

# *'Extravagance of Thought and Feeling': New Zealand Reactions to the 1932/33 Bodyline Controversy*

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It is inevitable that almost all contemporary comment regarding the Bodyline Test cricket series of 1932/33, and indeed much of the subsequent analysis, is less than partial.<sup>1</sup> It is firmly committed to either an Australian perspective —stressing the deliberately intimidatory nature of an English fast bowling attack directed at the batsmen rather than the stumps — or an English perspective which emphasises that no breach of the laws of cricket occurred and that Australian reactions were exaggerated and inflammatory. What, then, might be derived from a seemingly impartial observer — New Zealand.

New Zealand perceptions of Bodyline were bound by certain constraints. No New Zealand press correspondent witnessed the series at first hand or reported directly on events as they unfolded in Australia. Reports were instead culled from the Australian and English press. Despite this, coverage of the various tour and Test matches was extensive — reflecting an almost obsessive New Zealand preoccupation with Anglo-Australian cricket which dated from the 1860s. Moreover, these reports were augmented by a surprising amount of editorial comment in all of the major daily papers and in the sporting press — and especially that based in Christchurch, the acknowledged 'home' of New Zealand cricket and headquarters of the New Zealand Cricket Council.

Alas one will find little impartiality in New Zealand. With only a few very limited exceptions, New Zealand editorial comment on Bodyline assumed a firmly pro-English, if not anti-Australian, stance. This article represents both an examination of the range of New Zealand press and public opinion and an attempt to place it within the fabric of New Zealand cricket, New Zealand relations with Britain and trans-Tasman relations during a crucial period of the 1930s Depression.

Broadly speaking the New Zealand press pursued three themes in response to Bodyline. Firstly, they accused the Australian press of adopting

a sensationalist focus in order to inflame anti English public opinion against the touring Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) team. Secondly, they regarded the numerous 'incidents' in Australia as a threat to the very fabric of cricket, and as an indication that the game might best be served by suspending Test cricket. Thirdly, there were more direct and virulent attacks on Australia and its sporting traditions — especially in relation to the Australian Board of Control for International Cricket protests to the MCC regarding Bodyline.

### **Trans-Tasman Sporting Relationships**

The background to these reactions was a trans-Tasman sporting relationship which had begun to fragment after World War I. Where previously there had been some willingness to assume an 'Australasian' sporting identity, the 1920s heralded separatism and strains of antagonism. In particular, the New Zealand Cricket Council (NZCC) experienced a rapid deterioration in its relationship with Australia from the late 1920s, with the result that during the 1930s it was more than ever before a bastion of amateurism and imperialism.

Those in the New Zealand press who launched the strongest invective against Australian reactions to Bodyline, and received no censure from the NZCC for doing so, represent a coalescing of conservative opinion which was increasingly at odds with wider political and sporting realities. They held fervently to the notion of New Zealand as the most 'English' and imperially deferential of the white dominions. They were also the group most critical of the Australian Labor Government's handling of the Depression before its defeat in 1931 and of J T Lang's New South Wales Labor Government before its sacking in 1932. Yet the popular consensus in New Zealand was rapidly moving towards the election of the country's first Labour government in 1935 — and one dominated by expatriate Australians.

Without their own direct coverage of the tour New Zealand observers were unable to grasp the significance of Bodyline. When England won the First Test at Sydney by ten wickets on 7 December 1932 the New Zealand Herald (Auckland) observed that Australia had been at a considerable disadvantage without Donald Bradman, but there was no reason for England to assume superiority in the series as a whole. *The Press* (Christchurch), whose recently appointed editor, PHN Freeth, had just returned from ten years as a sub-editor with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, attributed England's win to superior batting and 'fiery' bowling.

