



All-Party Parliamentary Rugby League Group

Ordinary Meeting Minutes

29th April 2014 Committee Room Six

Meeting commenced 1803

In Attendance

Members: Greg Mulholland MP (in the Chair); Karl McKartney MP; Yvonne Fovargue MP; James Clappison MP

Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation): Spen Allison; Maurice Oldroyd

Organisational Associate Members: Sue Taylor (BARLA); David Gent (RFL)

Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation): David Ballheimer; Pat McClusky

Other: Ian Lenagan (Wigan Warriors)

Secretariat: Mark Ramsdale

Apologies

Members: Lord Smith of Leigh; Lord Thomas of Gresford; Lord Prescott; Dr Therese Coffey MP; Jim Dobbin MP; Robert Walter MP; Lisa Nandy MP; Derek Twigg MP

Honorary Life Members (all, no affiliation): Sir Ian McCartney; Neil Turner

Organisational Associate Members: Nigel Wood (RFL); Ralph Rimmer (RFL); Ernie Benbow (1eagu3); John Roddy (Shield Group); Dave Groce (GB Armed Forces); Tony Colquitt; Ade Smith; Callum Irvine (Oxford RL)

Individual Associate Members (all, no affiliation): Ken Edwards; Michael Macdonald; Alex Mitchell; Martin Coyd OBE; Anton Muszanskyj; Iain McIlwee; Ikram Butt; Stephen Johnson; Jason Critchley

The Chairman explained the House of Lords was in recess before welcoming Ian Lenagan from Wigan Warriors and new Associate Member Pat McClusky. He passed on Wigan MP Lisa Nandy's apologies specifically as she was hosting another Group meeting that evening.

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous Group meeting were considered an accurate account.

Matters Arising

The Secretariat raised Associate Membership for councillors as an on-going activity. The Chairman re-iterated the importance of the new specific class of Associate Membership for the Group.

Correspondence

Sent

- Letter to the BBC regarding the removal of rugby league from the international version of the BBC Sport website.
- Letter to Lord Patten, Chairman of the BBC Trust, regarding the removal of rugby league from the international version of the BBC Sport website.
- Letter to the National Arboretum Memorial regarding a suitable tribute to rugby league players who died in service.
- Letter of support to Alex McKinnon, the Newcastle Knights player paralysed during an NRL game.

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Received

- Letter from the Chairman of Wembley Stadium thanking the Chairman for his invitation to the Annual Dinner.
- Note of support from the Cooks Islands Ambassador.
- Letter from the BBC regarding the removal of rugby league from the international version of the BBC Sport website.
- Letter from Lord Patten, Chairman of the BBC Trust, regarding the removal of rugby league from the international version of the BBC Sport website.
- Letter to the National Arboretum Memorial regarding a suitable tribute to rugby league players who died in service.
- Letter from William Hill regarding non-renewal of support.
- Copies of the NRL Annual Review.

Group Activity Report

Parliamentary

The Secretariat updated the Group on mentions of rugby league in Parliament since the last meeting:

- During the Easter Adjournment debate, Bob Blackman referenced London Broncos' relocation to the Hive as part of a growing problem for residents local to the club.
- During a reading of the Criminal Justice and Courts Bill, Guy Opperman raised the work of Featherstone Rovers amongst others who are providing academy-style work in Doncaster prison "and having tremendous success".
- Helen Jones, during a debate on domestic violence on 10 April, praised the work of Warrington Wolves and highlighted the need for more male role models.

The Chairman, various Members of the Group and the Secretariat, attended a reception in March on medical innovation at which rugby league related charity Joining Jack was present. The Secretariat (also Secretary of the Political Animals) is taking forward a potential game.

Public

The Group sent out news on the Annual Dinner and Ian Lenagan's address.

The Group now has over 1,200 followers on Twitter.

[Secretariat's note: the Group's twitter name is @UKParliamentRL] Political Animals Report

Political Animals Report

The Secretariat (also Political Animals club Secretary) raised the upcoming game against the Army Veterans side as part of a celebration of 20 years of Army Rugby League. All Members and Associate Members are eligible to play. Club ties and other merchandise are available for Members and players.

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Group Support

The Secretariat informed the Group that supporter William Hill would not be renewing its support for the Group and the Political Animals when their period of support comes to an end due to increased tax pressures on the industry. An open offer was made to Members of the Group to discuss the decision.

