

A DEBATE IN SPORTS HISTORY

COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES IN AMATEUR SPORT IN AUSTRALIA 1972-1985

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I

With the election of the Labor Government in March of 1983, a new era in Australian sport began. Sport and recreation development became a tool to be used by the ALP'S "strong and fundamental commitment to revitalise the quality and direction of national leadership in Australia." This Government clearly saw itself as playing a strong, vocal and dynamic role in unifying the nation. After only nine months in office, significant initiatives appeared which reflected the Labor Government's unequivocal commitment in this area. The establishment of a separate Department of Sport, Recreation and Tourism, action for the creation of the Australian Sports Commission and massive increases in budget allocations for sport and recreation were major developments which were initiated. A Government document released in December of 1983 was appropriately titled, *Sport and Recreation: Australia on the Move*. The Commonwealth Government continued to work out constructive and creative ways to move ahead in accepting the challenge of developing sport and recreation programs which will benefit all Australians. The new, refreshing, bold and aggressive approach has special meaning for the much used Australian expression, "she'll be right mate" and one must conclude that she'll [sport and recreation] be more than right!

II

Despite the fact that sport plays such a prominent part in the lives of so many Australians, it is surprising how little attention has been given to sport by Governments, particularly at the Federal level. Prior to the 1970s the Federal Government involvement was minimal, at best. In response to the conflict of World

War II the *National Fitness Act* was passed to deal with the fact that significant numbers of Australian men and women had been classified as unfit for military service. An over-riding objective of the program was to improve the standard of fitness of Australian youth. The program operated through State Education Departments, university physical education courses and State National Fitness Councils. A second program instituted in 1951 by the Federal Government provided grants towards the cost of Life Saving Assistance Programs. The support of both of these programs involved a minimal expenditure on the part of the Government. Apart from these two programs, the only contribution to sport by the Federal Government were ad hoc grants towards the cost of sending representative teams to international competitions, specifically the Olympic and Commonwealth Games. Prior to the formation of the Federal Department of Tourism and Recreation in 1972, funding for sport and recreation was primarily the responsibility of the sporting organisations themselves and State and Local Governments. By the early 1970s, Departments of Sport and/or Recreation were in operation in most States.

The election of Gough Whitlam and his Labor Party in 1972 represented the beginning of a new era in Australian sport. Clearly, the Labor Party platform had within it a strong view on the kind of commitment that the Government should have towards sport and recreation and the use of leisure time.

There is no greater social problem facing Australia than the good use of leisure. It is the problem of all modern and wealthy communities. It is, above all, the problem of urban societies and thus, in Australia, the most urbanised nation on earth, a problem more pressing for us than for any other nation on earth. For such a nation as ours, this may very well be the problem of the 1980s; so we must prepare now; prepare the governments of the '80s - the children and the youth of the '70s - to be able to enjoy and enrich their growing hours of leisure.²

The election of the Australian Labor Party in December 1972 led to the creation of a Federal Ministry of Tourism and Recreation under the guidance of the late Frank Stewart. The Labor Government embarked upon a program which provided two main forms of assistance: a Capital Assistance Program to help provide sporting facilities at the local level and a Sports Assistance Program to assist National

associations with travel, coaching and administrative costs. The Capital Assistance Program considered the funding of any project which increased the range of leisure activities available within a local region. The formula was such that the grant represented 25% of the total costs. The annual expenditure for the years that Labor remained in power was: \$4.0m (1973-74), \$4.6m (1974-75) and \$6.3m (1975-76). The aim of the Sports Assistance Program was to support sports associations at the national level so as to supplement and strengthen their work. The expenditure involved was \$0.6m (1973-74), \$1.2m (1974-75) and \$1.2m (1975-76). Total expenditure figures can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Commonwealth Government Expenditure on Sport and Recreation 1973/74-1984/85

Year	\$m	Year	\$m	Year	\$m
1973-74	5.7	1977-78	5.9	1981-82	13.1
1974-75	6.9	1978-79	3.3	1982-83	13.9
1975-76	9.2	1979-80	6.0	1983-84	22.5
1976-77	12.1	1980-81	8.2	1984-85 (a)	31.2

Source: Budget Information Papers 1973/74-1984/85

Note: (a) Estimate.

