
How the left made sport the new battlefield in the culture wars

Richard Allsop

Anybody who thought the election of the Rudd government meant the end of the culture wars was not looking closely enough at the summer's cricket.

While many in the community had strong views about the rights and wrongs of the behaviour of both the Australian and Indian teams, few would have thought to place it all within the context of the culture wars. The left, of course, found a way.

In a recent item in *The Monthly*, Gideon Haigh claimed that:

The Australian reopened the culture war on a new front, passing off hectares of partisan comment in support of its star columnist Ponting as news.

Haigh is an outstanding cricket historian, who has produced many of the best modern works on the game. He is also an enthusiastic club cricketer and, in his *Monthly* piece, he went on to document some recent appalling behaviour that he, and his club teammates, had been subjected to at the hands of yobbish opponents. But Haigh illustrates an increasing trend in sporting commentary—writers desperate to politicise behaviour on and off the sporting field. If, as the old feminist

saying goes, everything is political, then surely cricket is too? The left have dragged the sporting field into their simple culture wars paradigm, and they are unwilling to let it go.

Haigh believes, quite logically, that poor behaviour in park cricket is triggered by poor behaviour at international level. Your typical *Monthly* reader knows instinctively that if there is poor behaviour in the Australian community, it has only arisen in the Howard years, and if that behaviour is endorsed by any columnist in *The Australian* (other than Phillip Adams), it is somehow part of the culture wars.

But does condoning boorish behaviour on the cricket field really place you on a particular side in the culture wars? If it does, it is certainly not on the side which Haigh implies. After all, over the past half century, the strongest critics of boorish behaviour from Australia's cricket team have not been those on the left of the political divide, but those of a more conservative bent.

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While Howard-haters would consider liking John Howard to be an offence, it seemed that even being liked by Howard was enough to earn the ire of the cultural warriors.

It was, after all, under the captaincy of Ian Chappell and during the Prime Ministership of Gough Whitlam that the Australian team first earned a reputation for uncompromising on-field behaviour and sledging. Back in the 1970s the cultural fault lines seemed much clearer.

Young people had long hair, vociferously supported Lillee and Thommo from The Hill, went to Sunbury and voted for Gough. Their parents had shorter hair, sat at the Paddington End applauding good play from either side, drew the line at any music heavier than The Seekers and voted for Malcolm Fraser.

Mark Latham, as a true child of the 1970s, maintained the stereotype into the twenty-first century. In his infamous diary he described a day at the cricket when he was a Shadow Minister in January, 2003:

I organised this as a 'Back to the Hill' day ... reliving our glory days from the early 1980s, on the piss, on the Hill ... matching wits with the Barmy Army and ending the day legless. It must have taken me an hour to walk back to Central Station—two steps forward, one step back.

Latham lamented that his only mistake on the day had been to invite along journalist Matt Price who 'didn't fit in, wouldn't have a go and ended up scurrying off to the Churchill Stand'. Of course, the late Matt Price was not just a political journalist, but also a weekly columnist for *The Australian* on sporting matters. His crime, in Latham's eyes, was that he enjoyed his sport sober, rather than drunk. Perhaps Price was closer to John Howard, who one can see more easily in the other half of the 1970s stereotype.

The different sporting attitudes of

Howard and Latham were the subject of what was undoubtedly the most asinine Howard-hating piece of writing in the history of Howard-hating. Written by regular *Age* columnist Martin Flanagan, it appeared on the day of the 2004 federal election. Howard's imminent re-election had clearly riled Flanagan to such an extent that a desperate rear-guard action was required on the back of the sports section.

Flanagan asserted that he had 'never been persuaded that Howard has the serious interest in cricket that his image people claim.' He challenged his readers to find anything Howard had 'ever said that shows insight into the game'.

In Flanagan's mind, despite the fact that Howard had been attending cricket since he was a boy (and, one can now point out, was back at the SCG this January), Flanagan's politics preclude him from being able to acknowledge that Howard may genuinely like the game.

Flanagan then turned to football and this time Howard is condemned for trying to make football small talk with a Melbournian he met on the campaign trail. Howard asked the bloke which team he followed and, when the response was that he did not follow a team, 'the Prime Minister instantly turned on his heels and was gone'. Flanagan opined that 'I do not believe he really wanted to talk footy. I do not reckon he would know how'.

Of course, Howard did not really want to talk footy, but was politely trying to make conversation, something that everyone, especially politicians of all hews, sometimes need to do. John Howard would probably not do a great job of talking Australian football, but he has never claimed it was his sport.

