

SPECIAL FEI ELECTION ISSUE

BY ANNAÏK LE FLOCH

“A shadow of doubt”

Six days from now, the FEI will have a new President – there is no female candidate since Princess Haya decided not to stand for a third term in spite of having prompted a change in the Statutes for that purpose last spring. The number of candidates competing for this position is unprecedented: there are still five people in the running since the Spaniard Javier Revuelta Del Peral withdrew. In alphabetical order: Ingmar De Vos (BEL), Pierre Durand (FRA), Pierre Genecand (SWTZ), Ulf Helgstrand (DEN) et John McEwen (GBR).

But these elections are a cause of concern, distrust and suspicion, including among some of the candidates for the presidency. The Spaniard Javier Revuelta announced he was withdrawing his candidacy on November 12, one month ahead of the election. He accuses Ingmar De Vos of “*conflict of interest*” as a result of being the current Secretary General and as such able to make use of the whole FEI apparatus to campaign, and of blatantly trying to influence a number of decisions during the election period. In his letter withdrawing his candidacy he says “*I think Mr. De Voss should have resigned from his position as Secretary General the day he announced he was a candidate: being both Secretary General and Candidate flies in the face of all the principles of impartiality and equality during the election process.*”

A CAMPAIGN PLACED UNDER THE SIGN OF INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

And the letter sent out to the various national federations concerning the voting procedure appears to prove him right. The questions and answers session that will follow the presentation of each candidate in Baku will be subject to unusual rules. Any federation that wishes to ask a question must do so in writing to the FEI in advance, and it has already been announced that it will

not be possible to answer all questions! This cannot fail to arouse suspicions. Will this not foster further inequality of opportunity between the various candidates since there is a risk of interference through the choice of questions, and quite simply due to the fact that some candidates inside the FEI have today have priori access to this information!

A FEDERATION THAT EXPLOITS OPACITY

Suspicion is an underlying constant that appears in every interview and is no doubt the outcome of the FEI's increasingly opaque and arbitrary mode of operation.

More and more presidents of national federations, veterinarians, journalists and riders are asking questions or demanding explanations about failure to comply with sports regulations including at events of the very highest level such as the WEG, failure to impose penalties in cases of proven infringements, concealment of results of toxicological tests carried out on horses that die at competition venues, etc. And every time the same answer in hackneyed phrases couched in legalese amounting very much to “*move along now, there's nothing to see!*”

With its huge machinery that handles millions, the FEI seems to have forgotten that it was set up as an association and that the way any association must operate is to allow members to express their views democratically and influence the policies implemented, in practice and not just through articles in the statutes that can be circumvented at will depending on the whims of certain individuals.

CONCURRENT MANDATES: AN INFRINGEMENT OF THE STATUTES

And what about the idea put forward by Mr. De Vos

during the election campaign of holding the positions of President and Secretary General concurrently? In a democracy, this would be equivalent to being elected both President of the Republic and Prime Minister. At the FEI, this would mean both the definition of strategy and the choices in sports policy — which are within the remit of the President and the members of the Bureau who are elected — and their application and daily implementation and management — which is the role of the Secretary General appointed for that purpose (who an employee who reports to the elected officials). At least that is what is set out by the statutes as they stand today: a separation of powers as between “*strategic management*” and “*operational management*”.

This idea caused an outcry based on the fact that legally these two positions cannot be held concurrently without changing the FEI’s statutes and governance. According to Pierre Genecand (another candidate in the election), if this is done in accordance with the procedures for amending the statutes, it could not come about before 2016. Which would mean that if Mr. De Vos did not resign from his position as Secretary General, even if he were elected, his election would be invalid.

WHAT ABOUT COMPENSATION FOR THE PRESIDENT?

Mr. De Vos eventually gave up the idea of illegally holding concurrent positions but only to immediately react by announcing the he would convene an Extraordinary General Assembly in the spring of 2015 to amend the statutes so as to allow compensation for the President (currently not permitted by the statutes). The problem is not so much whether a president should be entitled to compensation or otherwise. It is the fact that such a request is being made a candidate running for election whereas the question has never been submitted to the members of the FEI, nor have they been given time to examine the multiple consequences such an amendment might have.

A NEW FIGHTING PAIR: MCEWEN / DE VOS

The latest development occurred on December 4: an alliance between John McEwen who announced that, if he were elected President, he would take Ingmar De Vos as his Secretary General, as is attested by this excerpt from a letter addressed to the national federations that will be voting Sunday in Baku:

“If I had the honour of being elected I would be in a position to deliver that ‘best of both worlds’ as a President committed to our guiding principles and committed to working with Ingmar as Secretary General. It is, I believe, a solution which delivers the right sort of leadership and gives our sport the right mix of continuity, evolution and partnership at the top of the FEI.”

