

Stand up for the Ulster Economy 2013/14

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It's nearly time to Stand Up for Ulster Men again as the rugby team get ready for the 2013/14 season! As with economic success, winning at the highest levels of rugby's modern era requires a coherent strategy, decisive leadership, unwavering dedication, and a relentless execution of the agreed plan of attack.

We saw all of this and more on display from Ulster Rugby for much of the season just passed, as the Belfast-based team led the way in the Pro12 league and put in some great performances in the European Rugby Cup.

But whilst the local rugby team remains highly competitive and successful, the local economy continues to sit at the wrong end of many economic league tables, despite some strong statistics in certain areas, and some recent improvements.

There has been no shortage of aspiration and ambition in growing or rebalancing our economy, but delivery and getting the ball over the line has often proved to be more difficult. It's certainly not a simple case of just blaming the game plan, management and players. But are there things we can learn from Ulster's rugby success that will benefit us on the economic front?

Ambition and radical reform on and off the pitch are the key hallmarks of Ulster's recent success. In February 2010, Ulster Rugby's new chief executive Shane Logan laid down the gauntlet on what he hoped to achieve. *"The aim over the next few seasons will be to make Ulster Rugby a world-class organisation, both on and off the pitch"*. In a newspaper interview Logan was explicit in aiming for the top and spoke of transforming professional rugby across Ulster's nine counties. Not only would Ulster become the best club in Ireland it would be the best team in Europe. At the time, these claims were likely to have been greeted with some eye-rolling and smirking – not now!

On the political field of play, last week saw a new ministerial broom arrive at the Department of Finance & Personnel, to replace a hard act to follow in political heavy weight front row forward Sammy Wilson. In his first week in post, Simon Hamilton (*an Ulster Rugby fan*), wasted no time by addressing a sell-out crowd of CBI members. In some respects, the new Finance Minister's narrative drew parallels with Shane Logan's vision of transformation, setting the bar high for Northern Ireland's public sector to become the most innovative in the world. To achieve this requires *"the relentless pursuit of one aim – reform"*.

The emphasis on reform was welcomed by the audience as a breath of fresh air. Of more importance, however, will be the breadth of fresh actions delivered in the months and years ahead, something that Logan was able to produce after his visionary pronouncements. As a start, a new Public Sector Reform Division will be created to help DFP become the driver of reform, the catalyst of change and the enabler of innovation. It is encouraging the new emphasis that has been placed on the public sector as a driver of economic activity. It recognises the need to focus on, to use an analogy, expansive fifteen man rugby as opposed to the 10 man version (forwards plus 9 and 10) that Northern Ireland is more familiar with in economic delivery. Reform can no longer be kicked into touch and instead the ball of reform needs to be kept in hand.

So what else can the Northern Ireland economy learn from Ulster Rugby's transformation?

Skills, innovation, enterprise, investment and competition are areas in which Ulster Rugby has made great strides, and its team's performance has improved as a result. And central to Ulster Rugby's success has been the focus on leadership, skills and experience on and off the pitch.

In this respect, looking to New Zealand, is not a bad plan. When aspiring to be the best in the world, often the starting point is looking at the world's best teams and trying to replicate their success. In rugby, learning from the All-Blacks – the current World Champions - is the natural starting point and is used as the benchmark of best practice. In New Zealand, rugby benefits from being the national sport and therefore is the number one priority. Rugby is also very much part of the culture and national pride.

Ulster's new Kiwi coach Mark Anscombe has a proven track record of delivering with New Zealand's under 20 squad and is now in charge of Ulster's senior squad. Meanwhile, local coach Brian McLaughlin is in charge of developing the junior squads and the stars of tomorrow. This also highlights a blend of local and international coaching talent that will rub off on players and staff alike.

This excellence and experience extends to the rest of the back room staff such as physiotherapists, medical staff and strength and conditioning coaches. Management roles and responsibilities are well defined and filled with experts, invariably with experience gained outside of Northern Ireland. There is a clear structure related to function within a meritocratic organisation.

The spirit of competition runs through Ulster Rugby and is one aspect that the economy needs to emulate. This stems from the fact that the team has to be successful for the business to thrive and vice versa.

The demands placed on Ulster's players are much greater now than ever before and these become institutionalised into the culture of the club. Competition within the squad is intense and this in turn drives up performance and enhances skills development.

In all positions players have become stronger, fitter, faster and more skilful. Transparency of performance has also been enhanced. Practically no aspect of performance is neglected from conditioning to nutrition; or fitness to recovery. The sophistication of data measurement from tackle counts, yards covered etc all aid this process, promoting competition and improving overall performance.

Not only is Ulster Rugby's management more porous to external influences and experience, so too is the team. Ulster Rugby has successfully imported foreign talent and blended it with home grown talent. This has been particularly important for key positions such as scrum half / outhalf (Ruan Pienaar), front row (John Afoa) and second row captain (Johann Mueller). There is also a successful blend of youth and experience with a number of successful role models that younger players can aspire to. Clearly, this foreign investment is bringing up the standard and enhancing the skills of the local players.

In rugby, management is also prepared to make tough decisions. Performance is paramount and there is a low tolerance threshold for poor performance. The coaches need it; the management demand it and the ticket-paying fans expect it.

Former Ireland rugby manager Eddie O'Sullivan, who now often appears as a pundit for Ulster matches on BBC, did not have a goal of winning X number of games in a season. Instead, he viewed this as an outcome of each player achieving his own objectives. In past economic strategies Northern Ireland has been too prescriptive at achieving targets such as narrowing productivity gaps with the UK rather than delivering concrete milestones that are more tangible.

The new NI Finance Minister quite rightly posed the question *"Why shouldn't we aim for public service excellence delivered by excellent public servants"*. Like Ulster Rugby, Northern Ireland needs to widen the appeal of the economy being the number one priority beyond the traditional season ticket holders of the IoD, CBI and the Chamber of Commerce. Over the last decade, Ulster Rugby has broadened its appeal and focussed on developing an attractive, entertaining, inclusive experience for a wide section of our society. Even

supporters of opposing teams are always guaranteed a warm Ravenhill welcome. All of this plays an important part of Ulster Rugby's overall brand which in turn helps to drive revenues.

Clearly the public sector is a huge driver of the economy. The skills and experience within our public bodies needs to reflect this key role. We need to devise and implement world-leading economic strategies. We need international-class experts in planning, procurement, public sector delivery, economic strategy, policy development that could hold their own in the best equivalent organisations in Europe. This is something that lies within our control. Being porous to external influences and attracting international experience to key positions is something our public sector and our economy at large need to do.

The silverware of a rebalanced, dynamic economy that can compete with the best in Europe awaits!

Richard Ramsey

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