

SENATE INQUIRY INTO MATTERS TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE TEAM FOR TASMANIA

Submission by Ed Biggs General Manager former National Australian Football Council 1978-1995, General Manager Australian Football Foundation (former AFL development body) 1995 – 2000.

Australian Football is integral to Tasmania and Tasmania is integral to Australian Football.

Australian Football has for the past 150 years, held a significant place in Australian culture and regular independent research has found it to be an increasing major contributor to the socio-economic welfare of the nation. The AFL is unrivalled as the most successful professional sporting body in the country, both in terms of spectator attendances and commercial income.

Nevertheless, historically its strength has been derived from four states – one of which is Tasmania. While the AFL over the past 25 years has steadily pushed into the large population states of Queensland and NSW the status quo essentially remains. The AFL's commercial success and premierships to both its northern states' clubs has not yet been matched by an equivalent rise in grass roots support. It has been significantly more successful than other codes in establishing a national competition, it remains however, at best, the "Third" football code in both NSW and Queensland.

Successful as it currently is, the AFL is therefore clearly vulnerable to the rapidly changing demographics of our country and the obvious growth of rival football codes with strong international connections. It cannot afford to ignore Tasmania's importance as part of the Game's realistically narrow base. Despite the gains made nationally over recent decades Tasmania remains critical to the ultimate survival of Australian Football – and the AFL.

Tasmania's importance to the code cannot be measured simply in terms of population comparisons, as one may in normal commercial considerations. Unlike a commercial enterprise, culture can not be readily marketed into new regions. The AFL has marketed its national competition to Brisbane and Sydney with significant commercial success. It has however, made little headway in changing the culture in those cities. Tasmania's place in Australian Football, its steady flow of players to the AFL – and its VFL predecessor – and the overall public support is disproportionate to its population base.

Until recently it has been argued that a Tasmanian based AFL team would not be commercially viable. State Government and strong commercial support are now available according to recent reports, supported by a leading national financial commentator. Assuming this can be verified, Tasmania should be invited to enter a team in the AFL – making it a truly national competition.

The AFL has committed to extending to 18 teams. A Gold Coast club appears set to commence shortly and can be expected to succeed. It can be argued however, that Tasmania should be the priority for the eighteenth licence, rather than Western Sydney. Sydney has proven a difficult market to generate support and growth in Australian Football. There is little evidence of support for a second AFL team based in Western Sydney. Indeed, it may even hamper the growth and stability of the Sydney Swans.

The obvious rationale for a second Sydney team is commercial, essentially through the televising of an AFL game from Sydney on a weekly basis, instead of fortnightly as at present. Given the additional teams, in the medium term at least, this could be achieved by match fixture arrangements. This scenario, together with basing the eighteenth team in Tasmania could be achieved more expeditiously, at significantly less cost and without risk to the existing Sydney club.

In summary, Tasmania is an important component of Australian Football's historic - and in global terms narrow - base. The code cannot afford to ignore it. Subject to confirmation of the reported financial support, it should be seriously considered as the base for the AFL's eighteenth team, rather than Western Sydney. There is little evidence of support for the code in Western Sydney and culture cannot be simply sold like a commercial product. The AFL could achieve its commercial growth goals through fixture arrangements, without risking existing structures and a Tasmanian team could be readily established with little dislocation. The entry of a Tasmanian team would be welcomed by the Australian Football fraternity and provide the AFL with a truly national competition.

Ed Biggs
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