Yet he argued that the Australian selectors should resist the temptation to make wholesale changes.<sup>2</sup> Responding to Australian comments regarding Bodyline, or 'leg theory', the *NZ Referee* (Christchurch) claimed that this attack was only one of many explanations for Australia's defeat — and one which Stan McCabe had countered with no difficulty during his innings of 187 not out:

The merits of the leg theory and off theory will be debated until the last bowler skittles the last batsman, but the fact remains that players of international reputation should have made a much better showing than they did.<sup>3</sup>

This failure to distinguish between 'leg theory', an attack directed at, or outside, the batsman's leg stump, and Bodyline, an attack directed at his body, was a common feature of most New Zealand debate. By the time the distinction became more evident, the nature of Australian reactions had assumed a much greater significance to New Zealand commentators than the finer points of their cause. Moreover, although it became evident during December 1932 that the problem was of greater magnitude than New Zealand perceptions of 'leg theory' allowed, Australia's 111 run victory in the Second Test at Melbourne served to further deflect attention from the true intensity of the situation.

Before the Melbourne Test the Referee was highly critical of suggestions that Australia should respond to Bodyline in a similar manner — and especially critical of Arthur Mailey's suggestion that Aboriginal fast bowler Eddie Gilbert might be selected:

[W]e don't want our cricket fields turned into a shambles, nor would it be particularly pleasant to contemplate the havoc that Arthur Mailey's Abo. might cause if allowed at large. It might only be a step from cricket balls to cannon balls.<sup>4</sup>

While this seems to imply that Bodyline did indeed generate hostility, the outcome of the Second Test allowed the Referee to affirm its earlier opinion. On 5 January 1933, under the headline 'Leg Theory Hokum Receives Severe Knock', it suggested that the greater effectiveness of the Australian bowlers compared to Larwood, Voce and Bowes 'will be rather disconcerting to those who allowed themselves to be influenced by some of the newspaper "clap-trap" about "shock tactics" and so forth'.<sup>5</sup>

The feeling that the entire controversy was fed by the Australian media was outlined by *The Press* on 30 December:

All this hubbub and fever is fed by the daily newspapers with a fresh feature for every move in the game, columns of controversial criticism from expert and inexpert writers, and sensations that sometimes appeal to bitter national prejudices completely foreign to the spirit of a splendid game.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of whether actions on the field were right or wrong, the MCC, and especially their tour captain Douglas Jardine, had a right not to be drawn into controversy generated by the press. If this could not be guaranteed, the demise of Test cricket would be the only certain outcome:

If the visits of teams from other countries are to create such unpleasant and undesirable feeling, thinking people will seriously question whether these contests are worthwhile, whether the best interests of the game are being served by them, and certainly whether the claim that they make for good feeling and fellowship can be substantiated.<sup>7</sup>

When Australia won the Second Test, *The Press* cynically absented that their victory had done a great deal more to reduce tension than would have been the case if England had repeated its earlier triumph.<sup>8</sup>

When the Third Test at Adelaide erupted into controversy on 14 January 1933, the New Zealand press again condemned their Australian counterparts. Under the editorship of James Hutchison, an ardent sporting imperialist with a long pedigree as a sporting administrator,<sup>9</sup> the *Otago Daily Times* (Dunedin) claimed that 'the true spirit of sportsmanship has, it is to be feared, been obscured in the will to conquer which has been fostered by a publicity that has been disproportionate to the real importance of the issue'.<sup>10</sup> Implicit was a realisation that much more was at stake than the outcome of the current Test series.

Under the heading 'Ashes to the Taste' the *Southland Times* of 17 January 1933 painted a gloomy future for cricket:

Even after allowance is made for the penchant of certain journalists for 'incidents' there remains the fear that one of the finest games in the world is being robbed of its traditions ... To read ... of the grim seriousness of the players, of the tricks and questionable tactics resorted to, of the undignified utterances of leaders, is to wonder whether present-day cricket can be termed amusement, diversion or fun. Not only has it ceased to be a sport, it has become a paradox — cricket which is 'not cricket'.

On the same day, *The Press* again repeated its straightforward solution - suspend Test cricket.

It is enough to say that what has happened is enough, on the soberest estimate, to make many people, the keener lovers of cricket, wonder anxiously whether nothing but a long Test match holiday will cool tempers now far too hot and enable big cricket to be played again without big explosions.”