[Secretariat's note: Current Group supporters are the RFL, William Hill, The Shield Group and Tetley's]

The Chairman acknowledged the support of William Hill and the Group's appreciation for their involvement.

On behalf of the Treasurer, Lord Smith of Leigh, the Secretariat asked any Members or Associate Members who know of individuals or organisations who would like to support the Group and its work to contact him.

Annual Dinner

The Chairman spoke about the success of the Group's Annual Dinner and thanked the Secretariat, and the team at the RFL. All comments were positive.

AOB

The Chairman raised his involvement in an upcoming expedition with former and current soldiers to support the rehabilitation of servicemen and women through the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Mountaineering. Members and Associate Members were welcome to support.

Main business concluded at 1825.

Presentation: Ian Lenagan, Wigan Warriors Chairman

The Chairman welcomed Wigan Warriors' Chairman Ian Lenagan to the meeting, recognising the club's recent and current successes as testament to Lenagan's involvement. He particularly welcomed the opportunity to hear Lenagan's experience with other sports.

Opening, Lenagan thanked the Group for the opportunity to speak and offered Wigan's involvement with the Group as an Associate Member.

Often asked what Wigan does so well, Lenagan recognises Wigan's great past and current standing in the sport. He felt there are lots of positives for the club and the game as a whole. He believes the game is poorly managed but it can be transformed quickly, and can compete well against the antipodes.

In 2007, Wigan were losing £1million per year and had not won a trophy in years despite being known for breaking salary caps and employing the Great Britain head coach. The club was able to make changes within four years and in so doing was able to win each of the major titles in the UK twice.

Appointing Michael McGuire followed by his Assistant Coach Shaun Wayne was a risk but one that was calculated and risk is part of any business. Lenagan made clear that, after losing two semi-finals, replacements would be made a year later if the situation was not addressed. Since taking charge, the club has doubled turnover and generated nearly £500,000 profit and developed a great culture.

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The same approach was applied to Wigan as could be applied to any sport or any business, based on some key tenets:

- ask yourself where you want to be;
- devise a strategy to get to that point;
- stick to your strategy;
- put the right people in place to drive the business;
- execute well;
- be prepared to take considered risks; and
- be principled.

Wigan suffered when caught breaking the salary cap and their integrity was rightly questioned. To return to previous winning ways, the club needed embed the right culture. To do this, it needed to perform on- and off-field and demonstrate the right image over the long term and show loyalty to its fans.

There is a focus in rugby league on attendances. Clubs should concentrate on making things better. At Wigan, they recruited and retained good people. Lenagan interviews every employee of the club, including players. There was a focus on controlling costs. The club spends circa £100,000 below the salary cap due to its developing young talent. Revenue increased with ticket prices and the club spends heavily on sports science with the aim to measurably increase all players' abilities.

Of the 65 players in the club, 35 of which are in the first-team squad, 25 were developed through the club. They might take 24 players at 16, continue with eight at 18 and two into the first team. This was part of running any club, and the same happens at Oxford United Football Club. The club had to stop losing; then win and win regularly. Now, the club's target is to achieve a place in at least one final and one championship each season.

Collectively as a sport, rugby league always talks about how poor it is. There are so many positives within the game, not least because it is family friendly and the leisure pound is the one every sport is chasing. This is the area in which Wigan is working and it needs to be chased across the sport. Rugby league is a great game that is family friendly, good on TV and better in public. There are some great stadiums in the North West providing a great environment.

The club itself had to make things happen, and the RFL should do likewise. However, the focus of a governing body should be to administer rules and the community game. It should not be running the professional game; no other sports do it. The RFL should not be responsible for commercial marketing; it should be the role of the Super League.

Lenagan felt the RFL needs to alter its structure so that the same two people are not responsible for taking decisions within the Super League and the sport. The sport should play to its strengths and develop a coherent five-year strategy. Super League is in the newspapers every day in the form of women's football. Professional rugby league should be branded the Rugby League Premiership and Rugby League Championship. The sport needs to choose the right people as spokespeople such as Brian Carney, Ryan Giggs, Bradley Wiggins, and Russell Crowe.

Focusing on football, Lenagan had been on the Oxford United board for 18 months before being asked to represent their league (League Two) on the FA Council. From his experience, the FA was the best in the business. Rugby league should not fear football, however, as attendances and money continues to fall.

