 1803

In Attendance

Members: Greg Mulholland MP (in the Chair); Lord Hoyle (President); David Mowat MP (Vice-Chairman); Gerry Sutcliffe (Secretary); Lord Smith of Leigh (Treasurer)

Honorary Life Members: Maurice Oldroyd (no affiliation)

Organisational Associate Members: Major David Groce (Combined Services Rugby League); David Gent (RFL)

Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation): David Ballheimer; Mark Billyard; Dave Rammage; Chris Byron;

Other: Dave Smith (NRL); Kristen Kusack (NRL)

Secretariat: Mark Ramsdale

Minute's Silence

Before commencing the meeting, the Chairman led the Group in a minute's silence for Steve Prescott MBE.

The Chairman represented the Group at Prescott's funeral in St Helens, calling it extraordinary and a fitting tribute to an incredible individual and true legends.

Apologies

Members: Julie Hilling MP; Yvonne Fovargue MP; Jim Dobbin MP; Robert Walter MP; Dave Watts MP;

Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation): David Hinchliffe, Sir Ian McCartney, Spen Allyson

Organisational Associate Members: Nigel Wood (RFL); Ralph Rimmer (RFL); Mark Covell (RFL); Sue Taylor (BARLA)

Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation): Anton Muszanskyj; Iain McIlwee; Eric Czweronkia; Jeff Charlton; Andy Habbershaw

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:

- Compilation of the complete list of the Super League Player of the year.
- Preparation of the process for contacting local politicians regarding Associate Membership of the Group.

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Correspondence

Sent

- Letter to RFL CEO regarding attendance at meetings

Received

- Letter from the Ambassador of Ireland regarding the Political Animals v World XIII game
- Letter from Premier Sport thanking the Group for its help in securing a channel on Virgin Media
- Letter from Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP regarding passing of Steve Prescott MBE
- Letter from the Immigration Minister Mark Harper regarding clarification of visa matters
- Email from NZRL President Howie Tomati praising the work of the Group

Pending

- Responses would be provided to those above as appropriate
- A letter would be sent to Nigel Wood post World Cup on how well the tournament had been delivered and received

Group Activity Report

Parliamentary Questions

The Secretariat presented references to rugby league in Parliament since the previous meeting:

- Sir Bob Russell asked the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she would discuss with officials of association football, rugby union and rugby league to make it a requirement that players receiving head injuries must be withdrawn from play.
- The Rugby League World Cup 2013 was presented in a written ministerial statement by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.
- Diane Abbott raised the Hard Rock Café East London rugby league project during a debate on Olympic Legacy (East London)

Action – Secretariat: Note of thanks to be sent to Abbott

Early Day Motions

One Early Day Motions had been tabled since the previous meeting – Number 750 – *Steve Prescott MBE*

Public

The Group sent out press releases on the following public activities

- NRL CEO to speak in UK Parliament
- Parliament recognises life of Steve Prescott MBE
- Rugby League World Cup 2013 volunteers visit Parliament. Members from the Group joined as did London Sports Adviser Kate Hoey.

The Group received over 2700 visits since the previous meeting and now has over 1000 followers on Twitter.

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Political Animals Report

The Secretariat (also Political Animals club Secretary) discussed:

- William Hill has agreed to maintain sponsorship of the Political Animals for a further year
- The game against a World XIII is taking place on the morning of the Rugby League World Cup Final; hoping for TV coverage
- Commemorative hoodies and beanies have been designed and players can order by midday on Wednesday 27 November to receive for the game
- Ties have been ordered and will be made available to players as soon as possible
- Future game at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst to celebrate the creation of the British Army Rugby League

Partner Announcement

It was announced that William Hill had an offer to support the Group accepted.

Posthumous Award for Steve Prescott MBE

The Secretariat raised the growing campaign for the Man of Steel Award to be named after Steve Prescott and asked Members to let him know their thoughts.

RLWC2013

The Group reiterated how well the 2013 Rugby League World Cup had been delivered and received, and with the final to come, that it would be the best tournament to date.

