

## **SPORT AND RECREATION POLICY: WILL SHE BE RIGHT?**

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I

The study of sport as public policy is new. Australia's historians, political scientists, public administrators and physical educators have generally ignored this area of public sector activity. Even Gough Whitlam's account of his government's reforms overlooked the work of colleagues, Barry Cohen and Frank Stewart, in formally linking sport and state.<sup>1</sup> In November, 1985, the former Prime Minister and UNESCO Ambassador told me by telephone from Paris that this was not due to a lack of interest on his part, but was the result of a paucity of secondary sources. Why have researchers been slow to discover this 'sleeper' among policy areas? Perhaps Tatz is correct in assuming they are forced to gain 'res-

pectability through other interest'<sup>2</sup> before thinking and writing about sport.

Semotiuk' contribution is, therefore, part of a slowly growing body of literature. He gives a succinct and accurate account of substantive policy outcomes under successive Australian Governments. Yet the element missing is precisely that which is at the heart of policy analysis: an explanation of political behaviour. Semotiuk provides little insight into either the policy process, or the consequences of specific policy proposals. One can only conclude that his analysis is of limited utility in understanding the politics behind Australian sport and recreation policy in the 1980's.

## II

Semotiuk's article performs two functions. First, he provides a chronological overview of federal sport and recreation policy since 1941. This approach is useful in illustrating the expansion in government involvement. Second, he argues that, under the Hawke Government, this policy area will invariably prosper from an increased budget allocation, benefiting all Australians. Applying what he calls his 'travel study' method,<sup>3</sup> written sources and personal inquiry are combined through contact with libraries, embassies and information centres, personal correspondence, personal experiences and interviews with practitioners. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. But, like every case study, making sense of complicated and 'messy' detail involves setting this against the macro-political framework from which it arises. The analyst's task entails more than describing a course of action. It requires comprehension and explanation of the broad political and social elements spawning policy.

Semotiuk's analysis is limited by a lack of attention to the political variables impacting upon the planning process in Australia. He assumes the reader's familiarity with the political characteristics of successive Australian governments. Although seeking to isolate fundamental differences between the two major parties, Semotiuk still leaves basic political questions unanswered: why was policy formulated; how was this to be implemented; were

policy goals realised; how was the public interest defined; what underscores the Coalition's apparent disinterest in sport and recreation? But greatest criticism is reserved for the practical implications of his conclusion: that under the Hawke Government all Australians will benefit from the budget increases for sport and recreation. To use the colloquial 'she'll be right' in relation to any aspect of political life dangerously ignores the realities of inequality and political expediency.

### III

Sport and recreation policy, like that for broadcasting or the arts, is a variant of social policy. It is not intrinsically neutral, being a litmus of political ideology, of hopes and aspirations. Semotiuk correctly concluded that policy prior to the 1970's was 'minimal'. But why did the Coalition pursue non-intervention? It is disappointing that he referred to developments after 1972 without first addressing this question. Sound historical description is useful in understanding policy options at later periods, since the political agenda is shaped by past decisions and their implementation.

The influence of Robert Gordon Menzies needs to be examined if we are to understand Whitlam's policies. For twenty three years, planning, of either a social or economic nature, was not considered necessary, as resourceful and industrious individuals were expected to provide for themselves. Sport was no exception and formed one element of a range of policy areas considered the exclusive domain of the individual and the private sector. The Coalition assumed that all started from a position of equality: the industrious would be rewarded, whether Olympic athlete or dedicated suburban sportsman. This left it free to blame individuals, rather than an aversion to planning, for the absence of a range of programs and services.

What were the consequences of minimal policy? Semotiuk does not elaborate. Yet basic sources help in answering that question. The weekly newspapers indicated problems. By 1972, for example, a reliance upon private sponsorship to fund Olympic and Commonwealth Games teams left elite sport struggling for support. The slip in

world rankings evident since the euphoria of the 1956 Olympics made business reluctant to back outsiders.<sup>4</sup> The aversion to planning also became evident lower down the sports pyramid. National Fitness was hamstrung by a lack of national coordination and an unappealing image. It also lacked a sports development component to provide direct promotional assistance to associations.

Then Semotiuk should have turned to Hansard. This would have placed the Coalition policy of disjointed funding in a basic political perspective. Sport and recreation were continually reliant upon a few sympathetic Members of Parliament putting their case for increased funds. In 1958, for example, the Member for Kingston (South Australia) argued that the grants to the Surf Lifesaving Association and Royal Lifesaving Society should be raised from £5000 to £8000.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Semotiuk should have explained that the policy process involved the Coalitions solving the immediate political problem of providing public support via irregular funding arrangements, without engaging in ongoing planning.

Semotiuk correctly identified other levels of government as the most important in publicly administering sport and recreation in the period. But what are the implications of devolving planning and funding responsibilities to the fiscally weaker tiers of Australian administrative federalism? This should also have been explained if the urban politics of the Whitlam Government are to be understood. Under the Coalition, local government found itself increasingly unable to provide a range of services, including sport and recreation. Semotiuk does not emphasise that this was at the heart of the Whitlam Government's Department of Tourism and Recreation.

