

# WIND OF CHANGE



## FROM THE TOUCHLINE

Mark McGhee says the meeting of SPL managers to discuss the game's future came up with some good ideas

**B**EFORE any of the changes proffered at the Hampden meeting on Wednesday can be ratified, those not present have to give their consensus.

There were six SPL managers in attendance. We discussed several issues and arrived at conclusions over these issues that were unanimous and represent change which we all see as being good for the game in general.

Modern managers accept that, as well as having the responsibility of coaching the players and creating a winning team, they have to recognise their clubs needs and restrictions and work around those. Every decision that we make has to be done with two hats on.

The suggestions that were made and discussed at Wednesday's gathering were done so with the intention of improving the standard of our game while also giving consideration to the economic climate that persists at this time.

The clubs represented enjoy, or in some of our cases endure, a variety of different financial circumstances. But the factors that affect their ability to produce players are the same for everyone.

The under-21 rule was one area that was discussed. My opinion is that this rule was brought in at a time when it was necessary to coerce all the clubs into including younger players in their squad and to give the youth development side an incentive to produce players.

It has now become unnecessary to enforce this requirement. A combination of economic necessity and changed attitudes has resulted in a much greater willingness to introduce young players. We had seven players under the age of 21 in our squad at Aberdeen last week.

When I was a young player teams were allowed two subs then three and today its seven. The under-21 rule means that on many occasions there are players involved who are not good enough and who have not earned that privilege.

They are there to make up the numbers. This just disguises whether there are players who are good enough or not. At Aberdeen, we felt that the under-21 players we involved were good enough and had earned their chance but I would still like the option not to include these players if they did not deserve to be included.

The structure of our game is important to allow young players a path to the first team but we have all been finding that the reserve team is a limited option for the modern game. We all require greater flexibility in playing matches to give those players not in the starting 11 match practice.

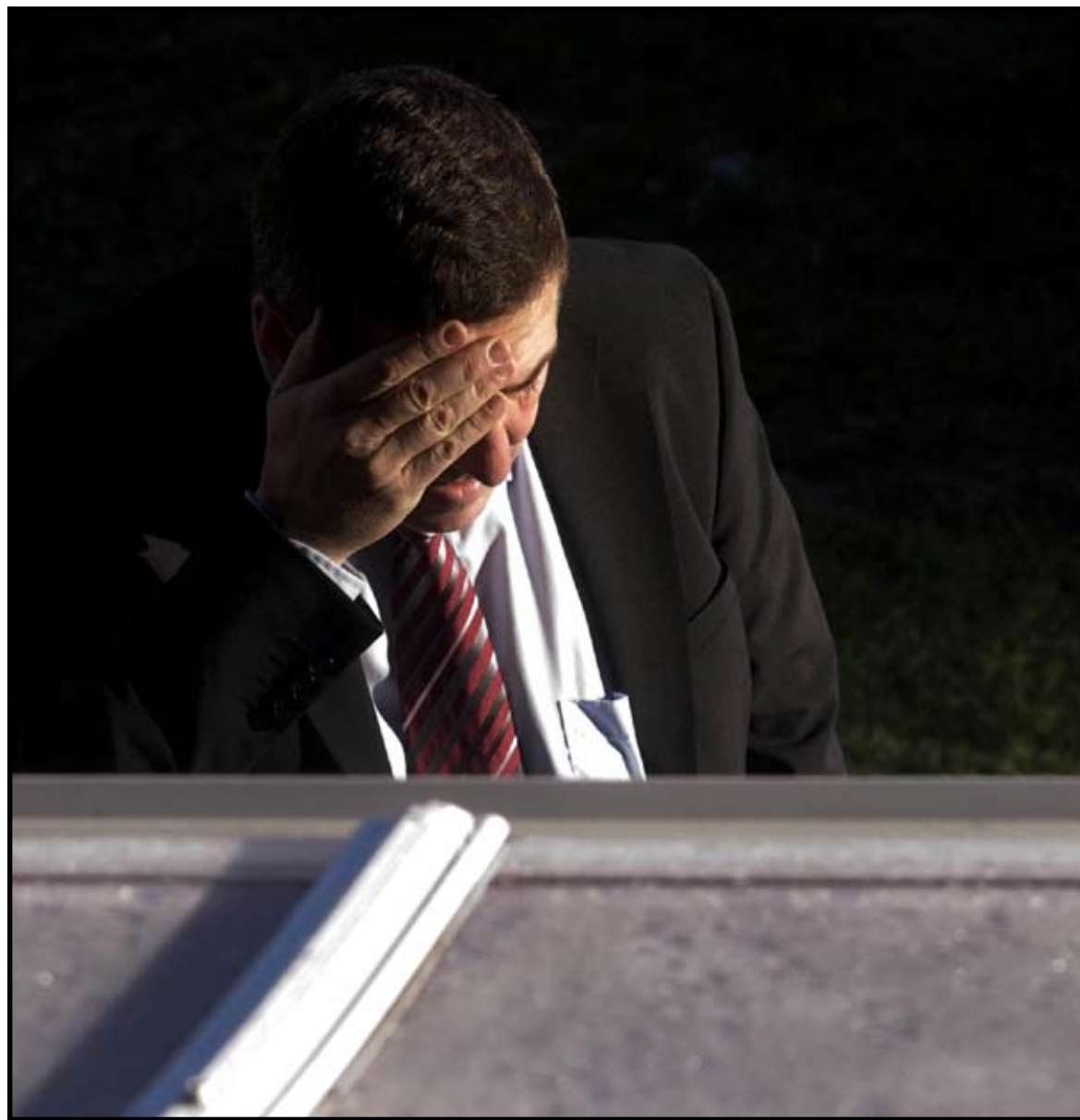
The combination of the under-21 rule and the restriction of scheduled reserve team football mean that clubs such as Rangers and Celtic are required to retain players who would be better served being on loan and gaining competitive experience at lower division clubs. Clubs of Motherwell's size are forced, by necessity, to retain players who we know will never make our first team.

