

# JONATHAN AGNEW



There is nothing more irritating in sport than the intrusion of politics, and in particular the behind-the-scenes bickering of the administrators who claim to be acting in the best interests of the sport, but whose only motivation appears to be to squeeze the games we love for every penny they can.

This week the International Crick-

et Council has been at loggerheads in Dubai as India, England and Australia attempt to seize control of the game's scheduling and finances while, coincidentally, the RBS 6 Nations kicks off this weekend with a power struggle in the background that makes a split in the rugby world a dangerous possibility.

It is timely that this brilliant tournament now has the opportunity to focus the minds of the administrators and remind them what might be lost if a much-feared European break up takes place. Sport must come first, and it is unthinkable to imagine a rugby calendar that no longer includes the great passion, the friendly rivalry and the unpredictability of the 6 Nations.

England travel to Paris for their opening match on Saturday without their centre Manu Tuilagi, knowing that to have a realistic chance of taking the 2014 title, they need to beat France. To achieve that they also need to break the unwelcome run of succumbing to the famously erratic French following a Lions tour, but if history does repeat itself, France would then be strongly fancied to go all the way.

Scotland and Italy are the only teams never to have won the 6 Nations since it was expanded in 2000 and neither looks likely to break its duck this time. Although England will not be looking forward to its traditionally hostile visit to Murrayfield next week, particularly with the pitch having been seriously damaged by an infestation of parasitic worms. The ground staff has resorted to spraying the pitch

with garlic, so at least the French should feel welcome when they travel to Edinburgh on 8 March.

Ireland and Wales are both perfectly capable of producing an upset if they gather some early momentum. Ireland bring great experience

into the tournament while Wales have the ever dependable goal kicker, Leigh Halfpenny, who will punish any opposing ill-discipline. His recently announced move to Toulon brings to eight the number of leading Welsh players contracted to clubs in the French Top 14 and reminds us of the uncertainty that lurks in the background

***'A split in the rugby world is a dangerous possibility'***

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