The *Otago Daily Times* added that a ‘dourness’ had crept into Test cricket, as it had already crept into Test football. Unless this was quickly eliminated, ‘it would be destructive of many attractive features of the game’.<sup>12</sup>

### **New Zealand Cricket Culture**

While these sentiments were brought to the surface by the immediacy of *Bodyline*, they had a much longer heritage. Indeed, the reaction of the New Zealand press to events in Australia was undoubtedly shaped by a cricketing and cultural idyll that was far more English in character and amateur in spirit than was ever the case on the other side of the Tasman. This would become particularly apparent after 18 January 1933 when the Australian Board of Control dispatched its first fateful cable of protest to Lord’s.

As a general rule, New Zealand retained an attachment to Britain far longer than Australia, Canada or South Africa. In part this reflects the slightly later growth of New Zealand compared to eastern Australia, with the result that an immigrant rather than native born population predominated for longer. There was also no convict transportation to New Zealand, nor a dominant Irish population, with its attendant level of social and economic grievances, from which to ferment anti-British feeling. The Irish constituted approximately 13 per cent of the New Zealand population, as opposed to roughly 25 per cent in Australia by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

In New Zealand there was a more regulated pattern of colonisation and of efforts to emulate and perpetuate English institutions. New Zealand continued to agitate for various Imperial Federation schemes and for much closer social and political ties with Britain for much longer than many Australians deemed necessary or desirable. Every New Zealand Premier from 1883 to 1912 can be quoted as favouring Imperial Federation, and at the various Colonial and Imperial conferences between 1897 and 1911 the most distant colony was the only one to consistently advocate

closer union.<sup>14</sup> Of course one cannot neglect the pronounced Anglophilia of Stanley Melbourne Bruce during his time as Australian Prime Minister, nor the conservative imperialism of the Lyons Ministry during the early 1930s.<sup>15</sup> But the issue is perhaps one of degree. As L S Amery remarked to the British Cabinet in 1927, 'If imperial sentiment is strong in Australia, in New Zealand it is a passion, almost a religion. Alone of the Dominions New Zealand is much more interested in her Imperial, than in her national, status.'<sup>16</sup> In the broadest terms, New Zealand was working to establish respect and integrity within the eyes of Britain, at a time when Australia was working to preserve imperial unity as an independent nation allied to Britain.

New Zealand was not a willing component in the evolution from Empire to Dominion Status and free association. When, in 1931, the imperial parliament enacted the Statute of Westminster, removing the last vestiges of control from London and confirming the reality of New Zealand's shift from dominion to independent state, the measure was effectively ignored. Not until 1947, after twelve years of Labour government, was the Statute grudgingly adopted.<sup>17</sup> Although Australia did not adopt it until 1942, it had in the meantime taken the first available opportunity to appoint a native-born Governor General - Sir Isaac Isaacs in 1930. New Zealand did not follow suit until 1971.<sup>18</sup>

### **New Zealand-Australian Relations**

These differing approaches to Britain reinforced the rather detached official relationship between New Zealand and Australia. Despite geographical proximity, a multitude of shared characteristics and much trans-migration during the nineteenth century,<sup>19</sup> the two countries were slow to reach a formal understanding. New Zealand firmly rejected federation with Australia in 1901. On defence matters interest only quickened when doubts arose as to the effectiveness of the protection offered by Britain -before World War I and after the fall of the Singapore naval base in 1942. Direct defence links and a full exchange of information between governments were not secured until 1938.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, a formal trade agreement was not put in place until 1922, and then only to be sabotaged by various protective tariffs on both sides. Even after its revisions in 1933, the agreement remained more a creature of existing arrangements with Britain than a positive move towards bilateral relations.<sup>21</sup>

Sport, which provided a good deal of continuity in the trans-Tasman relationship, was also undergoing significant changes by the late 1920s. In several sports pragmatism had dictated that Australia and New Zealand assume an Australasian identity. This was particularly the case in the 1908 and 1912 Olympic Games and in tennis where Australasia dominated the Davis Cup from 1907 to 1922.<sup>22</sup> Even in cricket, where the relationship was distinctly lopsided, it was accepted that any sufficiently talented New Zealander could be included in an Australian team to play England.<sup>23</sup>

