

Sporting Contacts with South Africa:  
The African Challenge and New Zealand Government  
Policy 1975-81

Richard Thompson

The 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand has given rise to the threat of sporting sanctions abroad and to massive protest at home.

In various statements made over the last few months, the Prime Minister, Mr. Muldoon, has defended the National Government's policy on sporting contacts with South Africa. The Government's policy, he said, is "clear and unequivocal" and it has remained unchanged over the last six years. "There has been no change of policy and no change of emphasis." The Government has met its obligations under the Gleneagles Agreement to the letter.

Despite this alleged clarity, the Prime Minister has repeatedly accused his critics of distorting and misinterpreting Government policy. He dismissed the President of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, Mr. Ordia, as a paranoiac, as some sort of a sports administrator who tells lies. Even the recent article in the London Times by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Sir Shridath Ramphal, was described by Mr. Muldoon as "an unfortunate combination of hypocritical platitudes and downright misstatements."

This paper draws attention to certain characteristics of the National Government's policy on sporting contacts with South Africa during the last six years.

The National Party Manifestos

Two related developments influenced the formation of National Party policy in the early 1970's. First, there was the challenge issued by the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa to the proposed 1973 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand. If the tour went ahead, Mr. Ordia warned, the African nations and their friends would not attend the Commonwealth Games in Christchurch in 1974. The action of the Africans was deeply resented in New Zealand. At the same time, the vulnerability of sports other than rugby to a boycott was appreciated. The National Prime Minister, Mr. Holyoake, now Sir Keith Holyoake, explained the helplessness of those concerned with the success of the Commonwealth Games in the face of the Rugby Union's action. Said the Prime Minister: "New Zealand sporting bodies were autonomous, independent of one another, and free of Government control."

Second, there was the direct request to the New Zealand Rugby Union by the Labour Prime Minister, Mr. Kirk, not to proceed with the proposed 1973 Springbok tour. The action was taken by the Prime Minister after the Rugby Union had explained to him that its responsibilities were confined entirely to sporting matters and that while it "acknowledged the larger interests of New Zealand", these were, in its view, "a matter for the Government."



Committed to what it called, keeping politics out of sport, the National Party made the sports issue a major feature of its 1975 election campaign. The National policy statement on sporting tours declared:

"The National Party strongly believes in the responsibility and autonomy of sporting and recreational bodies. Under a National Government there will be no political interference in sport, in any form.

"Sporting organisations will be free to associate with any sporting groups from other countries regardless of race, colour, creed or international politics."

The National Party's Manifesto for the 1978 General Election declared:

"The right to engage in international sport is a fundamental freedom of New Zealanders.

"New Zealand adheres to the Gleneagles Agreement and will continue to observe it.

"Decisions on international sporting contacts will continue to be made by the sporting bodies concerned and not by the Government.

"A National Government will not refuse passports to New Zealanders travelling abroad for sporting purposes and will not refuse visas to visitors coming to New Zealand for sporting purposes."

Any statement of National Party policy on sporting tours would perhaps be incomplete without reference to the passage in the 1975 Manifesto which recognised "the influence of African states in world affairs" and undertook to work for "improved relations with African States..." A similar passage in the 1978 Manifesto referred to the possibility of "establishing one or more posts in the African region..." Of this aspect of policy, Trainor (1980) said: "The calculation was that the African opposition could be diffused and split by taking a pro-African stance in some areas distant from the public gaze." Thus the Prime Minister gave assent to the conclusions of the Maputo Conference. Later, the conclusions were "defined almost out of recognition." (1)

Even accepting the policy statements on sporting contacts at face value, two comments are necessary. First, the change in wording between the 1975 and 1978 statements reflected some change in practice. The assurance that there would be no "political interference in sport, in any form" was too explicit. Early in 1976, in accordance with its international obligations, the newly elected National Government had to refuse a Rhodesian golf team permission to enter New Zealand. The definition of "political interference", however, was fought out elsewhere. In July 1976, Mr. Muldoon said that if the Government had "adopted an attitude of discouragement" over the Rugby Union's 1976 tour of South Africa, this would have been taken as interference in the affairs of sports bodies and the Government "would have had to break one of its election promises - and 'we don't operate that way'". In June 1977, the Government undertook to take "every practical step to discourage" sporting contacts and competition with South Africa. The Government maintained that even in the case of the 1981 Springbok rugby tour, it had met this obligation.

Second, the change in wording between the 1975 and 1978 Manifestos reflects a vital and unresolved problem: the question of who is ultimately responsible for the national interest where international sports tours are concerned. The Government says that the responsibility rests with sports bodies such as the Rugby Union. The Rugby Union says it rests with the Government and a former National Prime Minister, Sir John Marshall, expressed his agreement with the Rugby Union. The explicit reference to the responsibility of sports bodies in the 1975 Manifesto was deleted in the 1978 policy and greater emphasis placed upon sporting rights. The right of "New Zealanders", to engage in international sport became, without qualification of any kind, a "fundamental freedom".

