

## Kelly's Firing Creates Leadership Void within NHLPA at Pivotal Time

Written by Jeff Levine

Tuesday, 01 September 2009 16:58

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Yesterday, the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA), through its Executive Board, overwhelmingly chose to [remove Paul Kelly from his position of Executive Director for the union](#).

The NHLPA Executive Board, which is composed of one representative from each of the National Hockey League's (NHL) 30 teams, voted 22 to 5 (three reps abstained from voting) in favor of ousting Kelly, who had only been on the job for 22 months as the union's fourth Executive Director. The decision to remove Kelly was made during the NHLPA's annual meeting, which took place on Sunday and Monday in Chicago.

In the wake of Kelly's dismissal, NHLPA General Counsel Ian Penny was installed as the union's Interim Executive Director. Penny will serve in this position while the NHLPA attempts to find a new leader. As of now, neither Penny nor interim NHLPA Ombudsman Buzz Hargrove has expressed any interest in becoming Kelly's successor.

Hargrove, in an interview with the Toronto Globe and Mail, attempted to provide some insight into the Executive Committee's decision to fire Kelly by stating that, even after being on the job for nearly two years, Kelly had not earned the trust of the players.

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"I could only summarize it in that the players felt that given all the issues that they dealt with, not any one in particular, but with all of the concerns combined, they came to the conclusion that they didn't have the trust and confidence in Paul Kelly to lead the union into the future, especially with the CBA [collective bargaining agreement] coming closer and closer to an end.

Those outside the inner circle of the NHLPA are left to wonder what events led to Kelly's dismissal. Players reportedly perceived that Kelly was developing too cozy of a relationship with NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and that Kelly was not developing the necessary relationships with this constituency. Others speculate that Kelly was the victim of a [power struggle](#) between rival factions within the NHLPA. Regardless of the reasons that led to the dismissal, it is clear that there is a leadership void within the Union.

With less than two years before the expiration of the current CBA, players seem less concerned with, as the Executive Committee framed, "public relations hits" or maintaining leadership stability and more interested in acting on new information that was important enough to change the direction of union leadership. "The decision [to fire Kelly] was made as the result of the checks and balances we now have in our Constitution," said [Chris Chelios](#), a member of the player board. Fellow Executive Board member [Shawn Horcoff](#) echoed Chelios' message, saying that the new information that came to the players was "too hard for the membership to ignore."

Regardless of the true reasons for Kelly's firing, the dismissal of the former Assistant U.S. Attorney creates a situation where nobody is in place to prepare the players for a potential labor conflict in 2011. Both the union and the NHL are in a tenuous position; professional hockey is fighting to stay relevant within the United States, and another protracted labor dispute will further damage the sport's popularity. Thus avoiding a lockout or strike is in the best interest of the league and the union. However, striking such a deal is often built on trust, trust that can only be developed through building a relationship with the other side. Kelly had apparently already achieved with both Bettman and other NHL brass.

While Kelly may have not been the ideal Executive Director, he was working off a collective bargaining agreement that he inherited from ex-NHLPA chief [Ted Saskin](#). This upcoming set of negotiations was to be Kelly's real test. Now players are, for the third time in four years, faced with the task of electing another union head to lead the NHLPA into negotiations with the league at a pivotal crossroads.

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