But a growing sporting infrastructure, and perhaps a clearer sense of its own identity forged by World War I, prompted New Zealand to sever these connections. It sent its own team to the Antwerp Olympics in 1920 and entered the Davis Cup on its own account in 1924. Amid a surfeit of trans-Tasman tours during the 1920s,<sup>24</sup> New Zealand dominated rugby and left its mark on Australian horseracing, while Australia dominated cricket and appropriated Phar Lap as its own. Both continued to regard England as their ultimate sporting test, but preliminary excursions into the vastly under-researched field of trans-Tasman sporting relations indicate a keen rivalry which transcended the apparent apathy in other facets of the relationship.<sup>25</sup>

Behind this sense of Australia as a near but distant neighbour, conservative opinion in New Zealand found a more immediate focus for antagonism in the years before *Bodyline*. As the Depression worsened, New Zealand, despite having one of the largest *per capita* national debts in the world, remained firmly committed to a policy of financial retrenchment aimed at balancing its budget and meeting obligations on interest payments due in London. Contrary to the sentiments increasingly expressed by the New South Wales Labor Government and others in Australia, there was never any question of alleviating immediate New Zealand conditions by defaulting on loan payments. Finance Minister William Downie Stewart was so opposed to government intervention that he resigned in February 1933 when his colleagues took the decision to revive the export-dependent rural economy by devaluing the New Zealand pound.<sup>26</sup> In this light all Australian responses to the Depression were viewed with a good deal of critical interest by the conservative dominated press of the main centres.

Despite the Melbourne Agreement of August 1930 whereby the State Premiers pledged themselves to a policy of financial orthodoxy,

balanced budgets and debt servicing,<sup>27</sup> the defeat of the Scullin Federal Labor Government in December 1931 was interpreted in New Zealand as a sign that the Australian people wished to reassure the world that they would not default on loans. As *The Press* explained, 'The electors had no option but to vote out an administration that was hopelessly incompetent and vote in an alliance of parties pledged to a sane and understandable financial programme'. The *New Zealand Herald* added that 'the Commonwealth had delivered emphatically for economy, for stability and for orthodox public finance'.<sup>28</sup>

When Lang's New South Wales Labor Government did default on loan payments, leading to its sacking in May 1932, there was even stronger invective. Lang was described as a 'reckless, unscrupulous, lawless demagogue' whose government had 'shown all the vicious weakness of a mob-controlled party in office'.<sup>29</sup> When Labor was heavily defeated in the subsequent State election, *The Press* proclaimed 'the crushing defeat of the Lang party in the NSW elections saves the state from an administration whose avowed policy was dishonest and pernicious and the commonwealth from a menace to its unity and financial stability'.<sup>30</sup>

For New Zealand the sacking of Lang came only a month after serious rioting in Auckland as the deprivations of the Depression intensified. And the link between events in the two countries was clear enough in some minds. As the dairy farmer in John Mulgan's *Man Alone* characterised the Auckland rioters: 'They listen to a lot of reds, a lot of bloody agitators. If they ain't Russians, they're Australians. That's what the trouble is.'<sup>31</sup>

In terms of Bodyline, these New Zealand reactions are in direct contrast to the suggestion of Stoddart and Sissons that the Lang affair in particular helped to galvanise the anti-British sentiment which surfaced in Australia during the Test series.<sup>32</sup> Yet this is more an indicator of the narrow and conservative base of Bodyline opinion in New Zealand than any widespread public feeling against Lang. For the warnings against virulent Langism and the left generally were not heeded in New Zealand even in the short term. The New Zealand Labour Party, led by an Australian, Harry Holland until his death in 1933, was elected to its first term of office in November 1935. The Prime Minister, Michael Joseph Savage, and four of his cabinet, were Australians.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Orientation of New Zealand Cricket**

