

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE AUSTRALASIAN CRICKET COUNCIL 1892-1900

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The series of cricket tours and matches played in England and Australia, which commenced in the southern summer of 1861/62, were neither representative nor official nor responsible to a national authority in either country until the creation of the Australasian Cricket Council in 1892.

The English team of 1861/62 was a direct descendant from groups of professional cricketers who had for decades been playing local teams in the provincial areas of England. These entrepreneurs had taken unto themselves imposing titles of which *All England XI* and *United North of England XI* are typical examples.

The visits of Englishmen to Australia commenced in 1861 and the legendary W. Caffyn, "The Surrey Pet", and the captain, H.H. Stephenson, bravely repeated their 1859 pathfinding to North America by joining this expedition. These visits were to be haphazard, informal and at irregular intervals. The teams were never to be fully representative of first class cricket in England although they were of satisfactory strength for the contests provided by the Australian colonies. Subsequently many great amateurs came on these tours as did many high ranking professionals.

By contrast the Australian visits to England, commencing in 1878, were made at regular two year intervals until 1890 under various sponsorships and arrangements. However, these were always private enterprises in which the players formed themselves into partnerships with the profits going to the partners. There was no authority in existence to control their activities. The regularity of these visits led to the inevitable; the development of an "establishment" of the players who, from tour to tour, formed a core of the membership of the team as well as being an initiating group in the arrangements of the tours. This arrangement was to become the subject of much controversy filling many columns in the newspapers for over thirty years.

For the early tours the membership of the teams was restricted to twelve or thirteen. "Alick" Bannerman went on six of the first eight tours, Jack Blackham eight out of eight, Henry Boyle five out of the first six, Bonner and Spofforth each five straight and the ever so reluctant tourist, George Giffen, five out of seven, Percy McDonnell four out of five, "Joey" Palmer four straight, "Jonah" Jones four out of five, and William Murdoch five out of seven and captained four times.

During the period of this arrangement the touring players were to benefit financially and no complaints or disappointments on this score are recorded. Such a satisfactory situation encouraged the players involved to defend, with great vigour, their power and rights against much newspaper criticism in the first instance and against the ambitions of the three existing colonial cricket associations of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia when they moved to gain control and regulate international cricket.

Historical records of international cricket unfortunately hide some of the true story of the early matches. The neat appearance of these records ignores the true nature of the now recognised initial test match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in March, 1877. This match was an unplanned encounter between the touring English team and a merely ad hoc combined Melbourne and Sydney team. The term "test match" had not been used for this and subsequent contests until Moody¹ and Pentelow² made their classification of certain matches. Thereafter this term was used generally. The retrospective decisions were an unofficial consensus of statisticians, pressmen and the likes of Moody and Pentelow, and quickly received universal acceptance with which the existing colonial associations concurred.

As the tours and matches grew in public interest and stature, problems began to appear in the Australian cricket scene involving the players relationships with the associations and amongst the players and associations themselves.

The players' problems arose firstly from the assumption and use of the title *Australian XI*. The precedent for this was the use of imposing and well-known titles by the touring teams within and from England such as *All England XI*, *United England XI*, etc. There was sound wisdom in this as it was a help towards the filling of the

fixture lists of tours. Incidentally, these models were professional teams and professionalism was to be a cause for criticism of the Australian players in the years to come.

The second problem was the development of an "establishment" amongst the players which placed a query against some methods of selections and the sharing of the profits of the tours.³ For example, the preliminary arrangements were being made in June, 1889, for the 1890 tour and some nine or ten names were already settled with a full season yet to be played.⁴ Further, the practice of touring Australia prior to the departure for England meant that teams were not selected on current season's form. Keeping the team to twelve or thirteen players naturally ensured good dividends.

The third problem concerned the relationship with the associations. The financial rewards were restricted to the select group of players and thus the associations did not benefit from the tour proceeds. Furthermore, the players agreed to "give their exclusive services to the said partnership concern" and the partnerships generally commenced about January 1st thus precluding availability for intercolonial matches. As a consequence these association controlled matches were deprived of much interest.⁵

Finally, the players were average human beings and behaviour on tour was not always saintly or good-mannered and control by their peers on the executive committee was not always achieved, despite inclusion of penalties in the contract document.

