



# A RUGBY CONVERSATION

R.J.P “Dick” Marks

Before the Rugby World Cup in Japan I had detected a lot of disillusionment with Australian Rugby, and alarmingly so amongst many rusted-on devotees who had declared that they were “over rugby”. For some winters now I noticed that golfing competition results announced late Saturday afternoons were now being made to packed rooms that used to be only sparsely occupied. Why, because after one or two post-game drinks many would leave early to go home to watch the rugby – but no more. Those in power who couldn’t understand why supporters got so “worked up” over one game in Japan showed why the earlier rebellious calls are now reaching a crescendo. It wasn’t over one game for goodness’ sake; for those hopefuls who were left, it was the straw that broke the camel’s back and for the governing elite to be in a state of denial was and is no way to appease them.

I received a phone call from a great rugby contributor and indeed a very good Wallaby player. He said he wanted to advertise some advice on how to escape the current rugby malaise in this country. “Malaise” might not be the appropriate word as with a malaise it is difficult to identify the exact cause. He then said, “I want you to write it” and I replied “Why pick on me?” His rationale was that I had been close to the action for over 50 years beginning as a 19 year old Wallaby and playing through the Thornett/Catchpole era which produced a record win against the All Blacks and a winning and drawn series against the Springboks. “More importantly” he continued, “you helped to set up and run a National Coaching Scheme that contributed to taking us from the rugby doldrums to a Bledisloe Cup series win, our first ever Grand Slam and a system that produced a team to win two Rugby World Cups.”

I was still hesitant when he trotted out other relevant experience on the QRU Board, attendance at many ARU Council meetings, being a state selector, a broadcasting comments man, coaching manual author, an inaugural member of the International Technical Committee and drafter of the Game’s Charter.

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I said, “Have you left anything out, but in any case I’m only a feather duster now.” Not to be discouraged he reminded me of my role as a current trustee and part creator of the successful Ramsay Foundation Schools Competition Scheme. And with the John Eales Award night coming up he said, “Weren’t you recently awarded the prestigious Joe French trophy for services to Rugby?”

I caved in and asked what he wanted me to write. He said, “Well, start with the two main problems we have.” That was easy:

1. Forget about copying New Zealand and getting their coaches. If we are going to copy anything use our own template, the one that took us from the bottom of the heap to the top of the pile.
2. We have declined over the last two decades because we have had the wrong people running the game and they have got worse with the dreadful constitution that Mark Arbib drafted. Good rugby brains have been sacrificed for Democratic Elitism in which the board and its Nominations Committee choose most of the directors.

“Where do I go from here?” I asked.

“Start with the mistakes the National Union has made and we can finish with a solution.”

I said, “How much space do I have for the mistakes?” but agreed to limit them to about a dozen over a period with the 12 to exclude the failed technical leadership of the 2019 RWC campaign – not having a settled combination for Japan was the worst of many.

1. Making Ewen McKenzie the virtual CEO of the Wallabies and prematurely giving a woman authority over hardened Wallaby campaigners (no problems when merit based);
2. The Western Force fiasco;
3. The format of the NRC;
4. Australia’s lack of attention to the botched Laws of the Game;
5. Slavish copying of New Zealand and the “quick fix” mentality that led to the appointment of Robbie Deans;
6. Over focus on diversity;
7. The demise of our great coach education system;
8. Involving itself in social issues best left to Governments not only made RA more focussed on the political football than the rugby football but got them into all sorts of legal problems;
9. The elimination of the volunteer Sub-Committee System thereby excluding the best rugby advice available. One El Supremo never works and won’t out-perform good systems and processes. A one-man band never gets the support of a knowledgeable panel;
10. Waste - well over 100 RA employees and at one stage RA had four highly paid “gurus” in the High Performance Department;
11. The demolition of the AIS scholarship system and a totally inadequate substitute for developing youth talent. Our current promising under age and schoolboy crops must be better managed than their predecessors;
12. The substitution of a virtual unitary system of governance at the expense of the successful federative one. The latter gave WA the Western Force whereas the former took it away;
13. To make it a baker’s dozen, throw in the latest of its involvement in destroying Ballymore as a rejuvenated and much needed Reds venue

“If that’s enough, what did you say you wanted now?”

*“Do you think the RA board can unscramble that egg?”*

“No, but a new one could.”

*“But don’t they have four experts about to provide solutions?”*

“First of all, the Wallaby problem is only the symptom of the wider one that relates to the whole infrastructure. As for the panel, they are all good blokes but you have a rower, a sacked executive general manager of cricket team performance, an ex Wallaby and RA’s top technical bureaucrat who oversaw the RWC disaster. Each no doubt has something to offer but perception is important and it’s not a good look. Three of those people are either on rugby boards or recently so and one is an RA employee so there is an element of Caesar judging Caesar there.”

*“OK, but people want to know how it should be done and not with just cosmetics.”*

“There has to be major change in the administration but in leading to this I would prefer to take a road that would give the present RA dignity, the media and the Rugby public confidence and one that would save money. I’m not going to do that, however, because the informed opinion is that because of the state of denial that RA is in, it wouldn’t co-operate. I am therefore outlining the hard liner version which is based on suspending the Constitution for 12 months and establishing an interim board or a war cabinet, if you like. It could then conduct the comprehensive review of the entire rugby landscape that is needed and it could be assisted by the following process:

Australian rugby worked very well under a sub-committee system until it was abandoned in favour of in-house policy making. At the Game’s expense control became a CEO priority. The aforementioned “war cabinet” would need to temporarily reconstitute some of these groups with volunteer members. These would include the following:

1. A Technical Committee to review the player, coach and competition structures.
2. A Community Rugby Committee to assess the grassroots scene including the schools and clubs systems and their interaction with the NRC.
3. A Finance Committee to study the whole underfunding of Australian Rugby –there has been too much flirting with bankruptcy.
4. A Constitutional Committee to eliminate the iniquitous Nominations’ Committee, to deal sensibly with the “independent directors” failed experiment and to revisit the federative v unitary systems of governance.

Without mentioning my preferred candidates to be on that interim board there is a major consideration to be taken into account.

Rugby in Australia has two camps and two competitions in SANZAR and Rapid Rugby. These administrations must eventually amalgamate to the mutual advantage of both and in the national interest as well. Having someone in the War Cabinet to push that objective would be essential.

How to achieve this outcome is the \$64,000 dollar question and should involve two operations:

A recognition by the two Major Member Unions that we need to start again and that they as shareholders with the votes initiate a special meeting of RA to install an interim board for 12 months before we return to elections under a new Constitution.

A concerted effort by the rugby public to support this action by emailing the National Body at the first address with copies to the QRU and NSW RU. The court of public opinion is really important and you can send your emails to:

*customer.service@rugby.com.au, david.hanham@redsrugby.com.au, reception@nswrugby.com.au.*

Alternatively, you can leave your comments on this article on the website, [www.letsfixaustralianrugby.com.au](http://www.letsfixaustralianrugby.com.au). If you agree with what this article stands for, and you wish to lend your voice to help make a change, you can also add your name to the petition which can also be found on the website.

My caller said, “That’s what I want – something radical, revolutionary and rational instead of mere tinkering. Our weapon will be floods of urgings from the public”

I said, “You want me to write all that?”

He said, “No, I’ve recorded it so I’ll edit it and it goes in under your name.”

That was that and now you have it. ■