The option to arrange matches when we require them and not to be restricted to pre-ordained dates or venues will be much more satisfactory and serve our purposes better. I hope the clubs not represented at Wednesday's meeting feel similarly.

The hot topic of refereeing was discussed and an announcement should be made soon, again subject to the others' agreement.

When I was invited to join the group that met in midweek, I suspected that it would be a good opportunity for us all to flap our gums and air our grievances without serving any practical purpose or being a vehicle for any real change. Instead I was delighted with the determination displayed by all the managers present to improve and continue to modernise our game and to make tough innovative decisions for the good of the game.

I worked in England for 17 years prior to returning home and am as



Mark McGhee believes the under-21 rule has outlived its usefulness

Photograph: SNS

well placed as most to make comparisons between the two countries. We do not enjoy the levels of financial input that the English game does but we are rich in other ways.

The quality of people working in the Scottish game is astonishing. As supporters you may not always appreciate this but I assure you that you should not be fooled by the hype given to the English Premier League and Championship. There are lots of

poor matches in both those divisions and there are lots of management performances that are questionable.

I am in no doubt that all of the managers that I have faced in the SPL would do a great job down south.

We have to be careful that the performance of managers such as Owen Coyle doesn't cause chairmen south of the border to look north more often for talent and that we then see a draining of our best people

to the detriment of our own game.

These are ephemeral times when change is constant and is demanded by us all. We all want the latest phone, game console, car, iPod and football manager.

I would implore clubs and their supporters to recognise what you have and back your managers. Considering the resources available to many managers in Scotland, they do a remarkable job.

## Olympic chiefs reward 'Europe's last dictator'

### THE INSIDER ANDREW JENNINGS

OLYMPIC bosses have created a special award honouring the sporting achievements of the man branded "Europe's last dictator".

When Belarus president Alexander Lukashenko isn't closing critical newspapers and sending his riot police to club opponents, he presides over the Belarus national Olympic committee. Last month, at a meeting of the European Olympic Committees (EOC) in Istanbul, he was hailed for "his outstanding contribution to the Olympic movement".

Lauding Lukashenko, the EOC

president Patrick Hickey, an IOC member from Dublin, highlighted the success of Belarusian athletes at the Beijing Olympics. They won 19 medals – but two are now in doubt. Samples given by the silver and bronze hammer throwers are being re-tested for illegal testosterone. One has already served a two-year ban for an earlier offence. In September two other Belarus athletes were given doping bans.

According to a Norwegian delegate in Istanbul, the award was dreamed up by Hickey and two other officials. "I do not know what Lukashenko has done for the EOC," she said. "Delegates were not given the opportunity to vote on the award. President Hickey made the presentation before the meeting."

Among the goals of the EOC is "the spreading of Olympic ideals".

Hickey has headed Ireland's Olympic Committee for 20 years. When he was re-elected in October his EOC announced that Hickey's

**I do not know what he has done for the EOC. Delegates were not given the opportunity to vote on the award**

"commitment in Europe has been highly beneficial for the Olympic movement".

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus for the past 14 years. Opposition protests

are crushed by riot police and he is always re-elected. European election monitors in 2006 noted "a pattern of intimidation and the suppression of independent voices was evident throughout the campaign".

Reporters Sans Frontiers says: "The free press has virtually disappeared ... media outlets must register with the authorities and are constantly scrutinised by the secret police."

Lukashenko has hired British PR guru Lord Tim Bell and his company, Bell Pottinger presumably to put a gloss on his image.

The Olympic movement has a long history of succouring tyrants. Olympic Orders were bestowed on Nicolae Ceaucescu, Bulgarian dictator Todor Zhivkov, East German ruler Erich Honecker and Manfred Ewald, who devised East Germany's doping programme.

In another surprising move at the EOC congress, president Hickey presented their 2008 Order of Merit to French Olympic leader Henri Sérandour – who resigned from the IOC in 2007 ahead of a reprimand from the IOC's Ethics Committee. The previous year a Paris court gave him a three-month suspended jail sentence and a €20,000 (£17,400) fine after it was discovered he had awarded Olympic contracts to a company employing his wife.

The Sunday Herald asked the British Olympic Association, members of the EOC, if they had been consulted about the award to Lukashenko, what had he done to deserve it – and did they approve? They promised to reply – but did not. We tried to put these questions to Patrick Hickey but his office said they could not contact him until next week.