#### IV

Semotiuk provides an accurate and succinct introduction to the Whitlam Government's Department of Tourism and Recreation. He correctly identified Labor's policy as concerned with mass participation sport, without necessarily hindering the talented. This accorded with Frank Stewart's personal values. Semotiuk also correctly mentioned the committees of inquiry and reports of the Department. These addressed specific target groups - adolescents,

women, the disabled and Australians of non Anglo-Saxon origin. Together with the Task Force Report on the Australian Sports Institute, they quickly provided a much needed data base for ongoing planning and development. More importantly, they indicated that access to sport and recreation was regarded as a social issue. Inane notions of political neutrality were rejected. But what needs re-emphasis in Semotiuk's account is that the main thrust of policy was in the urban context - improving access to sport and recreation in a nation of city dwellers. The indicators for this are not just expenditure on National Fitness or awareness campaigns. Rather, the capital grants for leisure facilities in Area Improvement Programs were the foundations of sport and recreation in the years 1972 to 1975. They are the key to understanding Labor's perception of what constituted the public interest.

Semotiuk does not explain who were the main benefactors of Labor's policies. The Annual Reports of the Department, however, document hundreds of allocations to local government authorities organised by regions. Labor perceived the public interest to reside in providing local government with the financial capability to meet its planning responsibilities. A series of 'realistic' projects brought immediate improvement to sport in the nation's cities: top-dressing ovals, provision of change facilities, floodlighting, re-surfacing or building multi-purpose playing surfaces, upgrading pool equipment, boat ramps and so on. They fulfilled the political intent of policy statements made since Barry Cohen first raised the issue in the House in 1970.<sup>6</sup> Greatest attention was paid to the outer western suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne.

Semotiuk also does not elaborate on the mechanics of policy implementation. The Constitution prohibits a direct link between the Australian Government and local government. This issue is fundamental to any aspect of federal social policy. Semotiuk does not explain Labor's use of tied grants made via the States in circumventing the problem. Constitutional constraints directly impinge upon the ability of government to plan. Labor's strategy in a variety of policy areas involved transferring funds from the federal government to local government authorities. Transferring funds via the States meant these could not be challenged in the High Court by non-Labor States opposed to reform.

If administrative federalism was no problem, the communal input was. A philosophical mainstay of Labor's policy for the cities was the involvement of communities in the planning process. Semotiuk made no reference to the difficulties the Department encountered. Organised sport was inexperienced in dealing with government agencies. Many lacked financial and administrative expertise. By 1975 improved cooperation was achieved. But in 1980, former Treasurer, Bill Hayden, claimed some associations had maintained residual attitudes to assistance, preferring to struggle on with raffles and rudimentary facilities, rather than accept public money without strings attached.<sup>7</sup> The effectiveness of government programs, if not also their efficiency, is directly related to the quality of cooperation achieved from target groups. Hartung elaborated on this.<sup>8</sup> Yet the point is overlooked by Semotiuk.

Semotiuk inadequately explains why sport became one of the Fraser Government's victims. The demise of the Department of Tourism and Recreation was not caused by technical, administrative or constitutional problems. It was Labor's loss of control over the Senate and the subsequent election of Malcolm Fraser, which snuffed out a period of reform politics. The Coalition was brought to office on the promise of a return to small government. The Whitlam years were labelled as extravagant, irrespective of the success of individual programs. Semotiuk should have assumed the reader's comprehension of the politics of this period. Cost containment replaced concepts of equity and access as the central concern of government. The Fraser years were marked by a conviction that we could not afford the programs of the 1970s. Free market forces would relieve government of the need to intervene, and justify the stance that it should not intervene.

The pruning began in earnest, aided by committees of administrative review. In the ubiquitous public service jargon, these soon reflected the attitude of the Fraser Government towards Labor's social reforms - 'search and destroy missions'. Sport was lumped together in a 'hold-all' department - Environment, Housing and Community Development - along with other unwanted urban baggage.

If the reaction from the sporting community was 'predictable', as Semotiuk believes, then it had left its run far too late to defend any benefits. By the time the Confederation of Australian Sport was operational in 1976, Fraser's cuts were well under way. Semotiuk could have made clear that the public interest in this context was seen strictly in terms of relieving the demand upon the public sector, and not in terms of directly confronting social issues.

Attending to the macro-political environment would also have drawn Semotiuk's attention to the Coalition's federalism policy. The Coalition detested specific purpose payments, arguing that these eroded the sovereignty of the States. They promised instead block' grants to State and local government. This shifted planning responsibility for leisure facilities away from the federal government without guaranteeing that such grants would be spent on leisure projects. Semotiuk should have considered wider policy issues - federalism and Fraser's administrative reviews - rather than expenditure figures as an expression of the public interest.