It is simply not possible to determine whether those who controlled New

Zealand cricket subscribed to the conservative sentiments evident in much of the press. But it is clear that the orientation of New Zealand cricket during the 1930s was far closer to the MCC at Lord's than to the Australian Board of Control in Melbourne. Unlike Australian cricket or New Zealand rugby, there were no New Zealand cricketing successes to justify any sort of confident nationalistic sentiment. The few victories, such as those against New South Wales and Queensland 2nd XIs during the 1890s and the MCC in 1907, were against weak or unrepresentative opposition. When combined with New Zealand's prevailing Anglophilia, the result was a conservative cricketing ideal which prized the spirit of English amateurism rather than Australian competitiveness.<sup>34</sup>

The New Zealand sporting press reinforced these sentiments with extensive coverage of the English County Championship and English touring teams in all parts of the world. The major daily papers frequently editorialised on performances and developments within the English game, but paid much less attention to the Sheffield Shield. At a local level, the various elite secondary schools and the provincial cricket associations generally bypassed Australia in favour of more expensive English professional coaches.<sup>35</sup>

While Australia looked to expand its international contacts during the early 1930s, with a second tour from South Africa and a first from the West Indies, the NZCC held firmly to narrower amateur objectives. Despite the opportunity to tour England at four-yearly intervals, Arthur Donnelly, Chairman of the NZCC Management Committee, warned in July 1933 that 'we must not let these tours become too big a call on the time and work of our young amateurs. Rather than have that, it would be better to be content with a slightly lower standard.'<sup>36</sup> Implicit was a notion that cricket was only a part of life - not life itself.

As with the political arena, the English focus of New Zealand cricket was also shaped by the vagaries of its relationship with Australia. In short, New Zealand had little to offer Australian cricket and Australian authorities felt no obligation to assist in developing the New Zealand game. Dismal performances on tours of Australia in 1899 and 1913/14, and against a succession of Australian touring teams in New Zealand, were hardly redeemed by some improved showings during the 1920s - and especially on the 1926 tour of Australia.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the reverse was the case as the relationship between the Australian Board of Control and NZCC rapidly deteriorated during the late 1920s. A low point was reached

in December 1930 when the Australian Board stated that while it was willing to assist New Zealand cricket by sending young players on development tours after the completion of the Sheffield Shield program, sending more experienced men would unfairly deprive Australian clubs during important end of season grade games.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently the NZCC directed its greatest energies towards London. Unable to finance tours directly and exclusively to New Zealand, the Council made strenuous attempts to persuade Australia-bound English teams to play even a few matches in New Zealand. But most of these proposals foundered on the refusal of the Australian Board to curtail any part of its own itinerary in favour of New Zealand interests. There were particularly acrimonious exchanges prior to the 1928/29 MCC tour of Australia, and again in 1932/33.<sup>39</sup>

The later dispute undoubtedly had some bearing on New Zealand reactions to Bodyline. In October 1931 the MCC informed the Australian Board that it could not refuse an invitation to visit New Zealand after the Australian tour. The invitation had apparently been delivered by representatives of the New Zealand government - perhaps at the 1930 Imperial Conference. But the Australian Board refused to alter any part of its itinerary, and informed Lord's that the New Zealand tour could take place only after Australian obligations had been completed.<sup>40</sup> When W H Winsor, Secretary of the NZCC, visited Melbourne in December 1931, he received an equally unsympathetic reception. As the Australian Board minutes recorded:

Mr Winsor expressed regret at the decision. His council would not let the matter rest at this stage but would make further representations to the Marylebone Cricket Club and hope to have success in that direction. He added that he would have great difficulty convincing his Council that the Australian Board had not been most unreasonable and had committed a most unfriendly act. He expressed the opinion that the present action will terminate friendly relations for some years to come between Australia and New Zealand.<sup>41</sup>

Eventually the MCC were able to arrange three matches in New Zealand in March 1933. Although these were profitable, they were marred by predictable late summer rain.<sup>42</sup>

It is likely that the New Zealand public were quite aware of these disputes. In 1926 the NZCC had made it policy for the press to be invited

to all meetings. Arthur Cant, who reported on cricket for *The Press* for more than 30 years, was a former provincial representative and administrator with strong links to the personnel of the NZCC Management Committee.<sup>43</sup> Thus, although the report of Winsor's meeting with the Australian Board in December 1931, does not reveal the level of animosity involved, it leaves no doubt as to the lack of cooperation from the Board.<sup>44</sup> Against this background, New Zealand reactions to the Bodyline controversy are predictably biased against Australia.

