**Editorial : Truth Commission**

Here at Sitter! we often get little notes passed on, either at the bottom of subscription renewal notices, or anonymously sent, urging us to investigate one soccer scandal or another.   
Invariably they relate to the political and administrative doings of New Zealand Soccer. Sadly, often we are far too stretched to delve deeply into the allegations of hypocrisy, ineptitude, or maladministration presented.   
The signed notes usually end with something like: “... but this is not for publication and please don’t use my name in association with anything you write”.   
In a sense it is a cop-out. If more of the moderately high-profile figures in the game ready to mutter their dissatisfaction about the way soccer is being run were prepared to put their name to the things they really think, we’d probably be a lot further advanced in a public understanding of what is wrong and what is right about our game.   
But at the same time, they have a point. What’s wrong with anonymous whistle-blowing if it fixes a problem?   
Because New Zealand’s soccer media is relatively weak, there has been a paucity of in-depth analysis or comment on the massive political and structural upheavals in our game over the last five years.   
We get enough of the once-over-lightly, dutiful reporting of press statements. But there is a lack of rigorous scrutiny. This has directly abetted not only some appalling decision-making and eccentric administrative methods we’ve lived through, but also a widespread ignorance of our own sense of history.   
Structures have changed almost yearly, while numerous high-profile figures have come and gone, with suprisingly few value judgements made in the public domain on their contribution to the game. You probably know less than you think about any of them.   
Which is why, for want of a better term, I think it’s time we had a “Truth Commission” in New Zealand soccer.   
In 1995 South Africa established such a commission as a mechanism for fostering healing after the repressive years of apartheid. It was a chance to put everything in the open — what happened, what hadn’t happened, who was to blame, who wasn’t. It was a means to rehabilitation.   
That commission touted intangible concepts such as dignity and honour and cleansing of old wounds in its brief to produce an official history of the atrocities of the apartheid era. People told their stories, often simply to end the long official silence.   
In many ways the history of New Zealand soccer (and New Zealand Soccer) has been no less aberrant than South Africa’s political and social life. We’ve had our own atrocities. But unlike South Africa our worst ones have come since 1995.   
In the wake of the latest seamless transition from one chief executive to another, with hardly any explanation (and the position not even advertised) maybe it’s about time we forced similar exposure of the inner workings of soccer’s state machinery.   
Now we have a new (read “old” if you like) chief executive we need to similarly strip away the veneer of nobility that still surrounds the game here. We need a means to refute the specious claims we have digested over the last five years. We need to know what is really going on, from top jobs being dished out without being advertised through to the interesting interlocking administration of the national body with one of its constituent clubs (Kingz).   
Here are some “truth commission-type” figures in the game I’d suggest we have not heard the full story about, or would be well served in hearing more of their views: Bobby Clark, Keith Garland, John Morton, Harry Dods, Allan Jones, Roger Wilkinson, Noel Robinson, Keith Pritchett, Lorraine Storey, Joe McGrath (come to think of it,  Joe would probably require his own special truth commission), Kevin Fallon, Wynton Rufer, Kevin Stratful, Jock Irvine, Sandy Davie, John Euston, and whoever it was who signed Bob Patterson’s contract (ask around — nobody will admit to it. Does this mean he didn’t have a contract?).   
You’ve probably all got your own hunches on the value these characters added to the game, and whether, in the cowboys-and-indians world of soccer politics they were goodies or baddies.   
But what I’m suggesting is a forum for information to be put forward for a public re-evaluation.   
Here’s why. According to the NZ Soccer party line (as recorded in board minutes) Joe McGrath was/is a fantastic coach that we were dead unlucky to lose. By contrast the anecdotal evidence of just about everyone else in the game is the complete opposite.   
Let’s consider a couple of other topical cases.   
Bob Patterson has recently become the Peter Doone of soccer. He’s effectively been ousted from a pivotal leadership role, and been, temporarily at least, handed a back-room post.   
However, unlike the Doone case, where a media frenzy quickly exposed failings and mistakes, and what really went on, we in soccer have not had anything like an explanation for why Patterson “agreed to step down”.   
I happen to think it’s good Patterson has been replaced. Nevertheless, the soccer public have been treated with contempt. If a CEO is being dumped, it surely begs an explanation. If we don’t want Patterson as CEO, why should we then keep him on the payroll, working from home?   
Equally, if, as some like to think, it was a case of Patterson jumping because his dignity had been sullied by the curious Kingz-NZS tie-up with Sky, why the hell can’t he jump properly?   
Does it not beg the question why anybody would quit as CEO than take up another cosy little niche with the same organisation?   
What on earth is going on here? The lack of transparency is still astounding considering the gushing platitudes we’ve digested in the supposedly new “federations era”.   
Chairman Kevin Stratful has showered praise upon Patterson. “Mr Patterson has done an excellent job in moving the game forward in the last 12 months and has been a major driver behind the new federations structure and national league initiatives,” he said.   
So why didn’t you beg him to stay, Kev? Why were there no expressions of regret he was leaving? Where is the money for his wages coming from? How much is he being paid for not being our CEO? And why the hell do we never advertise our vacancies?   
Incidentally, we predicted the Patterson-MacGowan musical chairs last April if you recall the cover of issue 34. But the stench of bullshit is overpowering.   
Then there is the strange case of Kevin Fallon. His departure as national U17 coach has become every bit as messy as his arrival.   
Cast your minds back a couple of years and you’ll recall how Fallon was signed up after the U17s appeared to be all over the show under Wynton Rufer’s tutelage.   
Fallon’s appointment was for political reasons, but having appointed him NZS gave him no support, and there were no accountability checks until his contract with NZS ended on November 30.   
Fallon, who it should be recorded attracted official complaints from parents of U17 team members, said he had no contact with the national body before reading in newspapers that Mike McGarry and Steve Fleming have been put in charge of the under-16 side to prepare for qualifing matches to the 2001 under-17 tournament.   
Ken Dugdale, acting as NZS director of soccer, said he spoke to Fallon and heard he wasn’t interesting in working under the umbrella set-up he envisioned.   
Coaching can be an ego-dominated business. But it is hardly good for the game that we’ve had yet another senior international appointment last little over a year.   
I have no problem with Dugdale being the arbiter of appointments. But again, is it good for the game that such important posts are not advertised?   
I asked Roger Wilkinson, head of the independent Nascat (National Association of Coaches and Teachers) for his views on the Fallon fallout.   
He reckoned Fallon has been badly treated.   
“We all have had love-hate relationships with Kevin,” he said. “He has tremendous strengths and tremendous weaknesses, but this is no way to treat a coach.”   
So what’s the answer?   
“We need a technical think tank put together to lay down a coaching policy for the next 5-10 years.   
“Once you’ve got a policy, then you shape a structure to make it happen. You make appointments for the long-term good of the game. Personally I’m still trying to work out the logic of having U17 and U20 coaches based in the South Island when most of the top players of that age group are in the North Island. If anyone can explain the logic of that, I’d be happy to spend some time with them.   
“Under the Stratful regime our systems, quite frankly have become worrying.”   
Encouragingly, Dugdale says steps have actually been taken to initiate “think-tank” activites, with an encouraging response from most coaching quarters.  
  
