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Dear Councillors

As you know, I had prepared a document for you for consideration at the last meeting on the ITTF/WTT matter. Due to the length of the meeting we did not have an opportunity to discuss it at that time. Since then matters have moved on considerably.

Diane Webb asked me to prepare an article for publication in the Table Tennis Times magazine which I have done and this has been published. This article gives you an update on the current position, however, this may move further before our meeting.

For me, this is very concerning and I do believe Councillors should be aware of it and the ramifications, not just on sport around the world, but in particular, this country.

### **TABLE TENNIS TIMES MAGAZINE ARTICLE**

#### **Worrying Times at International Level**

I have had some concern for some time that the ITTF appear to be taking decisions that are reducing the benefits to most of its affiliated members, the 200 plus national associations, by weakening the structure that enables them to grow and prosper also the direction that the ITTF are taking at the moment, driven by WTT, would only boost a small number of the top associations and the leading 50 world ranked senior players.

This concern has been accelerated by the formation of WTT (World Table Tennis) which is hugely controversial. WTT is a company which has acquired the lucrative ITTF marketing rights. Its Chair is Liu Guoliang, who is also President of the Chinese Table Tennis Association. Its Directors include ITTF Chief Executive, Steve Dainton, Marketing Director Matthew Pound and Khalil Al-Mohannadi from Qatar, who is also a member of the ITTF Executive Committee.

The objectives of the WTT are:

#### **VISION**

Expanding the global table tennis economy to ensure the sport is financially vibrant from the top down and, to elevate table tennis to the upper echelon of world sport which will encourage more people to play and consume table tennis.

#### **MISSION**

To become the global table tennis commercial leader by transforming the table tennis experience and how it is delivered internationally through world-class entertainment events, engaging fan-centric content and enhancements to ensure that table tennis will have a profound impact on everyone's lives worldwide.

These are basically similar to some of the objectives of the ITTF, although the ITTF objectives are much wider.

This poses the question of why a company is needed to be formed to pursue these objectives, so moving the control of our sport at international level to a very small group of ITTF staff members and officials and who are largely out of the control of the members of the ITTF, the National Associations.

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All of this has caused a major split amongst the elected officials at the top of our sport. The President, Thomas Weikert of Germany, sacked the Deputy President, Mr. Khalil Al-Mohannadi, only for the Executive Committee to decide to reinstate him and then to continue to run the sport themselves. We understand that this matter is now subject to court action from the President.

My first concern with the ITTF was more than 2 years ago when they reduced the number of teams able to participate in the World Team Championships. This has been recently either 96 or 72 men's and women's teams. This was reduced to 32 although this has increased to 40 at the Board of Directors meeting last November. This means that many countries who have for decades been regular supporters of the World Team Championships, will not be able to participate any more. The effect of this will take away some of the incentive for their players to put in work and commitment to represent their National Teams if they have no chance to represent their country in the World Team Championships.

My second main concern is the changes which have been made to the ITTF ranking system. The ITTF system, was similar to the one in England, which has always been based, in the main, on the results of the matches played on the basis that players who win a match gain points and players who lose, then lose points. This has generally produced an accurate list. The new arrangements, instead of awarding points for wins and losses, award them to players who reach certain stages of competitions and, therefore, the players who enter more competitions are able to gain more points. This has the advantage of encouraging more players to enter the competitions but has the disadvantage of making it more difficult for players who do not have the resources to participate in a lot of events in different parts of the world, so as result having their ranking position diminished. This produces a ranking list without the same level of accuracy and shows up significant anomalies, with the players who can play in more events going higher and the players who do not have the opportunity going lower.

My third concern is the development of WTT who have launched a new competition programme with four major Grand Smash tournaments with huge prize money and huge ranking points. This proposal also reduces the importance of the World Championships, the Olympic Games with the World Team Championships, already diminished by the loss of around half the teams to have no ranking points at all, so reducing its importance even further. Following recent discussions, the ranking points for the Olympic Games and World Individual Championships have been increased so that they are the same level as the Grand Slams, but there are still no ranking points for World Team Championship matches.