On 17 January 1933, at the height of the acrimonious Third Test in Adelaide, Wellington's *Evening Post* prophetically suggested that it was time for higher authorities to intervene and resolve the developing crisis:

Cricket is too big a thing in Empire psychology to be left solely to the teams on the field when popular outbursts like that at Adelaide have occurred. When the highest cricket courts are approached - courts with competence in the legislation as well as the administration of cricket - the public may at least have the feeling that both the play aspect and the civic aspect of a very difficult problem will be competently investigated.<sup>45</sup>

But the following day, when the Australian Board cabled its protest to Lord's regarding Bodyline - which it described as 'unsportsmanlike' and a threat to existing friendly relations between England and Australia - its tone entirely failed to gain the empathy of New Zealand observers. Nor did they comprehend the fact that the Board's priorities were very close to their own ideals. For as Brian Stoddart pointed out, the Board was a solidly middle-class, conservative body with strong British and Imperial traditions. 'In that sense, their telegram to the MCC was as much a plea as a demand for protection of the game and all that it had come to represent socially for them by the 1930s.'<sup>46</sup>

Reflecting on events after the Fourth Test match at Brisbane, in which England secured the Ashes, the *Evening Post* was damning in its summary of the Australian Board cable:

Nothing more unmannerly, more tactless and more impolite could well have been devised than the last two sentences of the protest ... The sting of the message was in that extremely offensive and entirely unnecessary epithet 'unsportsmanlike'.<sup>47</sup>

The Christchurch *Press* once again suggested that a suspension of Test cricket may be the best solution:

Since extravagance of thought and feeling has already run to the improbable point marked by the Board's cablegram, it would be unsafe to think that it can not possibly go further and that 'Government conciliation in the interests of friendly relations' is, and will remain, a wild freak of fancy: but it is scarcely necessary to wait for the event in order to say that, if international cricket cannot be played without troublesome political reactions, the cure is not to call in the diplomacy of the Dominion Office but to stop playing it.<sup>48</sup>

During subsequent days there were several letters supporting the editorial contention that England had won due to superior cricket - a fact which had been ignored by the majority of the Australian press.<sup>49</sup>

When the MCC replied to the Australian Board cable on 23 January, demanding the withdrawal of the accusation of 'unsportsmanlike' conduct, they were roundly praised in New Zealand. The Otago Daily Times claimed that the Australian Board's cable was 'unhappily conceived and crudely expressed. The reply which has been despatched by the Marylebone Cricket Club is precisely what might have been expected.'<sup>50</sup> The *Southland Times* added that 'the very calmness of [the reply] is a reproof to the Board for its hasty action in making a protest unsupported by any evidence'.<sup>51</sup> The *Evening Post* felt that the reply highlighted the care which should have been taken by the Australian Board in the first place:

Though the directness of the MCC's 'non possumus' presents a remarkable contrast to the mealy-mouthed deference which is forced upon Downing St by the morbid sensitiveness of the Dominions, the document is also strong on the tact and the diplomacy which were conspicuously absent from the Australian protest.<sup>52</sup>

*The Press* urged the Australian Board to recognise that Bodyline was neither dangerous or unanswerable and that, in reality, there was nothing for them to protest against; 'if the Board is sensitive to anything but the pain of being beaten, it will hear its own rude shout rebuked'.<sup>53</sup>

By far the most vociferous condemnation of the Australian Board came from the *NZ Referee*. Although by the 1930s it was slipping from its mantle as New Zealand's leading sports paper, for most of its history the

*Referee* was owned by or closely aligned to *The Press*. Over the years it benefited greatly from proximity to the Christchurch base of the NZCC and the strong tradition of *Press* cricket reporting.<sup>54</sup>

