



**CHAIRMAN'S REPORT - MR GEOFF WANT
AHRC MID-SEASON MEETING 28 FEBRUARY 2008**

It is only four months since the annual general meeting in Melbourne but it has been an extremely busy period for most people involved with the harness racing industry, regardless of what form their involvement takes.

Obviously the devastating equine influenza outbreak created a stressful environment and it is pleasing to see the worst appears to be behind us. The national strategy of “control and eradication” of the outbreak appears to have been successful. Nonetheless, there are still many challenges ahead as we negotiate the road to recovery.

Hopefully yesterday’s EI forum will provide some clarity on the many issues we need to tackle in the months ahead and it is vital we work together as an industry to meet these challenges.

There were some excellent presentations.

The findings of the Callinan Inquiry, due in late April, will be critical to our future and we need to aggressively pursue matters such as compensation, if our lawyers deem this a possibility. The cost of protecting our herd in the future is also a vital issue and we cannot allow our industry to be burdened by expenses over which it has no control.

Rod Pollock, who has represented the AHRC on various EI committees and in discussions with other equine bodies, will be updating Council members today on some vital matters, including the federal horse disease levy bills and our submission to Animal Health Australia on re-categorisation of EI, which could have a significant bearing on industry costs.

The levy bills are extremely inappropriate in the circumstances, especially with the costs already incurred through no fault of the equine industries – and with the Callinan Inquiry still to hand down its findings.

It is difficult to draw positive conclusions from the destructive EI outbreak, but one must surely be the magnificent way in which harness racing administrators and participants responded to the crisis. Whether they were in the hardest hit areas of Queensland and New South Wales or in other states, their reaction was positive, professional and deserving of the highest praise.

This praise must be extended to the state and federal regulators and agencies, who were well prepared and efficient. We may disagree with some of the things that happened, but we cannot argue with the effectiveness of their actions.

Despite the distractions of EI the Queensland Harness Racing Board progressed towards incorporation and I wish Bob Lette and his team all the best as they venture forth as an independent entity. At the federal level we have not been able to agree to turn the AHRC into a company limited by guarantee, despite the recommendations of the incorporation working party headed by Ross Cooper.

I accept that several members are opposed to the concept.

Nonetheless, it is worth remembering why the working party was created – fundamentally, to strengthen the national body and make it more effective. If we are still committed to this objective, as I believe we should be, then we must explore how it can be achieved.

To date, all that has been achieved by the exercise – and a lot of work by Dean Cooper and Ross Cooper and the working party – is that we are changing our name to Harness Racing Australia as of this weekend.

Some of the issues advanced in responses to the proposed new constitution covered an expanded executive, voting, funding, and effective implementation or mandating of national rules. These should not be ignored. There also are aspects of the proposed constitution which should not be abandoned simply because of opposition to other elements of the document.

I believe we should now focus on reviewing the overall structure and objectives of the national body. It is 34 years since formation and the Laysell Report contained some pertinent recommendations, but little (if anything) has been done to change the formal structure or the objectives.

Sir Frank Ledger, the first president of the organisation, said when it was created in 1974:

“The establishment of a national council of trotting is one of great historical significance to the trotting industry in Australia and it is to be hoped that the progressive spirit of the founders will continue to grow through the years to build the Council into a national body of the highest administrative standard.

“Its long overdue formation will enable Australian trotting controlling authorities to achieve greater unity of purpose.”

I urge Council members to embrace *“the progressive spirit of the founders”* and undertake a review to determine what our organisation should be 34 years on. Rather than what members do not like about the recommendations put forward by the incorporation working party, I would prefer each member to determine what they want from the national body and to identify issues which should be addressed.

I strongly believe this will result in a more relevant and proactive national body.

There are other topics in the agenda for today's meeting which will require some discussion or which will update members on key matters which are being progressed on their behalf. There is an update on insurance, a status report on the RISE database integration project and a copy of Council's submission to the Australian Taxation Office for taxation reform for industry participants.

I also commend to you the submission from the WATA on syndication of standardbreds, to help in attracting new owners to our industry. Whilst I have some questions on the WATA proposal and don't agree with some aspects of it, I support the concept. It is imperative we strive to grow our fan base and attract new owners to harness racing.

There has been considerable debate at Council meetings in recent years on possible changes to stakemoney thresholds and at the Perth mid-season meeting a year ago it was agreed that

the Graduation handicapping threshold be raised in stages, to \$2,500 last September and to \$3,000 from the 1st September 2009. Our members have been divided however on the merits of increasing the Metropolitan Class threshold in excess of \$8,000.