The Minister of Tourism and Recreation, Mr. Frank Stewart, stated that while it was his Government's view that the pursuit of excellence in sport was as worthwhile as the pursuit of excellence in the arts and that national and international success were a stimulation to mass participation... "we have no intention of imitating some countries which regard success in sport as some sort of proof of the superiority of their way of life, ideology and race. Our task lies clearly elsewhere, in meeting more basic needs, in catering for masses, not just a small elite".³ The basic philosophical position came through by way of an increased expenditure under the National Fitness Act and the introduction of a nationwide fitness awareness campaign *Fitness Australia*.

During this period of time, the Department of Tourism and Recreation undertook initiatives which examined issues in Sport and

recreation. The discussions and documents produced from them have laid the basic foundation for the present day program of the Federal Government. These reports include: *Recreation in Australia - Its Role Scope and Development* by Professor John Bloomfield (1973); *The National Seminar on Leisure* (1974); *The National Coaches Seminar* (1974); and *The Report of the Australian Sports Institute Study Group* (November, 1975) chaired by Dr. Alan Coles. This latter document represents a landmark publication on Australian sport and performs a useful function in clarifying the status of the Australian sport delivery system. The thirty recommendations which came from the *Report* clearly gave philosophy and direction to Australian sport in general and the concept of The Australian Sports Institute specifically. The increased activity, mostly of an introspective nature, certainly gave further clarification to the role that the Federal Government should play in sport and recreation. The pieces of a national sports policy had been isolated.

With the defeat of the Labor Party, the Liberal-Country Party coalition returned to power in 1976 under the leadership of Malcolm Fraser. Sport and recreation was one of the first victims of the return to office: the Sport Assistance Program was abolished and the Capital Assistance Program was continued only insofar as it honoured commitments previously entered into by the Labor Government. The reaction from the sporting community was predictable, and after considerable pressure was put on the Government, the Sport Assistance Program was re-introduced in the 1977-78 Budget.

The change in Government certainly illustrates the profound difference in philosophical approach to sport between the Liberal-Country Party and the Australian Labor Party. These differences are evident in the level of funding (as shown in Table 1) and the relative significance given to different aspects of the program. A further examination of the positions on sport taken by both political parties provides additional insights into national government intervention in sport.

Barry Cohen, Shadow Minister for Sport, Recreation, Tourism and the Environment prepared a *Green Paper on Sport and Recreation*. In making reference to the Liberal-Country Party philosophy he stated ". . .when questioned on sport, Mr. Fraser gives the impression that all that is required to produce a fit and healthy nation is a pair

of sandshoes and running shorts".⁴ Cohen maintains that this approach fits in well with the Liberal-Country Party approach that success is up to the individual. Cohen, in speaking for his political associates maintained that such an approach was relevant fifty years ago when sport was primarily the domain of affluent gentlemen. He further suggested that it represented a "naive, unrealistic approach these day" when wealthy nations are able to provide top quality coaches and less wealthy but politically motivated countries are prepared to devote considerable time and money to produce world class athletes.⁵ The Labor Party maintained that if Australia wanted to have a fit and healthy nation and to regain its position as a top sporting nation, it would have to be prepared to commit its financial, physical and human resources to achieve those ends.

The election of Bob Hawke and his Labor Party in March of 1983 and their subsequent re-election in 1985 has provided a great stimulus for the sport and recreation movement. Initiatives which were identified during Labor's 1972-76 tenure as the ruling party were reintroduced. The elevation of the portfolio of sport and recreation to share ministerial status with tourism, the creation of the Australian Sports Commission and the marked improvement in the budget allocated to sport and recreation are testimony to the ALP's commitment to sport recreation. In a period of economic uncertainty and fiscal restraint these supportive measures are most noteworthy.

III

The Australian Labor Party has developed a comprehensive position statement on sport and recreation.⁶ Fundamental to its position is that "the Federal Government has a responsibility to provide national leadership in making sport and recreation available to everyone who wishes to participate". A most progressive position is taken by suggesting that "part of the funding for sport and recreation should be appropriated from the health budget". The sport policy includes further initiatives in the creation of a National Sports Institute; the development of a national coaching scheme; the expansion of the athlete assistance program; the provision of support for national sporting associations; a commitment

to funding sports medicine research and a provision of funds under a cost sharing arrangement to build facilities in cooperation with State and Local Governments.

The Liberal-Country Party, during its most recent tenure as the governing Party, formulated a general philosophical position on sport. It accepts as its role that suggested by the Confederation of Australian Sport in its *Master Plan for Sport*, March 1980: namely, the provision of international standard facilities; the servicing of the development programs of national sporting associations; and the education of administrators. Their stated policy in relation to sport has two broad objectives: the encouragement of the pursuit of excellence in sport; and the improvement of general health and enjoyment of life through involvement in sport.