David Gent of the RFL provided an overview:

- Over 400,000 will have attended World Cup games; many for the first time. 22% said The Big Hit would be their first experience of live rugby league
- 59% of ticket sales came from London & SE with 79% not on any RFL database beforehand
- Terrestrial television audiences had been high with nearly 3m watching the semi-final live and more watching via catch-up programmes
- There had been strong national press coverage of the tournament, raising the profile of sport
- Online and social media reached big new audiences during the tournament. For example, BBC Sport tweets on the World Cup go to 1.5m people
- There had been much high level engagement for the sport such as the reception hosted by Prince Charles for teams at Clarence House

The tournament had been a huge boost for the international game and demonstrated its importance to the sport.

RFL Policy Review Update

On Tuesday 19 November, RFL COO Ralph Rimmer attended a private meeting of the Group provide an update on the RFL Policy review. This had been a most welcome and useful meeting and the Group thanked Rimmer for his offer.

David Gent added the community game's desire to see the outcomes of the policy review adopted.

The Chairman reiterated the need for the whole game to come together.

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AOB

There was no business raised.

Main business concluded at 1825

Presentation

The Chairman welcomed Smith to the meeting, particularly ahead of the upcoming World Cup final between Australia and New Zealand.

Smith thanked the Chairman and began by presenting his route into Australian rugby league. He had been rooting for England in the World Cup semi-finals the Saturday before, calling the team's performance exceptional and a great testament to the sport. He acknowledged that his appointment a year previous had been controversial, both being a Welshman and coming from outside the game.

During his 10-day trip to the UK, he had made it a priority to speak with other leading sports administrators and clubs as well as politicians, including Sports Minister Helen Grant and others, as a means to establish contacts, create opportunities and share ideas. This type of approach was similar to that of the NRL generally - to make the body as strong as it can be on commercial and participation aspects of the game.

In Australia, rugby league represents 10-15 per cent of the daily print media and is a significant part of the national make-up of the country. Those in the UK don't realise the scale of the sport in terms of participation, with circa 2m people taking part regularly, with a further 600,000 – half of which are female - playing touch. This is supported by 100,000 volunteers operating as the lifeblood of the game.

The NRL is a substantial organisation particularly now rugby league operates under a single unified board – the first time in 108 years. Administration is often in the media and with a \$1.2bn television rights deal, the governing body had to step up in its professionalism.

With the intention to create an additional \$500m in sponsorship and central game revenues, the NRL would be a very significant business. He aims to double membership of NRL clubs to 400,000 and bring fans closer to their club, creating \$50m for each club per annum.

There were a number of priorities:

Participation

Growing participation to include families, and mothers specifically as they help create fans and encourage participation for life. Growing participation will increase funding which in turn would enable participation.

Reserve Grade Competition

The reserve grade competition will be nationalised and will be branded and administered by the NRL which would supply funding for three years to the point where the competition would be self-sufficient. This would enable local talent not able to play top-flight rugby league with the opportunity to play competitively and inspire the next generation in their local communities.

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Grass roots review

A comprehensive review of all junior rugby league sides is being undertaken to ensure all clubs and players can find a pathway to the top of the sport.

Diversification

600,000 players from touch football were now playing under the NRL through a partnership between Australia Touch Football and the NRL. There had been interest with from tag football to follow suit.

A nines competition would take place early in Auckland in 2014. Funded by the NZ government, it would look similar to a sevens tournament as a spectacle with big names, prizes and crowds.

Financial Security

Smith noted the importance of becoming independent on a single income stream. Next year, a surplus of \$250m-300m will be generated – the biggest in the game's history – and half of which will come from non-broadcast revenue. Whilst not-reliant on television money, a buffer must be created, and wise investment choices made.

NRL clubs had been asked to produce business plans. This had been a very successful undertaking and shown that some of the clubs are not viable in their current guise. That could now be changed and would ultimately lead to a situation where the NRL as a commercial entity would not take money from television agreements and create a surplus in own right.

This would require a new funding model to ensure clubs and states are in a healthy position, independent and not reliant on grants. The review of clubs had highlighted those with strong business models and areas that could be developed. The NRL had and would continue to work with clubs directly to improve growth and sustainability, a big cultural shift.

Brand and Reputation

There is a simple goal to appeal to 6m rather than 3m people.