However, there is a fair chance he could have a better discussion with a Rugby League fan about the St George

teams of the 1950s than the Tasmanian born and raised Flanagan could manage.

Flanagan concluded his piece with the following:

I reckon if you got close to Latham, you would find he would have something to say about sport that was both revealing of himself and the game he was describing. That's a difference between the two men. How significant a difference depends on your view of sport and its place in Australian culture and politics.

If one had attempted to have a chat about sport with Latham, staggering back to Central after his day at the cricket, the conversation might have been 'revealing of himself', but perhaps not quite in the way Flanagan had in mind.

While Howard-haters would consider supporting John Howard to be offensive, it seemed that even being liked by Howard was enough to earn the ire of the cultural warriors. Such was the fate of Australia's greatest sporting icon, Don Bradman.

Any hopes that Howard's demise might have stopped the trashing of the Don's achievements and character were dashed when ex-Latham staffer and current progressive think tank Per Capita head, Michael Cooney, opened up in *The Sunday Age*.

Cooney suggested that believing the 'most boring old men's cricket myth of them all' about the quality of Bradman's 1948 Invincibles would have become a condition of citizenship if Howard had been re-elected. Cooney slammed Bradman as 'a conservative, pedantic captain and ... administrator' and condemned him as 'aloof in style and a divider in nature'.



Kevin Rudd announces that unlike John Howard he won't use sport for political purposes

Kevin Rudd with the chief executives of Australia's major sporting codes at the binge drinking summit in March 2008
AAP Image/Julian Smith.

Bingeing

Cricket is not the only sport to have been dragged kicking and screaming into the culture wars during 2008. Ironically, it was that same journal of cultural warriorism, *The Australian*, that ran a story about the culture wars affecting the AFL. Although strangely, this time *The Australian* was empathising with those who had fallen victim to the Howard government's cultural crusade, rather than continuing to fight the culture wars in Howard's absence.

The paper excitedly reported that 'a senior AFL figure has publicly confirmed for the first time what many in football long suspected: that the league felt as much a victim of the Howard government's culture wars as its anti-drug crusade'. Retiring AFL Commissioner, Colin Carter, believes that the government's real gripe against the AFL was not the drugs policy. In fact, it was an Australia Day speech given by League Chief Executive Andrew Demetriou in 2005, in which he attacked the Howard government's handling of reconciliation, Tampa and immigration, combined with the presence on the AFL Commission of people like ex-ACTU

secretary Bill Kelty and former Keating staffer, Sam Mostyn, that prompted the tough on drugs strategy.

The fact that the AFL was full of Labor sympathisers may have added enjoyment to the attacks on its drugs policy, but there is no doubt that the government's motivation was exactly the same as had been in every other aspect of its tough on drugs strategy—focus groups constantly showed that the punters like governments to be tough on drugs. One only had to spend a few minutes listening to talkback radio, or to conversations on the train, to know that the AFL was on a loser.

If drugs policy is itself part of the culture wars then Kevin Rudd is undoubtedly on the same side as Howard. But at the same time, many who might generally have been on the Howard government's side of the culture wars, would agree with the AFL on the drugs issue.

Rudd's social conservatism came to the fore when he recently co-opted the heads of six major sports, including the AFL, to his National Binge Drinking Strategy. According to Rudd, the sporting organisations 'form logical partners

in dealing with a social problem which affects so many young Australians and their families today'.

While supporters of personal choice might regard such a policy as a silly piece of nanny statism, for the hard left, it confirms their worst fears that Rudd is on the wrong side of the culture wars they are desperate to continue fighting. The columnist Guy Rundle recently complained in *The Age* that Rudd in power will be just like the last decade in Britain where 'New Labour's trick has been to substitute behavioural coercion for real structural change, so ... war is declared on obesity or binge drinking'.

Rudd has already bought into another controversial sporting issue. When announcing federal government support for a bid for the 2018 World Cup, he referred to the sport concerned as soccer, not football. However, while clearly being a 'culture wars' sort of issue it might be a little difficult for the cultural warriors of the left to know which side to take. Calling the game 'football', and forcing other codes to use other names, could be a sign of respect for the various multicultural communities in Australia or, on the other hand,

a piece of insidious globalisation undermining our national identity.