A further problem with this is that the cost for Associations to stage these Grand Smash events is so high that it is unlikely that National Associations who are the main organisers of the Open Championships, particularly in Europe, would not have the resources to be able to host these events. In fact, the WTT has now employed a European Manager, presumably to expand the running of WTT events in Europe, which may have an adverse effect on the position of the European Table Tennis Union and the leading associations who have staged important Open Championships for decades, as there are only a limited number of dates in the calendar.

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One of the effects of all this is to reduce the opportunities for most countries, including Scotland, Wales and Ireland to play in the World Championships. Under these new arrangements the England men would qualify, the women may not. If for any reason Liam Pitchford was lost to the team, it is quite possible that the men would fall out of the top 40 in a few years time based on the rankings of the Junior and Cadet players in England coming through at the moment.

With regard to the main WTT events, the Grand Smash tournament, it is very unlikely that many of the other English players would be able to afford the costs of participation in their main events with the high ranking points, as currently the events are all either in Asia or the Middle East and are very expensive to play in.

The removal of ranking points will take away the incentive for the best players to represent their National Teams in competitions and, therefore, reducing their relevance to their top players. This would affect many countries throughout the world. There are 226 members of the ITTF and it would only be a small number who would gain benefit from these changes with many much worse off.

I have seen first-hand how damaging all this has been with Scotland, Wales and Ireland where selection for the National Team is a very important part of their programme. The loss of the opportunity for their players to play in the World Championships demotivates their will to train and fight for places in their national teams.

This has an adverse effect on their whole High Performance programme in those associations with not just the seniors, but also sends a negative message to their upcoming juniors and cadets. There are also major concerns that all of this, including the downgrading of team matches at international level, may have a negative effect on Club National Leagues in Europe and generally reduce the importance and relevance of team matches at international and national level.

The formation of the WTT also takes away the control of the sport from the democratically elected officials, as the ITTF Board of Directors and the Executive Committee have effectively handed control of its competition programme over to this company.

The vision of the ITTF, going back to the very early days, was to promote and expand table tennis throughout the world and the size of the World Championships was one of the main ways of doing this. They did this so that most, rather than a much lower number of national teams could compete. When we last staged the World Championships in Manchester in 1997, over 125 countries participated.

I have no doubt that all the plans that are being implemented at the moment would be of major concern to former ITTF Presidents, Ivor Montagu (England) Roy Evans (Wales), Ichiro Ogimura (Japan) if they were still alive. I am also confident that Adham Sharara, who has been President for most of the last 25 years, is also very concerned about these developments.

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I have received copies of letters of concern from some of the leading Associations in Europe, in particular the German Association. In a letter under the signature of Hans Wilhelm Gab, former President of the ETTU, who expressed significant concern about all of this and felt that there was a major conflict of interest between WTT and some of the ITTF leading officials. He was also worried that the disempowerment of National and Continental entities was a serious impairment to the grass roots of our sport.

The Belgium Association have recently circulated a letter complaining about the effect that the ranking system has on the opportunities for top players in Europe to make progress in the world list, the cost of participating in WTT events. The Japanese Association are also showing concern, and the Swiss and Belgium Associations have also sent letters in the same vein. China are in favour of WTT, as are Hungary and Qatar.

An intervention from Sandra Deaton at the last ITTF Board of Directors meeting helped to stop the ITTF giving even more power to WTT.

At this stage it is not clear how all this will develop. The ITTF AGMs have been curtailed due to the Coronavirus but will now take place in September with the elections for the President, Deputy President and Executive Committee.

The outcome of these elections may well have a significant effect on sport and its future prospects in many areas of the world but, at the moment, everything looks very uncertain.

We would all like the sport to benefit from better and improved marketing, more sponsorship and TV coverage and stronger funding streams, but ....

1. Why does this have to be done in a way that damages, to such a degree, much of the existing and traditional infrastructure which has done so well and done so much to support, promote and develop the sport over many decades?
2. Why does this need to be under the control of the most powerful table tennis nation, together with a small group of unelected officials?

It lacks transparency and has no direct involvement of the large majority plus the National Associations who are the bedrock of our sport.

**Alan Ransome OBE**