The associations suffered in a number of ways. The Victorian Association, in particular, had a strong rival in the Melbourne Cricket Club which had a good record in its support and development of cricket. There was a strong opinion within and outside the Club that its place in Australian cricket was the equivalent of the Marylebone Club in England. Its sponsorship of the players created a bond between them and the Club which continually upset the V.C.A. The New South Wales Association was also having difficulties with the Sydney Cricket Ground Trustees about the use of the ground although it was ultimately able to secure its position. The associations also were having problems internally because of prime loyalties being given to clubs. Finally their lack of access to finance was a continual hurdle for the associations.

From the outset of international cricket the selection of the Australian teams created adverse comment at home and abroad. The perpetual problem of the unfavourable comparisons concerning the abilities of those selected and those not selected was just as apparent then as now, and the daily and weekly press writers continually discussed the relative merits and recognition or non-recognition of abilities. The restrictive selection policy has been referred to above. Another issue was the early selection of a major portion of the proposed teams. However it must be remembered that there were difficulties in communication at that period and also the lack of first class matches to provide performances. The balance of the team selection was invariably piecemeal and there is the strong suspicion that this provided the opportunity for some hard bargaining on the part of the promoters.⁶

The active "establishment" of players which became the core of the membership ensured financial benefits for a regular group of aspiring tourists. Furthermore, the size of the teams was restricted to the absolute minimum. Great use was made of the managers who were already senior cricketers, even in the most important matches, to complete the sides in the event of sickness and injuries of members of the team. On occasions use had to be made of the services of fellow travellers or Australians resident in England. What with travel and matches the players were fully engaged on each tour and the anticipation of personal profit was the necessary stimulus to meet this awesome task. The financial rewards of the partnerships were high by the income standards of the times. The restricted membership of the partnerships provided an acceptable dividend for the participants despite the substantial expense of lengthy first-class travel and accommodation. Some of the tours lasted twelve months, or more. On these occasions the players obtained additional income by touring Australia from January 1st before going overseas, by playing in North America and even New Zealand on the return journey and, sometimes, by playing local matches on their return before officially disbanding the partnership.

The players provided the capital, made the organizational arrangements through their agent in England and ran whatever financial risk that ensued. As the tours continually proved

profitable and socially pleasant experiences, they were convinced of the justice of their claim to the exclusive touring rights and the resulting benefits. As a flow-on they endeavoured to extend this entitlement to international matches within Australia, having already competed with the intercolonial matches to the disadvantage of these association matches.⁷ The most notorious incident was when, on its return to Australia, Murdoch's 1884 team of so-called amateurs demanded 50% of the proceeds of their match with Shaw's 1884/85 side at Adelaide. This type of competition in the local areas was of serious disadvantage to the colonial associations both financially and organizationally.

Meanwhile, as a by-product, these disadvantages to the associations worked to the financial advantage of the controllers of the cricket grounds at Melbourne and Sydney. The Adelaide Oval, by contrast, was under the control of the South Australia Cricket Association, and this possibly explains the support given to players by the S.A.C.A. at a later date. The weakness of the Victorian and New South Wales Associations provided a vacuum in the national control of the game and the players enjoyed an alternative source of sponsorship in the Melbourne Cricket Club and the S.C.G. Trustees. Although this situation was not of the making of the Club and Trustees, a new power was being thrust into their not unwilling hands and at the same time adding to the independence of the players.

The colonial associations naturally were expected to carry the responsibility for the conduct of intercolonial matches and the development and support of cricket at all levels within their own territories. Obviously their prime source of income had to come from matches in which their most accomplished players were involved. In this, the associations were disadvantaged for a number of reasons. In intercolonial matches, players with international experiences were known to seek higher than normal payments or expenses and were not always available to play.⁸ Then, when the touring side was playing in Australia they had contracted not to play for their own colonial side. The associations found the unavailability of the cream of Australian cricketers for intercolonial matches lessened the public interest in these matches and therefore had adverse effects on the financial results. The

associations were suffering also from troubles within their own spheres of influence. Victoria was in strife with its constituent clubs and the competition from the Melbourne Cricket Club was always there in the background. South Australia was having difficulties in its relationship with New South Wales over suitable match dates and the division of the gate takings.