An independent poll of the game highlighted that mothers think the game is violent and has poor off-field behaviour. With issues around peptides over the previous year, it was decided to create an integrity unit to ensure consistent application of rules and mitigate risk and reputational issues.

Salary Cap Review

A salary cap was put in place in 1998 and not reviewed since. Meanwhile, the sport had created the most competitive league and generated superstars. A review was being put in place to consider current remuneration levels and how they fit into the current landscape.

Social Media

Fans want to be a part of the game, and social media is a way to enable. The biggest social media activation in the sport is State of Origin, with #origin used in 1.8bn tweets in 2013. This had been monitored by 20 people in the NRL, who were able to update social applications and sites as trends appeared. The team and technology was so impressive, Smith demonstrated their work and its scale to politicians in-situ.

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Parliamentary Friends of League

Building on this work, caucuses in state and federal governments had been created to demonstrate the reach and importance of rugby league in communities. Called “Friends of Rugby League”, each meets once a month and issues are discussed with politicians are treated as insiders.

In Canberra, 70 MPs from all parties played in a recent touch State of Origin game.

International Game

By virtue of his role, Smith is part of the RLIF board. He felt RLWC2013 had done fantastically well and demonstrated huge potential for the sport. He felt there is a need to leverage the opportunities that come from such a wonderful job but international development is tough and money limited. However, the NRL will provide much of the funding because in best interest of game but there is a need to focus and target resources.

Ending, Smith raised press coverage in the UK, commenting on excellent viewing figures not translating across to traction within the UK press.

In response to questions about challenging the perception of the game as a regional sport to one seen as national, Smith raised Australian Rules Football which was being marginalised in Australia 18months previous and had been under threat from other sports, including soccer. However, it had been successful in its innovation and developing new structures. In the case of rugby league, a broader inclusive approach had enabled the sport to negotiate a substantial TV rights deal which generated significant revenue for the sport and with the partnership with touch football yielding increased NRL recognition through branding on kit, the sport’s reach and reputation and improved.

With the NRL as the content provider on television, there is much more in control within the sport and prospects created to use as a vehicle to develop additional commercial opportunities, grow pathways and widen participation.

On questions about the potential of a single body overseeing both codes of rugby or creating a hybrid sport, Smith felt this was too complicated and more to be gained for rugby union. Rugby league would take as many fans as it could from rugby union and other sports. Smith cited the example of touch football in Australia and NZ touch football – the second biggest sport in New Zealand – making contact to follow suit.

On social clubs and membership and expansion, Smith felt the sport had never pushed outside of its heartlands. He considers membership programmes essential to the long-term health of the game and with 2million people visiting their local leagues clubs but not previously engaged, there was opportunity to involve people on the side of the sport and bring them closer to the game and their clubs. He cited Rabbitohs and Bulldogs, both of which had embraced membership culture and were now the sports’ biggest clubs but had less than one per cent of fans as members. He noted churn rate remains high, but that could be redressed by reducing complacency in contact.

Expansion will not be considered until the end of 2014. Smith noted the AFL went from 16 teams to 18, providing more value to broadcasters and becoming more national. However, this meant teams were created where there was no support and the cost resulted in a net dis-benefit. Rugby league is heavily-centred geographically and may need to spread out, but options would be considered based on data received. A second tier structure would allow development and national growth and the potential to bring up tier-two clubs into the NRL as and when appropriate.

Victoria represents a substantial opportunity, driven by success of Melbourne storm. 500,000 Victorians watching State of Origin. Similarly New Zealand and the Pacific Island provide opportunity as many players come through New Zealand to play in the NRL. Both would need to be developed over time.

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Responding to questions about British players leaving the UK to play in the NRL, Smith acknowledged the market is attractive to top talent. However, he felt there cannot be inequity or substantively different remuneration in the sport across international markets. The local and international market was something the salary cap review would need to consider.

The Chairman concluded the meeting by asking for support in a similar fashion to that during the previous meeting with RLIF Chairman Scott Carter. He noted that people recognise the Group as a strong presence for the sport in Westminster and Whitehall but that the Group was looking to establish a network of Parliamentarians internationally. The Group is establishing links with France but is keen to make links with politicians in Australia to create a global network.

Action: Secretariat to take forward with NRL officials.

Meeting concluded 1932

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