

Clark, the Commonwealth, and New Canadian Sport Initiatives

Donald Macintosh
Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Recent proposals by Canada's former Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark to extend aid to third-world Commonwealth countries to assist them in improving sport performances so that they may compete more equitably in the Commonwealth Games, and to help to ensure that these Games in year 1998 will be held in a third-world country, are unprecedented in the annals of Canadian foreign policy. Up to this point, Department of External Affairs officials and politicians had assumed a "defensive and reactive posture vis-a-vis sport in international relations". To be sure, an International Sports Relations desk had been established in the Department of External Affairs on a part-time basis in 1972 in order to deal with the diplomatic exigencies of the first Canada Cup hockey series with the Soviet Union. But this desk laboured for years in relative obscurity and with minimal financial and human resources, except when called upon to provide expertise in a series of international incidents in sport in the 1970s that were to engage federal officials at the highest level. According to a number of central actors in these events, there were very few people in the higher echelons of External Affairs who saw the potential of sport in international relations.

There were signs, however, that this would change in October of 1987, when Joe Clark, and his counterpart in sport, the Minister of State for Fitness and Amateur Sport, Otto Jelinek, released a Cabinet memorandum that called for a greater use of sport to promote Canada's image abroad, and a larger role for government in the international sport movement. This was a time at which Canada was seeking to fill the leadership role in the Commonwealth vacated by Great Britain after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's fallout with the rest of the Commonwealth over her recalcitrance in imposing tougher economic sanctions against South Africa. Renewed sporting contacts with South Africa in rugby and cricket had caused Black African and other third-world Commonwealth nations to call for the suspension of Great Britain, the leading offender in these renewed contacts, from the 1990 Commonwealth Games in Auckland. These nations were also upset when Victoria was awarded the 1994 Games, claiming that they should have been awarded to the third-world city bidder—New Delhi.

It was in this atmosphere that Clark proposed a series of measures about sport in the Commonwealth at the meetings of the Commonwealth Committee of Foreign Ministers on Southern Africa in Canberra in August of 1989. Subsequently, the Commonwealth struck a "Working Committee on Strengthening Commonwealth Sport". This Committee's final report, presented at the October 1991 meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Governments, picked up on many of the initiatives in the original Clark proposal. Included in the report were proposals: to put the Commonwealth Games Federation on a sounder financial footing, and to move its headquarters to a third-world Commonwealth country; to provide funds to insure that the 1998 Games would be held in a third-world country; and to assist in raising the competitive level of sport in developing Commonwealth countries, as well as to help to reduce the inequities in participation in sport experienced by females.

Certainly, Clark was motivated in taking these initiatives by aspirations for a leadership role in the Commonwealth, and with Canada's efforts to bolster its international image as a supporter of third-world countries. But in selecting sport to meet these goals, Clark must have seen that dissension about sporting contacts with South Africa, and controversy over the sites for the Commonwealth Games, were a threat to an already fragile Commonwealth, and that putting the Games on a more solid footing would at the same time increase the stability and harmony of the Commonwealth.