

The moral case on behalf of a Tasmanian team being included in the AFL is indisputable. There isn't a party with an interest in the discussion who could argue otherwise. That side of the case is overwhelming because:

- **Tasmania is the only state of the Commonwealth not represented in a supposedly national competition. It's supporters are the only ones in the land not to have a team from their state to truly represent them**
- **Tasmania has always been a heartland Australian Rules state in terms of on- and off-field commitment**
- **The state has produced three of the 22 Legends of the Australian Football Hall of Fame. The other states and territories, with the exception of Victoria, have produced a combined total of four**
- **Other Tasmanian individuals and teams – most notably the Tasmanian cricket team – have performed with distinction when given the opportunity to compete on the national stage**
- **Tasmania has made a contribution to the highest level of Australian football, over decades, which has never been adequately re-paid. Whereas the spoils of the game's success have been shared among all other Australians, they remain largely inaccessible to Tasmanian football-goers.**

The only way the inestimable debt of the decades can be properly re-paid to Tasmanian football lovers is for the state to be granted inclusion to the national competition. Financial support, or a ration of games played by teams that don't represent the state in the AFL, are simply a poor second prize.

Australia's elite-level competition, whether formally constituted as the national league (AFL), or in its previous incarnation as the Victorian Football League (VFL), has feasted upon the best available Tasmanian footballers for over half a century. Since 1986, its presumption of the right to do this has been institutionalised in the form of the annual draft, which distributes the best young talent in the land to existing AFL clubs. Whereas five of the six states are represented in the competition that draws on this talent, and are thus re-paid for providing their best resources, there is no such return for Tasmania. Its best are simply taken away to become the property of the teams of other states.

Imagine the outcry if one state was stripped of any other valuable resource in such a way and then denied a share of the dividend that was its just entitlement.

From the time the exploitation of Tasmanian football began, a decline was inevitable in the quality of the local game available to those on the island. That the great Tasmanian footballers then played against their native state – such as when Darrel Baldock captained Victoria at the national carnival in Hobart in 1966 – compounded the injustice.

The decline of local football on the island was paralleled by a growth in interest in the national league. Despite various attempts to resuscitate the local competitions, they have been dying a slow death since television first exposed VFL replays to the Tasmanian public in the early-1960s. As the gap widened between the quality of football available at local grounds and that appearing on television screens, support for the local game dwindled. From the 1990s, when the AFL began permitting live telecasts of its matches to coincide with local Tasmanian games, the life-support system was effectively switched off. There is now no local football of a standard that bears any comparison with the elite level for Tasmanian football lovers to attend.

Tasmanians are left to follow their chosen AFL clubs from afar and this they do with great passion. Indeed, having professionally observed the game around Australia for many years, I believe they are the most enthusiastic supporters in the nation. I never cease to be amazed at the sight of Tasmanians walking the streets of Hobart, Launceston, Devonport, St Helens, Strahan, Port Arthur or any other town on the island, wearing the colours of Collingwood, Essendon, Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane, the West Coast Eagles, or any other of the AFL's 16 clubs.

But why should Tasmanians be forced to support teams of other states, cities, and suburbs?

The answer, of course, is that they have no choice. Lately, they have been urged to turn their loyalty to a team from the eastern suburbs of Melbourne which claims to represent them. This team, Hawthorn, has as its major sponsor the Tasmanian government in a deal which is the envy of virtually every other club in the AFL. The state government undertook this arrangement to provide at least some AFL games to its public at a time when the AFL was emphatic that the state was not capable of supporting its own team. The arrangement currently involves Hawthorn playing four of its home games in Launceston each season. Tasmanian football fans are thus given four games over the six month season from which to enjoy first-hand exposure to the AFL.

One of the ironies of this deal is that in 1996 Hawthorn's financial circumstances were so precarious that it seriously considered merging with the Melbourne Football Club. Now, the sponsorship arrangement it enjoys courtesy of the Tasmanian taxpayer has placed it among the wealthiest clubs in the AFL and ensured its future as a secure Melbourne-based club.

Tasmanian dollars have secured Hawthorn's future as a Victorian entity. Once again, Tasmanians are propping up a component of the competition while continuing to be denied access in their own right.

Perversely, the commitment Tasmanians hold to their preferred AFL clubs is so strong that some say they are not sure they could switch their allegiance to a Tasmanian team if they were given the opportunity. This, it must be stated, is what many people in Adelaide and Perth thought when they were first given their own teams in the AFL of the late-1980s and early-'90s. Invariably, it took them all of one or two weeks to realise that being a football fan is much more fun when you are able to regularly go to your local ground to watch your team play, knowing that it genuinely represents you.

Tasmanians haven't known this experience in the national football context since the state competed against the rest of Australia at national carnivals and in other interstate games decades ago. These fixtures were once regarded as the highest expression of the code. Carnivals were played every four years as football's quadrennial equivalent to the Olympic Games. It is poignant to observe that at the 1958 Carnival in Melbourne, staged to celebrate the game's centenary, Tasmania defeated both Western Australia and South Australia. It had a claim at that time to being the second-strongest football state in the land. In the 50 years since, football in Tasmania has fallen so far that it could no longer provide either of those states with anything resembling a contest.