## VI

Semotiuk regards the election of the Hawke Government as a stimulus for public sector involvement in sport and recreation. Both parties formulated policies in the area. How are we to discern between the two? Semotiuk compares the party platforms. But these are very malleable and imprecise documents.<sup>9</sup> Both espouse philosophies relating to mass participation and competitive excellence. Semotiuk is correct in assuming the Coalition would prefer the privatisation of sport along with concomitant economic spinoffs in a leisure industry. Yet his analysis could also have benefited from a comparison between the Hawke and Whitlam Labor Governments. Sport has played its part in the Hawke ascendancy and outcomes have not always been benevolent. Hawke is not worried about being another Whitlam, but he is worried about being another Cairns.<sup>10</sup>

Hawke sought the Prime Ministership on a platform of reconciliation, his now famous olive branch of consensus. As McGregor prophetically wrote shortly after the 1983 election, consensus ignores the practical reality of a conflict of interests between large corporations and workers, developers and conservationists,

transnational and Australian companies, public and private enterprise, or simply those who have and those who do not.<sup>11</sup> It is fundamental to the policy-making process that governments will eventually favour some interests over others. By the time of the December 1984 election, the language of consensus was quietly abandoned, having by that time served its purpose.<sup>12</sup> Yet one element of that early Hawke rhetoric remains: an appeal to common values, transcending economic and political divisions through a common interest in sport.

Hawke's ability to mix with the sporting fraternity helped foster the larrikin image.<sup>13</sup> Fraser the grazier and Whitlam the barrister never achieved the same rapport with sport, looking clumsy and out of place. Within this process, the nation's sporting elite played a central role in developing national unity, maintaining a flow of 'good news', and generally focusing the nation's attention on what the government was doing to restore Australia to a position of pre-eminence in technology, and restoring the drive to win. Even during his address to the nation in 1986, Hawke invoked the names of three sportsmen and an opera diva to illustrate what Australians could achieve through application and drive. The Liberals are also intent on acquiring the same tactics. A leaked party document encourages candidates to use sporting metaphors to target younger voters.

The Interim Committee for the Australian Sports Commission found, that sport has the power to unite or divide. Hawke already knows that. but the Committee also indicated it can reflect inequalities in society. The Hawke Government has been told that little attention was paid by past administrations to the sporting needs of Aborigines, migrants, women, the elderly, or the unemployed. Ten years after the Whitlam Government began its shortlived Area Improvement Programs, where one lived continued to determine access to essential services, including sport and recreation. A need still exists, therefore, for government to concern itself with questions of the populations access to sport and recreation. At present, recreation development is linked to the Community Employment Program. But these projects are intended to be labour intensive and not facility oriented. The Area Improvement Programs of the Whitlam years are not being continued.

The Hawke Government has made available \$590,000 for the recreation and fitness needs of older Australians, and funding is available for the sporting and recreational needs of the disabled. But more still needs to be done. The national survey of recreation habits, for example, found that less than 13% of respondents played competitive sport. Herein lies the problem that Semotiuk should have addressed: where should the main thrust of policy be, with the apex or the base of the sports pyramid?

Established on Australia Day, 1981, the Australian Institute of Sport was not a new idea by Australian or international standards. Following upon the 1980 decision by the Australian Olympic Federation to attend the Moscow Olympics in spite of requests to boycott, was the Institute intended to be primarily a way of controlling elite sport by throwing money at it? What happens to sport's autonomy when threatened with a withdrawal of funding? As a general rule, political parties and politicians do not wholly subsume their principles when in government. Cynicism may be unwarranted if the community takes no part in demanding reform.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the Institute, and elite sport in general, are regarded as such vote-pullers that the Hawke Government increased funding to \$22.4m. The budget for the Institute alone for 1986-7 is approximately \$14m. Each of the 180 athletes costs approximately \$28,000 in various charges. Generating a swag of medals at Seoul may do little to provide facilities in many of the nation's outer suburbs. Can a few convince the many to do a little? Even the Institute's coaches think it essential that national programs in athletics and swimming be based on school sport.

are content to allow governments to foster elite sport believing mass participation will follow. It cannot be denied that the Hawke Government is making progress. But there is still a long way to go before our sporting ethos is one of participation and not just watching Pat Cash retain the silver.

## VII

Semotiuk's analysis is not factually wrong, but could have

benefited from casting a wider net. It is imperative that researchers understand the macropolitical environment before proceeding to the detail of sport and recreation policy. The investigation should move from the general to the specific. A concentration upon expenditure figures, party platforms and the influence of personalities can provide only partial answers. Perhaps the same criticism can be directed at Mr Hawke as Dr Semotiuk: the most serious omission from their analysis is an awareness that social inequality still exists in Australia and that until specific efforts are made to overcome this, access to sport and recreation will resist democratisation. Until both parties accept this fact, a healthy cynicism is required. Will she really be right, Dr Semotiuk?

#### NOTES:

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6. *Debates (Reps)*, 5 March, 1970, p.137.
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