Through its policies the Liberal-Country Party promotes both these objectives. It regards the following principles as basic to their achievement: the maintenance of the voluntary nature and autonomy of sporting bodies; the assistance, in general, for only the non-professional aspects of sport; the provision of equal opportunities for the handicapped in sport; and the encouragement of private sponsorship for sport.

It is interesting to note that both political Parties have considered sport important enough to develop a policy position on it. Philosophically, both positions are quite similar, in that both have indicated that the pursuit of excellence and mass participation in sport are important policy objectives. However, fundamental and significant differences exist in two areas. These include: defining the degree of importance of sport within the overall policy of the government; and assigning the primary responsibility for the promotion, encouragement and development of sport. The evidence examined suggests that the Australian Labor Party would assign a higher priority to sport than would their Liberal-Country counterparts. One can also conclude that the Labor Party would favor a stronger intervention and control over sport on the part of the Federal Government. The privatisation of sport position adopted by the Liberal-Country Party has been consistently enunciated by party officials. Mr. Groom, Minister for Environment, Housing and Community Development, in a policy statement on June 1st, 1978 indicated that "...clearly, the major responsibility for

development rests with the sports themselves, with the Government assisting and encouraging this development".

Personalities appear to have had a large impact on the extent of government commitment and support provided to sport. In this connection, two Ministers, Mr. Bob Ellicott (Liberal-Country Party) and Mr. John Brown (Labor Party) have stood out in recent years. Mr. Ellicott has taken an extremely keen interest in sport and by virtue of his strong position within Cabinet has been able to argue successfully for a greater share of Government dollars for sport. The initiatives that he was responsible for taking have laid the foundation for present day Federal Government programs in sport. Of particular significance are the Australian Institute of Sport, the Sports Development Program, the National Coaching Accreditation Scheme, and the International Standard Sports Facilities Program. His decision to resign his post as Minister of Home Affairs in 1981 meant that sport lost one of its most supportive politicians at the Federal Level.

It was during Mr. Ellicott's tenure that the Government considered the task of formulating a comprehensive long-term national sports development policy. In February 1979 he charged the Sports Advisory Council with preparing a report whose aim would be to provide a policy framework for sports development within which all levels of Government, sports bodies and organisations with responsibilities for sport could cooperate to meet these needs. The Sports Advisory Council Paper, entitled *Towards a National Sports Program*, identified possible areas of Government involvement for discussion with State Governments and highlighted areas for action by the Commonwealth. It emphasised the need for Governments to cooperate in the development of a National Sports Policy. In so doing, it also recognised and fully supported the role of the private sector and the self-help principle followed by voluntary sporting associations.

The distinguished members of the Sports Advisory Council saw the need to develop a comprehensive national sports policy which would provide a framework for the planned development of sport in Australia on a continuous basis. This policy would set national objectives, would offer the opportunity for coordinated action by all levels of Government, would transcend political affiliation and

would not be interrupted by changes of Government or Ministers. It was within this spirit that their report was submitted to Government for its consideration in April, 1979. It was considered by an Inter-Departmental Committee which met over a period of 8 months, and submitted a redrafted document for consideration to Cabinet. The Cabinet made the decision to continue its funding support for numerous sport programs, but was reluctant to commit itself to establishing a national sports policy. The failure of the Liberal-Country Party to come to grips with putting such a policy on paper meant that sports program support continued on an ad hoc basis with the Government's action reflecting a response to pressures being placed on it.

IV

One of the more controversial initiatives undertaken by the Federal Government in recent years has been the creation of the Australian Institute of Sport and a study course developed in co-operation with the Canberra College of Advanced Education. The seeds of the concept were planted with *Report of the Australian Study Group* (1975) and brought to fruition by the efforts of the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Bob Ellicott. Mr. Ellicott's interest in the idea of an Institute was increased by overseas visits. In 1979 he visited the People's Republic of China where he saw the sports schools system in action and London, where he saw Crystal Palace in its role as a national sports centre. In 1980 he visited European and North American centres which further strengthened his vision of the Institute.