Racing and Wagering Western Australia is currently considering a local handicapping rule change to raise this to \$10,000 whilst Harness Racing NSW has also prepared a revised submission on this matter. This submission was not ready in time for inclusion in the agenda for this meeting, but it is to be presented to the Integrity, Rules and Handicapping committee for consideration. It is to be hoped this issue can be resolved in the near future.

It is pleasing to again welcome HRNZ chairman John Penney, chief executive Edward Rennell and their colleagues to our meeting. Several delegates to this meeting were in Christchurch in November for the World Trotting Conference, which HRNZ did an outstanding job hosting. It was a productive and informative conference and all the Australian attendees played an active role in the sessions and committee meetings.

Whilst our major immediate challenge is the recovery from the equine influenza outbreak, the world conference showed most countries have similar issues, including building brand awareness and market relevance and growing the fan base.

In Australia I also believe we need greater control over our brand – it is imperative we work closely with our wagering and broadcast partners but we must retain some control over what they do with our product, especially in terms of presentation. We must continue to review and adjust our product to improve presentation and market acceptance, to embrace emerging technology and to make wagering more appealing.

I hope we, as an industry, will continue to strive for unity of purpose, in the manner envisaged by Sir Frank Ledger and the founding fathers of our organisation. Most of all, I have a fanciful notion that one day the Australian racing industry will unite to compete for a greater share of the leisure dollar. Unfortunately, too many people in racing see the other codes as competitors, rather than poker machines, casinos, lotteries, other sports and so on.

I understand the importance of market share in some states, but that should be a secondary consideration. I have no doubt some thoroughbred programming is designed to impact on the wagering turnover – and therefore, market share – of harness and greyhound racing. Such

behaviour is not only petty, but shows a lack of initiative and confidence in their own marketing and a lack of understanding of racing's true competition in the battle for the leisure dollar.

There are some good things happening in harness racing around Australia and I have had the pleasure in the past fortnight of inspecting two of our most exciting projects – the NSW Harness Racing Club's redevelopment of the Menangle track and complex and the Harness Racing Victoria development at Melton. I have no doubt they will be tremendous venues at which we can showcase the very best of harness racing and wish both organisations well in bringing the projects to a successful conclusion.

The Inter Dominion has occupied a great deal of time in the past year with the debate over the future of the event, the creation of the marketing fund and the dissolution of the IDHRC. My thanks to everyone involved in what, at times, has been a difficult process. Special thanks go to Robert Marshall for his stewardship of the IDHRC in recent years.

The success of the Inter Dominion initiatives will be reviewed in the coming weeks and there will no doubt be adjustments to such things as marketing plans, but no-one should under-estimate what has been achieved in the past year, despite the disruption caused by EI.

We will not rebuild the Inter Dominion brand or grow fan awareness in a few months, but I strongly believe we are heading in the right direction.

Thanks to all members and HRNZ for their co-operation on the marketing fund and thanks also to all the sponsors who continue to support harness racing, including Barastoc who recently signed up to sponsor the Grand Circuit.

Special thanks to Watpac, SEW Eurodrive, Australian Pacing Gold, Tabcorp, Sky Channel, the Metropolitan Harness Racing Club and Seelite for their sponsorship of the ID08 pacers and trotters series.

Best wishes to all clubs conducting Super Saturday meetings this week and thanks for their efforts in trying to build the Inter Dominion brand nationally.

Most of all, congratulations to Neil Busse, John Anderson and all at Harness Racing Victoria for the hard work they have put in to making this year's series a success and best wishes for a fantastic final night on Saturday.

You deserve good weather, a huge crowd and strong wagering turnover and, hopefully, two grand finals that will be talked about in the days and months ahead for all the right reasons.

Many thanks to the AHRC staff for their dedicated efforts on our behalf and to Bob Lette, Neil Busse and Ray Sharman for their support and hard work on the Executive.

Again, thanks for your attendance and best wishes for a productive meeting.

Geoff Want
Chairman

Please Note: On 1st March 2008 Harness Racing Australia Inc (HRA) replaced Australian Harness Racing Council Inc (AHRC) as the organisation's name. All AHRC's formal structures, rules, regulations, policies, processes etc., now pertain to HRA, and any reference to Australian Harness Racing Council Inc, AHRC, Council or The Council shall mean Harness Racing Australia Inc or HRA.