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I can’t understand the determination of New Zealand soccer to ditch the term “national league”.   
The re-instituted “national league” is of course this year called the Ansett (for the interim) National Club Championship. For some reason saying “national league” — a term the socer public is well familiar with — is a no-no.   
Joanne Gibson (NZS Operations) put out a press release in early April urging editors to refer to that handle rather than the far more popular national league.   
     “Could everyone please ensure that every reference to the Ansett National Club Championship, including both print and broadcasts be named specifically this.   
At present there are still a few references to the New Zealand Soccer National League, this league is called the Ansett National Club Championships...”   
Okay, I can understand NZS’ main drift here is a mention for its sponsor. But National Club Championship? It’s a meaningless, nebulous concept, which could stand for anything from a superclub format, to North and South Island leagues, to er, a national league.   
By contrast the term “national league” has history, prestige and mana on its side. Even if this season we must endure a non-standard format with rugby-style bonus points, what is wrong with preserving what remaining traditions we have and calling it a national league?   
Incidentally Joanne Gibson is doing a top job in trying to spark media interest with national league previews despatched weekly. It’s a promising development.  
  
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Speaking of the Ansett national league (oops, there we go again, sorry) try nominating a more dodgy corporate entity on the NZ commercial scene since the word Alpherville disappeared from our vocab.   
Hard, isn’t it? Ansett earned the worst imaginable consumer profile after cynically stuffing the public and their own staff around with their ham-fisted, cynical pilots’ lockout last year — an effort which was nothing more than an undisguised effort to manipulate their market value through a troglodyte industrial relations policy.   
At the time the sponsorship deal was signed Ansett was denuding its own planes as part of the preparation for sale and establishing a new name unsullied by their bastard industrial relations.   
In other words, perversely, we picked up their corporate logo at a time they were preparing to dump it. You never like to knock folk putting money into soccer (somebody please tell me they are actually putting serious money in and not just giving us a 15% discount on flights) but it is all too easy to see very dark symbolism in Ansett’s arrival — gate 32, delayed by industrial action.   
When this issue went to press it was unclear what Ansett’s new name, and thus the longer-lasting handle for the national league (bum, said it again) would be. Wouldn’t it be neat if by some miracle the new post-Ansett airline entity was called “National League Airlines”?   
But whatever the name, the term Ansett National Club Championship is destined to be the shortest-reigning league name in New Zealand’s history.  
  