For most of the period since the first tour by the Australians to England the subject of a national controlling body was discussed in the newspapers and by the associations. In response to the various concerns and problems detailed above, the associations moved eventually and took the initiative to set up the Australasian Cricket Council in 1892 with the following objectives:

- a. to regulate the visits of English and other teams
- b. to regulate visits of Australasian teams to England and elsewhere in conjunction with the governing cricket bodies of the places visited
- c. to settle all disputes or differences between Associations represented on the Council
- d. to appoint umpires for international and intercolonial matches in Australasia
- e. to alter or amend or to add to the Laws of Cricket in Australasia

In addition, a set of rules gave the Council responsibility for the appointment of the team manager, to approve the membership of the selected team about to tour, and to determine the suitability of dates of tours to and from Australia.

Despite the new rules and regulations the difficulties with the players continued and the Council endeavoured to find solutions by making additional changes as the difficulties arose and were identified. However the Council was not successful in achieving the desired results and the three tours of the 1890s were not free of conflict with the players.

Commencing with the 1893 tour the Council was in trouble. It appointed the selectors and they carried out their task. Unfortunately, the members of the Council were not entirely happy with the team selected but their power, according to the rules, was restricted to approval of the team as a whole. Players could not be

approved individually and the team as selected went on tour. Before the tour ended the players were involved in serious financial discussions with the manager and on the homeward sea journey had to subscribe one pound each for an audit of the books.⁹ The return to Australia did not end the tour's worries. The team was informed of the Council's disappointment with the pre-tour form of some of the players; a rather late observation which had little value. The players provided their ration of mishaps. Unfortunately, there were acrimonious press statements made by some of the players concerning their partners in the enterprise.¹⁰ Also during the course of the tour the newspapers carried reports of players quarrelling.¹¹ The final incident came when the players eventually wrote to the Council complaining that they were unable to obtain a satisfactory financial statement?

The experience with the 1893 tour brought a response by the Council. It amended the main object to include "control" in addition to "regulation of visits" and further included that "the manner of selecting teams shall be decided by the Council". The power of the players was being challenged.

Despite the changes made by the Council, the 1896 team was not free of troubles. Although the team selection was made under the new rules, the players found a way to have the last say in an extraordinary, unjust and incredible incident following which the Council failed to act to correct a grave injustice. The players, not unanimously, decided to remove one of their companions, namely Jack Harry, from the team before the tour began. They were successful in their endeavour. They then selected a replacement and, to its discredit, the Council failed to act to preserve their original selection. The Manager, H. Musgrove, requested Harry to attend a meeting with the team executive and himself. They informed Harry of the team's decision to retire him on injury grounds, despite medical opinion to the contrary, and offered £50 as compensation. After legal assistance Harry accepted dismissal on the payment of £160 compensation.¹³

This negligence on the part of the Council made the players more aware of their power. Further arrogance was to be shown by the players before the year was over. Despite the agreement in which the team was to return by a specific date to enable the

players to join in the first class matches in Australia in the next summer, the side failed to fulfil its contract. Furthermore, the manager was a party to this arrangement having planned matches in North America and New Zealand which caused the delay. During the course of the tour the Council lodged its protest with the team but no reply was received until a further protest was made. The team deigned to reply on this occasion, expressing its regret at the Council's action and stating its unanimous decision to fulfil its own plans.¹⁴ Musgrove was reported to have said that "the whole trouble has been caused by the wire pullers in one of the colonies represented in the Council"; a remarkable comment by the Council's appointed manager.¹⁵

Thus each of the tours arranged since the formation of the Council provided misdemeanours that went unpunished. Sadly the Council by its weakness failed itself and Australian Cricket. The words of its 1898 *Annual Report*, regrettably, confirm this. The Report stated that there was no suggestion "that the tours of the Australian Teams should be in the slightest degree interfered with. The Council does not desire to reap any pecuniary benefit from such tours". Such a timid attitude to its responsibilities inevitably contributed to the lack of respect shown by the players.