Some American writers have considered the cultural role of soccer. The globalisation of soccer prompted a book chapter titled 'How soccer explains the American culture wars' in which author, Franklin Foer, claimed that for many baseball fans loving soccer is reprehensibly un-American. Yet, in the Australian context that would make the Howard government's enthusiastic promotion of soccer un-Australian. It vigorously supported the game and implemented an ambitious soccer reform agenda. An interesting aspect of that agenda was the removal of all ethnic-backed teams from soccer's national league. Again, this could have been seen as part of some cunning Howard attack on multiculturalism, but even the left somehow let that one go past.

Culture and commercialism

The original push for paying sports people clearly came from those associated with the working class and the labour movement. Late in the nineteenth century, increased leisure time gave the working classes the opportunity to play organised sport. It soon became clear that an injury to a manual worker had far more serious repercussions than an injury to a white collar worker, both in terms of ability to continue working and the financial reserves the individual had to fall back on. Changes to the economic rewards of sport were needed.

The most obvious example of how this divide played out is the creation of the separate code of Rugby League in the industrial towns of northern England in 1895 and then in the industrial suburbs of Sydney in 1908. The fact that the Rugby League paid its players made it a game for the working class, as opposed to middle and upper class amateur Rugby Union. The cultural divide it created remains, despite Union turning professional in the 1990s, and undoubtedly will continue for some generations to come.

In the 1970s, cricket administrators wanted to keep their game in its semi-professional, uncommercialised form. These conservatives believed the games should continue to be televised

on the ABC, and that players, even at the elite level, should earn little more than expenses. In trying to force a cultural war paradigm on the issue one can only speculate whether the Packer revolution was a battle for legitimate wages for workers, or capitalist commercialisation of a people's sport.

These days the most prominent battles over sporting pay no longer relate to whether payment of players affects the moral underpinnings of sport, but whether the inputs (amount of training), or outputs (attendances, TV ratings), should determine remuneration. Hence, in recent years, there has been Bill Shorten and the AWU campaigning for elite netballers to receive the same pay as elite footballers, on the basis that they train just as hard. But the trouble with this argument is that it does not recognise the different capacities for each sport to generate revenue.

However, while crusaders for equal recognition of female sporting achievement constantly raise tennis and netball, they never complain about the lack of recognition for the achievements of arguably Australia's greatest current sportswoman—Natalie Rasmussen. Rasmussen has trained and driven the winner of the past three pacing Interdominions, competing on completely equal terms with men. However, because harness racing is considered a bit 'common' by the elites, it scarcely rates a mention in the broadsheet newspapers, or on the ABC.

This sort of snobbery about aspects of sport is certainly not solely an Australian phenomenon. British sporting writer, Simon Inglis, observed in the 1980s that 'though architectural books might be full of the duller churches and faceless office blocks, none of them consider football grounds'.

The intellectual left and sporting snobbery

For many years, much of the Australian left also managed to exclude sport from intellectual discourse on elitist grounds. The historian Tom Stannage has documented how Donald Horne 'repeatedly tried to define citizenship as a matter of high culture—keeping sport and the

arts firmly separated in his interpretation of identity and culture'. Stannage describes how historians, such as Manning Clark and Stuart MacIntyre, while personally interested in sport, were reluctant to give it due weight in their serious histories, as they were 'often sluggish to accept the place of sport in Australian culture'.

Manning Clark loved cricket, and was a keen Carlton supporter, and yet rarely wrote about sport. On the other hand, when it comes to the most recognised historian on the other side of the culture wars, Geoffrey Blainey, Stannage records how sport is 'a topic which has long received his attention' and that he 'has never been ashamed of the role sport has played in the recreation, culture and identity of the Australian people'. And, indeed, the most famous phrase in the whole of the culture wars—the 'black armband' view of Australian history—assumed its current usage after Blainey's 1993 Latham Lecture, where he used the term as a metaphor, based on the armband footballers use to honour the recently deceased.

One might have hoped that the defeat of the Howard government would have meant the end of the propensity of much of the left to see everything in terms of some vast right wing conspiracy and to deny legitimacy to any view held by an opponent. It would be equally idiotic for someone on the right to argue that because Mark Latham liked to have a few too many drinks at the cricket, or that Manning Clark did not write enough about football in his histories, they did not have a genuine love of sport.

The left is definitely more prone to thinking that if someone does not share their overall world view then therefore that person cannot have a legitimate view on anything. And when it comes to sport, only their intellectual fellow travellers can appreciate sport on the higher plane on which they operate.

In reality, people with something interesting to say about sport can be found across the political and cultural fault lines of the country. And those with something stupid to say seem to have an unerring ability to occupy the seat behind me at the MCG. **R**