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I’m trying to recall the last time we had a decent riot in New Zealand soccer.   
I once saw North Shore hordes jubilantly invade the pitch at the end of an enthralling Chatham Cup tie (yes, it was a very long time ago), but as for something “going off” I just can’t place it. Please write and tell us.   
I know it must have been very recent otherwise we wouldn’t be subjected to the gormless yellow-chested goons who stare at us at every Kingz home match.   
House of Football did fandom a great service by lampooning the zealous excesses of security staff at Albany. So for the third issue running, three cheers for HoF.   
The piece on security staff at Albany was almost like something Michael Moore might have done on “The Awful Truth” in terms of public service television.   
Ironically, the only time I can recall a security incident at Albany, the staff were absolutely inept at dealing with it.   
During the Central-Dunedin Chatham Cup final in 1998, a Central fans threw a buring flare onto the perimeter of the pitch.   
A security guard tried in vain to stamp it out with his boot, which then threatened to catch fire itself. So he did the natural thing. Simply turned around and faced the other way and pretended the flare didn’t exist.  Brilliant. Where do you buy those things anyway?  
  
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Last issue I pontificated at length on national identity, or lack of it, in New Zealand soccer.   
How topical then, to see the new McDonald’s soccer poster in circulation. It advertises the national club championship draw and New Zealand international matches (has us down to play Middlesborough on May 21 — we’ll see), but its most dominant feature is a jubilant Davor Suker, exploding off the page, rejoicing with arms akimbo.   
While this will go down a treat with the Croatian hardcore at Central United, it would appear a little incongruous on a national league poster. Perhaps the designers figured Wynton was over-exposed (you wouldn’t generally associate him with the national league anyway) but hell, they could at least have featured Mark Elrick. Why waste all that immaculate grooming?   
However what disappointed me more was the snubbing of All White Che Bunce. At the bottom of the poster it features the mugs of 16 current All Whites (sadly Elrick looks like Manuel out of Fawlty Towers on this occasion, while Jonathan Perry looks like he’s just got out of bed) plus Ken Dugdale and Mick Waitt. The text line reads: “All Whites squad 2000. Other All Whites include Danny Hay, Simon Elliott, Jeff Campbell, Josh Stick, Aaron (sic) Lines, and Raf de Gregorio.”   
The only omission is Bunce. Given his raw-boned approach as the epitome of Kiwi graft and endeavour, he’s not a figure you would normally quickly forget, so the lad has genuine cause for worry here.   
Despite those quirks, the poster is a praiseworthy effort to publicise the game among the youth of New Zealand. I personally gave out over 100 at (as it happened) Bunce’s former high school.   
The irony of Bunce’s absence and Suker’s presence was lost on me at the time. What did strike me was the tragedy in giving out well-intentioned posters in a major city where there is no national league club within 100km, and the senior All Whites have not been seen for over 30 years.  
  
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I can’t believe the stick Noel Robinson has copped, even from Sitter! contributors, for getting tired of waiting for the $25,000 odd from the Kingz.   
Robinson, a former NZS councillor, and CEO, who did most of the spade work in setting up the Kingz, has been slagged for not toeing the “party line” as a good soccer bloke, in pursuing a liquidation order against the Kingz.   
The argument goes Robinson should have waited, now that Sky are about to come on board. The bottom line is this is a commercial issue, not a “soccer” issue, as evidenced by Showtravel NZ Ltd's subsequent effort to also have the company wound up, claiming to be owed in excess of $100,000.   
it would be absurd to suggest that, because he is a soccer fan, Robinson shouldn't be allowed to recoup his money while other creditors can.   
To put the spat in clearer perspective, the following detail may help readers understand a few things.   
Robinson stood down from the Kingz board to avoid any conflict of interest when he was elected to the NZS board.   
The other Kingz directors approached Robinson to buy his shares back, (ie, not the other way around.) Settlement date was October 1, when the Kingz crew, who initiated the buyout, remember, turned up with just half the agreed amount. Numerous other settlement dates came and went. (“Tomorrow, next week, next month” — sound familiar?)   
Robinson waited three and a half months before legal action was filed in mid-January. That’s well before a Sky deal was anywhere near being a reality.   
Yes, the liquidation move was embarrassing for the Kingz. But if they were so confident about the Sky deal, why didn’t they borrow short-term to pay Robinson out? In other words, ensure they had arranged creditors rather than unarranged ones.   
As I say, it was a commercial spat. In the era of professional sport, where it is all the rage to use business-speak, like calling your team a product, then it’s hard to argue that other business terms and practices shouldn’t also apply.   
I am a season ticket holder, and I want the Kingz to succeed. But not at the expense of norms of business behaviour or any other form of propriety. ***— Bruce Holloway***.