At the end of 1976, with no rugby exchanges between New Zealand and South Africa in sight, Sir Keith Holyoake explained the Government's policy.

"The Government has assured the sporting bodies the right to decide for themselves who to deal with in other countries. Sporting bodies in New Zealand cherish this right. They also have a strong sense of responsibility. They realise that the decisions they take on other countries can have far-reaching effects, not only on their own sports but on others as well, and on New Zealanders in general. They realise that in considering exchanges with other countries, and, in particular, with South Africa, they need to consider carefully the implications of their actions."

Like those responsible for the 1975 National Party policy statement, Sir Keith simply ignored the fact that the New Zealand Rugby Union, by far the most powerful sporting body in the country, had explicitly stated that the kind of considerations referred to in this passage were "outside its province as a sporting body." The Rugby Union refused to accept responsibility for the international implications of its sports tours and persists in its refusal. In the name of freedom, the Government also refuses to accept a responsibility which it maintains, rests with the sports bodies.

#### The Gleneagles Agreement

The Gleneagles Agreement was designed to end sporting contacts with South Africa until sport in that country was racially fully integrated. Accepted by Commonwealth Prime Ministers as a result of their concern over the 1976 All Black rugby tour of South Africa, adherence to this Agreement was included in the 1978 National Party Manifesto. Incensed by the action of new Commonwealth countries in transferring the Finance Ministers' Conference from New Zealand as a result of the present Springbok tour, the Prime Minister said the Gleneagles Agreement was dead. Mr. Muldoon said he would ask the party caucus to decide whether or not to adhere to the Agreement. "I have not the slightest doubt that the answer will be 'no'," he was reported as saying.

The New Commonwealth countries, Mr. Muldoon said, are trying to interpret the Gleneagles Agreement in a manner contrary to its letter and spirit; New Zealand's interpretation is the correct one. New Zealand's interpretation of the Agreement was examined by Thompson (1979). He concluded:

The Gleneagles Agreement embodies five points. The first three include the denunciation of apartheid in sport, the belief that sporting contacts with South Africa appear to condone apartheid and the obligation of each government to take every practical step to discourage such contacts. Although these points might reasonably be regarded as basic to the declaration, none of them are central to the Government's position on the sports-apartheid issue. The first is not explicitly denied; it is simply overshadowed by the belief that sport and politics are unrelated. The inclusion of the phrase 'however unwarranted' fails to conceal the Government's disagreement with the second. The third is severely limited to those steps which are acceptable to a political party with a history of support for reciprocal sports tours with South Africa.

The last two of the five points in the agreement include the recognition that each government would determine the methods it would use to implement its commitments and the affirmation that the Commonwealth Games would go ahead. Although these points might reasonably be regarded as less basic to the declaration worked out at Gleneagles both have been given importance by the New Zealand Government. In its reference to methods in accordance with the law, the fourth is central to any Government statement on the sports-apartheid issue and is treated as the key to interpreting the Gleneagles document. The emphasis placed on significant sporting contacts in the fifth has led to it also being interpreted as a limitation on the scope of the agreement. In effect, the New Zealand Government's interpretation of the Gleneagles Agreement has displaced the emphasis from the basic tenets to the qualifications. (2)

The position has not basically altered since that assessment was made. In recent months, Mr. Muldoon has emphasised that the wording of the third point requires only that the Government should "discourage" sporting contacts, it was not required to "prohibit" them. He has emphasised the consistency of his power over visas; he made it clear at Gleneagles that his Government would not refuse visas to visiting sportsmen. Commonwealth Secretary-General, Sir Shridath Ramphal, said that neither point was in dispute. He maintained that Governments who "chose as a matter of policy not to exercise the right of withholding visas to South African sports teams" must "find other ways of discharging their obligations". Further, in accepting the Gleneagles Agreement in 1977, Mr. Muldoon stated specifically that there would be no further rugby tests between New Zealand and South Africa until South African rugby was fully integrated. Mr. Muldoon conceded that while he had given this assurance, he had been mistaken in his belief.