The *Referee* of 9 February 1933 praised the MCC for the manner in which it dealt with the ‘gratuitous insult’ from the Australian Board. ‘In contrast to Australia’s protest, the English reply was urbane and dignified when it might, with considerable justification, have been acidulous and approaching the bellicose’. Bodyline was nothing new, and talk of it had only been revived when the Australians started to be beaten:

It will be the devout wish of cricket lovers in the Dominion and elsewhere that our friends across the Tasman will settle down to real cricket. Most of us have heard enough of the squealing of their apologists. This is not cricket in the broader meaning of the word. One can be safe in hazarding that once the Aussies start on their winning way again they will feel ashamed of the whole business. Calling one’s opponents names, particularly those who have shown themselves one’s betters, is a schoolboyish thing: we expect something different from those who flatter themselves about their superior conceptions of sportsmanship. With the vulgarity we will say ‘cut the cackle and give us cricket’.

It was hoped that a better Australian batting effort in the Fourth Test would alleviate much of the animosity.<sup>55</sup>

When Australia lost the Fourth Test by six wickets and the controversy continued, the *Referee* headlined proceedings with renewed vigour:

Campaign of Bombast and Vilification Misses Target  
How Australia was Hocused  
Recent Wrangle due to Over-Boomed Team’s Failure

According to the *Referee*, the controversy stemmed from both the failure of the Australian team to match its billing in the press and a deep-seated anti-Englishness in which cricket was seen through the ‘violent yellow’ atmosphere of a few Australian newspapers.

Their success in stirring up the ancient antipathies of a small but aggressive and extremely vocal minority to everything English and British might have helped to swell the gate-takings, but remains one of the most deplorable features of a sad chapter in Australia’s social and cricket history.<sup>56</sup>

Under another provocative headline on 2 March - 'Leg Theory Only an Excuse: Hatred of England Real Cause of Trouble'- the Referee expanded its political thesis.

Many of those who have done most of the booing and hooting would probably not be able to distinguish between a long-hop and a donkey-drop: they simply go along to see the hated 'pommies' 'getting it in the neck' ... We can ... regard ourselves as fortunate in New Zealand that our cricket is below Test standard. It would be better to turn Lancaster Park or the Basin Reserve into a Roman arena or into bear pits than allow them to be used for the unseemly exhibitions served up in the last month or two in Australia.

In sum, Australian protests against the MCC, and Douglas Jardine specifically, were 'just another example of how the mob spirit is threatening to destroy the fine old game of cricket'.<sup>57</sup>

### **New Zealand Reactions to Bodyline**

New Zealand criticisms of Bodyline were few and far between. The *Otago Daily Times* conceded that although the tactics employed by England were entirely within the laws of cricket, 'whether they involve a breach of the spirit of cricket is another matter'. But the time for altering laws was not during a Test series and the Australian Board had therefore 'blundered' in sending its cable to Lord's after the Third Test.<sup>58</sup> But only the usually conservative *New Zealand Herald* and its correspondents displayed any sustained criticism of English tactics. At the height of the Adelaide controversy, various letters to the editor criticised the MCC for placing the result of the Tests ahead of the game itself. One expressed concern that the same tactics might be brought to New Zealand, and another suggested that the NZCC should join Australia in its protest to Lord's.<sup>59</sup> During the Fourth Test there was more direct editorial criticism of the English approach:

English cricket was so extremely anxious to win that an unwanted tensivity of feeling prevailed with a risk of losing the joy and damaging the prestige of the pastime. A natural reaction happened in Australia, for a challenge so dour was calculated to evoke a similar spirit .... There has been more than enough of quarrel to make 'the ashes' scarcely worth winning by either side. Whatever the result of this match, the result will lack the old time splendour of the game. Cricket is not itself when happenings such as these can be chronicled.<sup>60</sup>

When England secured the Ashes, the *Herald* suggested that there were issues of cricket law and its interpretation which now needed to be discussed by the authorities. 'It is equally to be hoped that, with the strain over, the spirit of cricket as a game rather than an international duel will be recovered.'<sup>61</sup>