The Australian Institute of Sport was established in Canberra in January 1981 and gives young Australians the opportunity to pursue their interest in their sport to the highest level without interruption to, or risk to, their education or careers. The aims of the Institute are to:

- (a) provide top level, specialist coaching/training for athletes who have shown great promise, at the same time offering them complementary and attractive education and career training opportunities.
- (b) support these athletes with world-class facilities and, sports science and sports medicine back up.

The AIS project commenced with facilities and training provided for nine "resident" sports including: basketball, gymnastics, netball, soccer, swimming, tennis, track and field and weightlifting. Sportsmen and sportswomen attending the AIS are expected to be gainfully employed while not training, either by undertaking secondary or tertiary education or obtaining regular employment. As of June 1984, the AIS had 205 scholarship holders and a staff of 82 comprising 35 sport coaches, 15 sports science/medicine personnel and 32 administrative personnel.⁷

The funding for the AIS comes almost entirely from the Commonwealth Government. The budget for the Institute has increased from a \$1.1 million allocation in 1980-81 to a \$8.9 million one in 1984-85. These funds are for scholarships, competition expenses, salaries and other administrative and operational costs.

Another interesting development within the AIS program is that of the appearance of new agreements between the Commonwealth Government and the State authorities in offering new sports. A unit of the AIS was established in Perth to cater to field hockey in April 1984, one to service the sport of diving in Brisbane in November 1984, and most recently, an AIS squash unit was officially opened in Brisbane in February, 1985. The decision to decentralise Institute activities paves the way for the emergence for future co-operative ventures amongst the three levels of government and the sports organisations.

V

One of the major developments that has taken place under the Hawke Government has been the establishment of the Australian Sports Commission. The Government has suggested that the Commission will provide added expertise to work with national sports organisations and associated private sector interests in developing ideas for the most equitable distribution of the Government's sports funding. The Australian Sports Commission has been created to administer the funds available for sport and recreation. Ostensibly, its creation is to allow for decisions on funding to be taken out of the political arena, but in reality, the status quo prevails. As expected, the Australian Sports Commission has assumed the major responsibility for overseeing most of the high profile sport and recreation issues. Early indications suggest that the Commission is on its way to becoming the most powerful, influential sporting body in Australia.

VI

The following observations and comments are offered:

1. The Australian sport delivery system is complex and fragmented with communication bonds amongst agencies representing the public, private and shared sectors in need of improvement. With the new initiatives being undertaken by the Commonwealth Government encouraging signs of cooperation appear to be emerging.
2. There is a marked difference between the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal-Country Party on the matter of their perceived roles in the funding and governance of programs in sport and recreation.
3. The election of a Labor Government in March, 1983 has resulted in a massive infusion of financial resources in support of sport, recreation and tourism activities. The Labor Government has considered the areas of sport and recreation to be both worthy and deserving of fiscal support and direct intervention.
4. It would appear the Labor Government has identified sport as a vehicle to promote national unity and Australia's reputation internationally. Enhanced program support for the elite athlete through the Australian Institute of Sport supports this view. It would also seem that this strategy is closely tied in with the promotion of tourism and its attendant economic spin-offs.
5. Strong political interest and leadership has been provided by Bob Ellicott (Liberal-Country Party) and John Brown (Australian Labor Party) at the National level. Both of these individuals have advanced a position in strong support of sport and recreation initiatives.
6. The creation of a new arms length organisation called the Australian Sports Commission has introduced a new element in the area of government involvement in sport in Australia.

Indeed, Australia is on the move! The Hawke Government has been the catalyst in providing the impetus for improving the Australian sport delivery system. Encouraged by strong political support and visionary leadership, progressive advances in sports policy and programming have taken place.

Australian sport is in a position to reassert itself as one of the truly great sporting nations of the world. The elements of a rich sporting heritage, the presence of human and physical resources, a magnificent climate, the Aussie spirit of competition, and a supportive economic infrastructure provide Australia and all Australians with the basic framework to become a world leader in

sport and recreation.

NOTES:

1. J. Brown, *Sport and Recreation: Australia on the Move* (Canberra, 1983).
2. E.G. Whitlam, *ALP Policy Speech* (Blacktown Civic Centre) 13 November 1972.
3. F. Stewart, *Press Release Statement on Sport and Recreation* (Canberra, 1975).
4. B. Cohen, *Green Paper on Sport and Recreation* (Canberra, 1980).
5. *Ibid.*
6. This paragraph is based on Cohen, *op.cit.*
7. Department of Sport, Recreation and Tourism, *Annual Report* (Canberra, 1984), 54.