Little more than a year after the Agreement was accepted, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Talboys, gave an assurance that: "The Springboks will be able to visit here in 1981 - if the New Zealand Rugby Union invites them." The present rugby tour is not an isolated contact. A number of New Zealanders have, as individuals, played, coached and refereed in South Africa since the Agreement. There have been a number of occasions when rugby administrators of the two countries have been able to meet together. Two of New Zealand's most senior rugby administrators have made private visits

to South Africa in the last year. New Zealand made a significant contribution to the rugby festival which marked the expansion of the Loftus Versfeld Stadium in 1977 and to the World XV matches in 1979. Mr. Talboys said: "I am aware of only two rugby contacts since the Gleneagles Agreement; five rugby players went to South Africa in July, 1977, and six players visited South Africa in March, 1979". According to newspaper reports, an invited New Zealand party of seven players and two administrators attended the 1977 festival and a party of eight players, a former All Black captain to act as coach manager of the World XV, three administrators, the editor of Rugby News and a TV film director, attended the matches in 1979 organised by the Northern Transvaal Rugby Union.

An examination of the extent to which it could be said that New Zealand had adhered to the Gleneagles Agreement would require a study of its own. The visa issue aside, the Government certainly cannot be said to have taken every practical step to discourage the present Springbok rugby tour. (3) In assessing the Government's attitude to the Agreement, its interpretation of the first two points are of particular significance. It is noticeable that both Mr. Muldoon and Mr. Talboys have begun to talk not merely of New Zealand's opposition to apartheid but to its opposition to apartheid in sport. In November 1980, Mr. Talboys said it was "saddening" that the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa should have "so little regard for the genuineness and effectiveness of New Zealand's long commitment against apartheid in sport." The statement as it stands, invites misunderstanding.

#### The Empty Policy

On the face of it, Mr. Muldoon is correct. If Government policy is to be judged solely from the Manifestos, the Government policy has not changed over the last six years, though there has been some change of interpretation and practice. The cornerstone of Government policy is that sports bodies are responsible and autonomous. On this rests the justification for the Government claim that it will not interfere in the decisions of sports bodies with regard to international competition - anyway as long as they are not planning to go to Moscow. The question arises: Does the Government believe that in inviting the South African Rugby Board to send a Springbok team to New Zealand this year the New Zealand Rugby Union acted irresponsibly? If the answer is yes, what is the Government going to do about its policy? The vital question is not whether the Prime Minister and other Government members believe that the present rugby tour is undesirable, but whether the Government believes the New Zealand Rugby Union acted responsibly, or more precisely, whether the Government believes the New Zealand Rugby Union can make a responsible decision on such an issue in view of its stated concern with rugby to the exclusion of the "larger interests" of the nation. The chairman of the New Zealand Rugby Union, Mr. Blazey, told the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Rowling that the Rugby Union had acted responsibly and pointed to the removal of apartheid from South African rugby to justify the claim.

In fact, the Government's effective policy on sporting contacts with South Africa is not fully expressed in the Manifestos.

Soon after the National Government came to power, Thompson (1976) wrote:

"The Government has two policies on the issue of sports ties with South Africa. One provides the escape route for the other. The formally stated policy is one of non-intervention in the affairs of sports bodies. The informal but effective policy encourages the restoration of sports ties with South Africa." (4)

The 1975 policy statements on sport are incomplete and misleading unless considered in conjunction with the elaboration and commentary provided by the party leader during the 1975 General Election campaign. What Mr. Muldoon talked about during the campaign was the restoration of sporting ties with South Africa. He made it clear that the Springbok team would be welcome to tour New Zealand in 1976 and that should it do so and National was in power, he would host a Parliamentary reception and attend the matches. With the election won and the message conveyed, the Government could retire to its formally stated position of non-interference. The restoration of contacts with South Africa could be left in the hands of responsible and autonomous sports bodies, while the Government pleaded its helplessness to intervene.

The division of the effective policy on sporting contacts into the formally stated and the informal has proved to be a very effective device, especially if it is desirable to convey one impression abroad and a different impression at home. The emptiness of the official statements leaves room for manoeuvre. The danger of the Gleneagles Agreement is that it threatens to close the gap so carefully left open.

This paper has been confined to some consideration of the formal statements of policy. It is essentially incomplete. What is needed is an account of those informal statements and attitudes which would complement the formal statements and make it possible to assess the full ramifications of the Government's policy on sporting contacts with South Africa. There is, however, the assurance of the Prime Minister that since the 1975 General Election: "There has been no change of policy and no change of emphasis."

African Studies Conference  
University of New South Wales

23-26 August 1981.

R E F E R E N C E S

- (1) L. Trainor, "Race, Sport, Gleneagles", in Hendersen, Jackson and Kennaway (eds), Beyond New Zealand: The Foreign Policy of a Small State.
- (2) R. Thompson, "Sport and Apartheid in New Zealand", New Community, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1979.
- (3) R. Thompson, "Making it easy for the Rugby Union", New Zealand Monthly Review, March 1981.
- (4) R. Thompson, "The Double Policy on Sport", New Zealand Monthly Review, August 1976.