However, the Council did have one minor but important success. It had forced an increase in the size of the team on tour to fourteen, a not very popular decision in the eyes of the players' clique.

The year 1899 was another bad one for the Council. Its members were forced to an unanimous agreement, as stated in its *Annual Report*, to "sanction and approve of the Melbourne Cricket Club bringing out an English team to play during the cricket season 1900/1901, that the management of the tour from the first to last be in the hands of the Melbourne Cricket Club exclusively". Surely this was the ultimate embarrassment. Felix of the *Australasian* in his survey of the season 1899/1900 was to observe that "the temperate and conciliatory course pursued by the majority of the members of the Council throughout tended much to smooth matters and to make everything come out right in the end".¹⁶ For whom? Certainly not the Council. The Council in its 1898 *Report* had gone to great lengths to dampen any feeling that there

was discord between the M.C.C. and itself. The new arrangement with the M.C.C. was admitting its feebleness and failure to fulfil its responsibilities.

The players were continuing to occupy a strong position. The Council was forced to concede "all that it wishes to do is appoint a Manager, to approve the team and to financially place the Manager in such a position as to meet the preliminary expenses. This is the control the Council desires".¹⁷ The persistence of the players was bringing results and they gained the vital right to provide half of the Council's membership and thus have effective control of its activities. Their status in the organization of international cricket was now an official one of power. The N.S.W.C.A. displayed its objection to this move at its March 1899 meeting and indicated its intention to move that it withdraw from the Council. In addition, it was apparent that the players would be loyal to the M.C.C. irrespective of what the A.C.C. might wish?¹⁸

The Council was doomed and the influence of the players on it was shortlived. Nevertheless their representative was able to participate in its liquidation in that the 1899 captain, Joe Darling, seconded the motion of dissolution.

The Australasian Cricket Council was not a success because it lacked the strength to carry out its objectives and rules; lacked the full support of its member associations; was unable to compete with the standing of the Melbourne Cricket Club, and unable to withstand the pressure of players. The players were able to work from an entrenched position flowing from fourteen years of control and seven successfully organized tours. Furthermore, they had been successful on the field; they had made money for themselves; they had plenty of applicants from players to be members of their teams; and, of some importance they had added to the national pride during the exciting period leading to the Federation of the Australian Colonies. Indeed the cricketers were unique in the Australian sporting scene so far as team sports were concerned and enjoyed the status of national heroes.

By the setting up of the Council the associations had challenged the power and influence of the players. The challenge had been defeated soundly on this occasion but history would show that

the challenge was soon to be revived and a national body successfully formed.

NOTES:

1. C.P. Moody, *Australian Cricket and Cricketers 1856-1893/94* (Melbourne: Thomson, 1894).
2. J.N. Pentelow, *England V Australia, the Story of the Test Matches* (London: J.W. Arrowsmith, 1895).
3. *Victorian Cricket Association Statement*, 27 March 1912; *The Referee*, 22 March, 1899.
4. *Sydney Mail*, 29 June, 1889.
5. Paragraph XVIII of the Indenture accepted by the 1882 team.
6. *Victorian Cricket Association Statement*, 27 March 1912.
7. *Cricket*, 28 February 1907.
8. *Ibid.*, 28 February 1907.
9. *Australasian*, 16 December 1893.
10. *Ibid.*, 18 November 1893.
11. *Ibid.*, 23 September 1893.
12. *Ibid.*, 30 December 1893.
13. *Ibid.*, 14 & 21 March 1896.
14. *Ibid.*, 15 September 1896.
15. *Ibid.*, 12 December 1896.
16. *Ibid.*, 29 April 1899.
17. *Argus*, 30 July 1898.
18. *Australasian*, 23 September 1899.