

Holy Days for Sports in Australia

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It looks like a gross mismatch: the ferocious Tigers versus the flighty Crows. But the latter, who stem from Adelaide, are the favourite. This is Australian Rules Football (“footy” to the initiated), one of the stranger hybrids in the sporting codes: men in the barest excuses for shorts; singlet tops of tight matching. But that is even less strange than the fact that the state of Victoria in Australia is having a Grand Final Holiday.

To have a holiday – literary a holy day for sport – jars with modern sensibility. It riles the accumulating capitalist, irritates the diligent shop keeper, angers the ambitious retailer. But governments like selling quack solutions for popularity, and a sporting holy day seems as good as any. Go heavy on the bread and the circuses, and a grateful populace will remember.

When Victoria’s premier, Daniel Andrews, introduced it in 2015, the sporting classes cheered with intoxicated glee. Friday could be given over to festivities; fans could travel from other parts of the state and country to worship their teams.

The business managers, the hands of industry, have different views. Bread, after all, has to be made, and those supervising the bread makers are proving splenetic in their irritations. Tim Piper of the Australian Industry group is one who wishes to see the holiday discontinued. The government, he claimed, would be myopic to persist in this “public holiday that is seen as superfluous.”

The accountants have also been ferried into the discussions on this exercise of superfluity, coming up with their own astrological assessments on losses. The Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has thrown up its thin air prediction: that the Grand Final holiday costs the state upwards of \$1 billion, a curious form of accounting given the sluggish nature of Australian wage growth. (Figures are delightfully relative: in 2015, the chambers of commerce and industry were bemoaning the loss of \$852 million in productivity.)

These lamentations are simple and base: close for the day, or front up with paying more to staff who chose to work on the holiday. The 2015 estimate of lost productivity came in the form of \$147 million in penalty rates. This remains a country where employees and employers tolerate each other with a resentful air.

Defenders of such an occasion are also charmingly incapable of rubbing the star dust from their captivated eyes. In the Huffington Post Australia, sports and environment editor Anthony Sharwood is sympathetic:

“Wallowing in 48 hours of footy fever through Friday into Saturday has a civic virtue, even if it can’t be quantified. That’s the gist of the argument from the Andrews camp.”[1]

Andrews certainly wished it be known in 2015 that his measure was not the cynical product that arises from your political representative's surgery. There are, he assured a Melbourne radio host, "lots of families right across Victoria who are really set to enjoy not just a great day with their kids, a great day celebrating footy or going to the regions to enjoy so much of the amazing tourism offering we have, but it is hard to put a price on what family time, and what a bit of a break actually means." [2]

Australia also offers another fabled peculiarity this regard. Mark Twain famously noted on his travels through Australasia that Melbourne hosted the race that stopped the nation. The Melbourne Cup horse race has become a de facto Australian holiday, a chance for fillies to run on the pitch, and off it. It also allows Australians to pleasure themselves with a pursuit they have treasured, and punished, at various stages: betting.

Such days justifiably bring out the critics. Polling conducted by the *Herald Sun* suggests that such a day is losing appeal. The political yield for Andrews may be declining in value. But is it better that people worship a secular cause featuring an oblong ball fronted by scantily clad men, or other occasions that smack of conquest or defeat? Either way, a politician lurks in the stalls, wishing to reap the reward.

Perhaps there is something to be said for having such a day off when alternatives are considered. Humans treasure those sombre occasions when memories of conflict find form in wreaths, early dawn ceremonies, the stare of death. Poor decisions, appalling judgments, and calamity all too often find their representatives, their holy day high priests.

To commemorate a historical occasion for slaughter, a lost cause, a battle, brings out a certain vulgarity, a form of stupidity that made H. L. Mencken remark acidly on war itself.

"Wars will never cease until babies begin to come into the world with larger cerebrums and smaller adrenal glands."

Till that happens, we can at least find some comfort in these idiosyncratic escapes, however foolish they seem to the unconverted eye. Whether it is the Crows who will swoop come Saturday, or the Tigers who will roar, sporting holy days may turn out to have their place, whatever the stewards of industry think.

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Notes

[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2017/09/17/melburnians-arent-big-fans-of-the-afl-grand-final-eve-public-holiday_a_23212773/

[2] <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/victoria-premier-daniel-andrews-defends-grand-final-public-holiday-20151002-gjzumn.html>

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