A BUNDLE OF HASTY DECISIONS WHICH, TO SAY THE LEAST, ARE INAPPROPRIATE

There are other topics of grave concern for many stakeholders in this election period when generally the structure runs on its own steam and simply oversees day-to-day business in the interim prior to the new president taking over. Curiously there is feverish activity with appointments, *resignations*, legal decisions, inter alia, in key areas for the future of equestrian sports, many of which involve competitive endurance. In the last month, there has been:

- The sudden *resignation* of Graeme Cooke, head of the veterinary department. The latest suspected doping cases in endurance, whitewashed by the FEI along with threats made to the veterinarians who touched on this sore point, are no doubt in some way related to this so-called resignation! It certainly looks a lot like the principle of fuses that melt so as to avoid the system being short-circuited. Difficult to believe that someone should resign of his own accord (just after being summoned to a meeting with the President), in just a few hours and in spite of having several appointments planned in the coming days. He was in his office in the morning, by noon he had packed and by the evening he had disappeared from the FEI!

Could there be a connection here with the Compiègne case, or else with a number of photos taken in Normandy at the WEG, both of which were being investigated by Graeme Cooke?

- The appointment as Director for endurance (to succeed Ian Williams who is *retiring*) of an illustrious individual, unknown to the world of endurance, called Manuel Bandeira De Mello, whose CV is riddled with untruthful claims his ties with endurance and who is involved in a court case opposite the Portuguese Equestrian Federation of which he was secretary and from which he was dismissed.

- Dropping of charges relating to deception as to the identity of the horse ridden by Hamdan Al Maktoum at the World Championship in Euston Park.

- The rejection of the application for failure to apply the FEI rules on qualifications at the WEG 2014 endurance event, raised in relation two horses among the top ten.

- The probable change (last Endurance Committee) in the format of the next championships where the historic, 160-km events would be converted to 2 times 100 km or 3 times 80 km!

European endurance is concerned and indeed expresses its deep disappointment which comes after a glimmer

of hope was set alight when Ian Williams — who suppressed the cases that have discredited endurance in recent years — announced that he was retiring.

The FEI must return to the standards of ethical sports where the horse's welfare is central or otherwise lose its legitimacy and collapse. This risk grows every time the white line of legality is crossed. Indeed, a European Equestrian Federation was founded in 2010 with 27 European countries whose initial purpose is to represent the interests of the European federations before the FEI and the European institutions, in keeping with the structure for soccer where the FIFA exists alongside

the UEFA. Nothing appears to prevent this federation, which now has some forty member countries, to extend its powers and take charge of all issues relating to the development of equestrianism in Europe, including international events held there up to the level of European Championships.

But is such an extreme situation desirable at a time when equestrian sports are being reappraised as to their olympic status because they have slipped below the fatal 50-nation threshold required to retain that status? As it so happens, endurance is no doubt in the best position to bring up that figure to the required 50 countries.

A new Director for Endurance at the FEI: Manuel Bandeira De Mello

Is this the right choice? A burning issue indeed.

On one side, there is the endurance world, a discipline under the shadow of several doping scandals and of sundry irregularities and therefore in need of turning over a new leaf.

On the other, the appointment of a new FEI Technical Director, Mr. Bandeira De Mello

- who is not familiar with endurance and has no link to or network within the discipline where he is unknown.

- who was not the organiser of the European Championship at Barroca d'Alva, nor was he the Chef d'Equipe for endurance, contrary to what is claimed in his Curriculum Vitae as circulated by the FEI, and as confirmed by Luís Manuel Cidade Pereira de Moura who has been President of the Portuguese Equestrian Federation since 2013. *"There is no connection I know of between Mr. de Mello and endurance. I do not think he was ever Chef d'Equipe for Portuguese endurance but that needs to be checked with my predecessors."* [Paulo Branco who was Vice President of the Portuguese Federation fulfilled those duties most of the time and was organiser of the Barroca d'Alva Championship – EDITOR'S NOTE].

But on the other hand, Mr. Bandeira De Mello

- is the subject of disciplinary proceedings within the Portuguese Equestrian Federation where he was Secretary. The proceedings were initiated in May and ended with his dismissal in July.

- ° is currently petitioning the Portuguese Labour Court with a view to obtaining severance payments

which explains the caution exercised by the Portuguese Federation when making statements, in spite of having no doubts about the content and evidence in the case file. The trial is to take place this Thursday, December 11.

It all started with what was felt by the Portuguese Equestrian Federation to be a *"betrayal"* by Mr. De Mello at the FEI Extraordinary General Assembly of April 29 where he represented Portugal and failed to comply with the instructions given to him by his own federation, i.e. to vote against an amendment of the statutes that would allow an FEI President to stand for election three times. *"The voting instructions were given to him in writing, adds the President of the PEF, and Mr. De Mello signed a commitment to comply with the Portuguese Federation's voting preferences. In actual fact, he voted in favour."* It is difficult not to put two and two together between his vote and the position to which he is suddenly promoted.

Since then, some grievances that go back to a period before Mr. Moura's presidency have resurfaced. There is talk of concealment of cases of doping of Portuguese horses, of embezzlement... Mr. De Mello denies these accusations, which is why the dispute has been brought before the courts.

The President has expressed his astonishment that he learned about this appointment from Mr. De Mello himself, on the 27th or 28th of November last, without receiving any prior request for information from the FEI about his former secretary or about the reasons he was dismissed. *"We will not just let things lie, but we are waiting for the court decision."*

What will the FEI do if the court decision goes against Mr. De Mello?