

Lotteries in Saskatchewan, 1970–1977: Sport’s Money Tree or Lifeline?

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During the past two decades, “The Western Express,” “The Provincial,” “Lotto 649” and “Super Loto” have become household names throughout Canada. They are the labels of national and regional lotteries operated by the governments in the ten provinces bringing annually millions of dollars into provincial treasuries as well as providing dreams and fantasies for the millions of Canadians who lay down their hard-earned dollars in their hope that maybe the next draw will, “. . . be my turn.”

In many of the other provinces a governmental office markets the lottery with profits being directly administered upon decisions of the governments. In Saskatchewan the lottery is marketed by the provincial sport confederation, Sask Sport. The substantial profits generated are put into the Sask Lotteries Trust, a fund which ensures that they are divided on a ratio of 50%, 40% and 10% between sport, culture and recreation respectively.

A government official in charge of the lottery operation in a sister province has asked how it is that, “. . . any government in its right mind could give up such a money tree as the lottery operation—and to an independent sport federation!” The answer lies in a combination of an NDP philosophy, a technically capable provincial sport confederation being in the right place at the right time and a sense of western alienation which felt compelled to stand against Ottawa and Pierre Trudeau’s threat of intrusion with its own “Olympic Lottery.”

Getting into the lottery business was not an ethically easy decision for the New Democratic Party led by Allan Blakeney. There was a significant minority within the ranks of these “democratic socialists” which would have no truck with lotteries. These people represented the moral outrage present in the Party against all forms of gambling as a sinful pursuit—an insidious tax on the poor. Major lotteries were sweeping the country during these early 1970s. Negotiations had been underway between the four western provinces to harness the amazing financial potentials of lotteries to benefit provincial treasuries and to have the West stand firm against Ottawa. The dilemma for the NDP became apparent as they struggled with the obvious need for control over lotteries in Saskatchewan and, yet, how to not be seen as the agent of lotteries. Thus, they turned to an outside agency, one seen to be both at arms length from government and, more importantly, seen to be totally free from suspicions.

After a brief experience selling tickets for the Regina Exhibition Association's "Derby Sweepstakes" and operating its own lottery (the "Saskatchewan Sweetstakes"), the provincial sport confederation, Sask Sport, proved to the Government of Saskatchewan that they had the organization and technical-administrative expertise to become the single agency to operate this province's portion of the Western Canada Lottery Foundation.

The benefits to sport, culture and recreation have been most significant, and the envy of the rest of Canada. Hundreds of thousands of people continue to enjoy the benefits of this unique made-in-Saskatchewan "arrangement" in the management of lotteries.