New Zealanders were given no chance to assess Bodyline for themselves. The tactic was not deployed in either of the Tests on the MCC's short New Zealand tour, and there is no indication that Douglas Jardine ever contemplated doing so. Although one of the main protagonists, Harold Larwood, missed the New Zealand tour through injury, his opening partner Bill Voce played in both Tests and Bill Bowes in the second. The two Tests, both drawn due to rain, were dominated by Walter Hammond who scored 227 at Christchurch and a Test record 336 not out at Auckland.<sup>62</sup>

After their experiences in Australia, the MCC regarded New Zealand as a welcome respite. Some players reportedly observed that there would have been far less controversy if the Australians had been as civilised as the New Zealanders. For their part, the hosts were determined to show their gratitude for the MCC decision to carry out the tour despite the obstructive attitude of the Australian Board. The display of mutual affection reached its peak at the Wellington Town Hall where the English team were welcomed to the strains of 'See the conquering hero comes'.<sup>63</sup>

At an official level there is no evidence that the NZCC ever discussed Bodyline or made any representations to the Australian Board or MCC when its legality was debated during 1934. Despite the hostile press comment, Arthur Sims, New Zealand's representative to the Imperial Cricket Conference, predicted advantages for New Zealand in its dealings with Australia. He cabled the Council from London in June 1933, 'For your confidential information, think Australia will have to depend on New Zealand as local authorities generally think unless barracking resulting insult English players stopped best declare moratorium Australian visits'.<sup>64</sup>

But the events of the following season put paid to any such optimism. In January 1934 the NZCC belatedly cancelled an Australian 2nd XI tour under the captaincy of Victor Richardson. While the original selection contained a number of leading players, most withdrew citing a variety of personal and business reasons. More likely was a general dissatisfaction with the low rate of tour pay offered by the Australian Board. Fearing

that the calibre of the remaining players would not create sufficient public interest, the NZCC felt it had no choice but to cancel the tour in order to avoid an estimated £1000 loss.<sup>65</sup> As a consequence of this, let alone the New Zealand stance over Bodyline, relations with Australia remained tense throughout the 1930s. Although an Australian tour was secured for 1939/40, it was curtailed by the war. Thereafter, with the exception of one Test match at Wellington in March 1946 which was regarded by the Australian selectors as a convenient trial for the forthcoming series against England, there were no Test matches between Australia and New Zealand until 1973/74. Only Australian B teams visited New Zealand.<sup>66</sup>

### Conclusions

New Zealand reactions to Bodyline did not have a profound influence on future relations with Australia - cricketing or otherwise. But they are undoubtedly symptomatic of the state of the relationship, and particularly conservative perceptions of it, during the early 1930s. The politics of the Depression and of New Zealand cricket dictated orthodoxy and a high degree of imperial deference. On both counts Australia was seen as a recalcitrant threat to the fabric of Empire.

### Notes:

- 1 For a bibliography see B Stoddart and R Sissons, *Cricket and Empire: The 1932-33 Bodyline Tour of Australia*, London, 1984, pp. 145-7.
- 2 *The Press*, 8 Dec. 1932; *New Zealand Herald*, 7 Dec. 1932.
- 3 NZ Referee, 15 Dec. 1932.
- 4 NZ Referee, 29 Dec. 1932.
- 5 NZ Referee, 5 Jan. 1933.
- 6 *The Press*, 30 Dec. 1932.
- 7 *The Press*, 30 Dec. 1932.
- 8 *The Press*, 4 Jan. 1933.
- 9 *Otago Daily Times*, 30 May 1908; 13 June 1946.
- 10 *Otago Daily Times*, 20 Jan. 1933. See also *Southland Times*, 25 Jan., 17 Feb. 1933.
- 11 *The Press*, 17 Jan. 1933.
- 12 *Otago Daily Times*, 20 Jan. 1933.
- 13 K Sinclair, *A Destiny Apart*, Auckland, 1986, p. 96.
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