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Lenagan was pleased to see the appointment of a new Non-Executive Director to the Super League Board. There are still changes that need to be made, led by the clubs, but there are factions within the league.

There is a northern mentality within the game; the RFL should move from Leeds to London or Salford and promote the international game. London should be the jewel in the crown of the sport. The game should stop being negative and move forward; it is as good, and better, in many areas so should have pride in itself.

The Chairman reiterated his thanks to Lenagan for speaking to the Group and agreed that all were clear on the need for dynamism and taking risks to get the sport to where it needs to be. He felt there was nothing wrong with being a rebel leader and all in the game, including the Group, should be prepared to challenge where needed and find the best way to address issues and problems.

Opening to questions, the Chairman asked who Lenagan thought should be involved in the sport, what should happen and how it should happen. Lenagan felt it was very important to have a whole-game solution. As the governing body for the sport, the RFL holds and administers the rules. However, there is a conflict of interest for the Chairman of the RFL as he is also Chairman of Super League. No better was this demonstrated than with the RFL purchase of Bradford Bulls' Odsal Stadium without consultation of Super League clubs.

Super League should be like football's Premier League as the commercial entity in the sport to generate revenue; there is nothing better at selling the sport than the elite league. It should be responsible for driving forward the national and international game.

It was noted that the Football League did not want the Premier League format and that it happened regardless because the clubs decided en masse to leave the existing structure. Lenagan pointed out the Premier League is still within the governance of the Football League and he was suggesting the same structure as a proven model that many other sports use. It is up to the clubs to manage their own destiny with the right people in place.

Asked it could happen, Lenagan referred to the changing structure of Super League. He felt the Group could have influence if it chose to do so. A governing body should act as such, not focus on the commercial elements of the game. Lenagan paid tribute to the work of the RFL in delivering the community game; recognising it as one of the few governing bodies increasing participation and the only team sport with increasing numbers.

Super League had previously run the commercial side of the sport, prior to Lenagan's involvement. He felt that commercial control should be returned to Super League. He noted this opinion is not shared by all Chairmen and CEOs and that rivalry between three strong chairmen had caused friction and factions to develop.

Moving to questions about the game's geographic focus, Lenagan felt it should move away from its northern view; it should not refer to itself as such, as it is a national game. He noted there are more children playing rugby league in London than rugby union and many other sports. London Broncos will be relegated which need not be a bad thing if it means they come back stronger. What is needed is a strategy to deal with the dearth of a London Super League club. Super League should take over and could run London well, if people who know the market are employed.

On questions about behaviour of players and fans, and the authority of referees in football, Lenagan spoke of his experience with Oxford United where 75 people had been removed from the club for poor behaviour. Football needs

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to recognise the all-pervading strength of the referee and referees should have the authority to remove players for swearing. This might result in five-a-side for the first few games but would disappear soon afterwards as players recognised they could not behave in negative fashion.

Recent debate had taken place on playing two games over the Easter weekend, which were noted as having high attendances but had been seen by some coaches as detrimental for players and clubs. Wigan and other clubs had polled their players who were happy with two games. Lenagan would like to see an extra bank holiday weekend game, replacing a January game. This would have positive impact on season tickets as people are without money so soon after Christmas and it would push back the start of the season.

Picking up comments about the need to be positive within the game, a question on how people behave toward the sport was put. Many fans say things are being done the wrong way and the game destroys itself by putting itself down. The game has a northern base but there are opportunities nationally, particularly in London. A governing body should be there to govern; fans will follow strong management and clear direction whether that is based in Leeds, Wigan or London.

Representing the RFL, Participation and Partnerships Director David Gent focused on the game's community development. Rugby League was the only team sport to grow in 2013 and there is a clear strategy within the community game's development. The RFL faces two competing themes, those who play are in the community game and those who watch are in Super League. Most governing bodies have only to worry about the playing element and have the responsibility to grow their game. This was something all major sports struggle to deal with, but Gent felt there was a need to ensure a balance between these two seemingly conflicting aims.

The final question focused on independence of the Super League board. Lenagan reiterated the board's lack of independence caused by the duality of the CEO and Chairman of Super League being the CEO and Chairman of the RFL.

Closing the meeting, the Chairman thanked Lenagan and invited him to follow up with the Group in writing if he saw fit.

Meeting closed at 1919

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