So, why has Tasmania allowed this demonstrably one-sided arrangement to not only develop but become institutionalised, over decades, without a fight?

Part of the answer lies, I suggest, within the state's psyche. It hasn't seen itself as big enough or good enough to join the big boys. Yet that is how it once viewed its place in Australian cricket.

Indeed it is a more than arguable proposition that the Australian Cricket Board of the 1970s took a bigger risk on Tasmanian cricket than the AFL would be required to take were it to include a Tasmanian team in its competition. Through the 1960s and into the '70s, Tasmanian cricket teams

were embarrassingly weak. The state's admission to the national first-class competition, the Sheffield Shield, in 1977/78 was a brave leap into the unknown. Thirty years later, Tasmania has become highly competitive in a competition in which there is no structural equalisation as the AFL provides with its player draft. The state has learned to stand solidly on its own feet and, in recent seasons, has won a string of one-day and four-day titles. Currently, the national cricket captain, two of the national selection panel, and the national fast-bowling coach are Tasmanians. Tasmania makes a contribution to Australian cricket manifestly disproportionate to its size.

This provides a glaring contrast to the dwindling contribution Tasmanian football now makes to the player ranks of the AFL. From the golden years of the 1950s and '60s, when it produced such legendary figures as Darrel Baldock, Ian Stewart, Peter Hudson, Verdun Howell, Royce Hart and many others, the state now offers fewer players for the AFL production line, and fewer champions. The reason is clear: unlike cricket, which has included Tasmania, football has continued to exclude it. Cricket has become more accessible than football to the youth of Tasmania.

Another reason Tasmania has struggled to make its voice heard in the quest for football inclusion is that the state relies on the AFL for its major income stream and therefore is not financially independent. The state's administrative body, the erstwhile Tasmanian Football League, is now called "AFL Tasmania". This change came about as a result of a 1998 re-structure which installed a board of seven whose nominations require AFL ratification. One can imagine the impossibility of this body asserting its independence regarding the state's future if it were seriously seeking a different path from that being plotted by the national administration.

As a result, the state administration has simply not been in a position to present the state's case for AFL inclusion. The stumbling blocks that had always been placed in Tasmania's path were allowed to remain there without public question. Incidentally, the other major income stream received by Tasmanian football is derived from the state government which, until taking a decision in 2008 to pursue AFL representation, had embraced the AFL's policy of placing a limited number of Hawthorn's games at Aurora Stadium in Launceston as Tasmania's only AFL ration.

For many years after the evolution of the VFL into a national league, the Tasmanian case – whenever timidly raised by anyone who cared to do so – was dismissed as being economically unviable. It was stated as though axiomatic that Tasmania could never hope to provide the corporate backing required by contemporary AFL clubs. Economic realities, it was said, were such as to make it impossible for Tasmania to ever have its own team.

More thorough recent analysis has revealed that this is not so. During 2008, the Tasmanian Government commissioned the Melbourne-based *Gemba* group to conduct a study into the state's capacity to support a team. The outcome of this was that, based on conservative estimates of all major measures, a team could be sustained with a lesser contribution from government than that currently provided to Hawthorn.

A common fallacy in discussion of Tasmania's ability to support a team was that it didn't have enough business of sufficient size to provide the necessary corporate backing. But the existing AFL clubs don't rely simply on backing from local business for their corporate support. The CEO of one non-Victorian club told me when I asked him about this specific issue was that his club's corporate backing was derived on the basis of both its national and local profiles and that the former generated approximately 60% of its revenue share. AFL clubs carry their sponsorship messages across the continent, not just to their own constituencies. Tasmania – since its bid for AFL inclusion was announced last year – has already been guaranteed a major sponsorship from a non-Tasmanian industry.

Another important income-stream for AFL clubs is that derived from memberships. Tasmania has historically been told that it wasn't populous enough to command the sort of membership base that would make it financially viable. Yet Tasmania's population is approximately 10% of Victoria's

and Victoria has ten AFL clubs. Bearing in mind the proportion of Victoria's support-base consumed by the highly popular clubs like Collingwood, Essendon, and Carlton, that left for the battlers is significantly less than would be available to a Tasmanian team from its discrete base.

North Melbourne, for example, would survive on a total constituency of scarcely a quarter of a million people. By comparison, a Tasmanian team would have no rival for its identity within its local market and, bearing in mind its history, would be supported with a commitment few other teams in the competition enjoy. Also, the state has historically produced a vast diaspora of successful, professional people and could be expected to have both its membership and its financial support bases boosted by this group.

Comparisons with the demographics of other AFL states shouldn't be confined to Victoria. South Australia, with a population of approximately three-times that of Tasmania, has two AFL clubs. Those who know the state's football configuration say that the more popular team, the Adelaide Crows, would claim at least two-thirds of that landscape, leaving the less supported team, Port Adelaide, to survive on a backing probably smaller than Tasmania's. And they are required to do this in an environment in which the majority of the state is hostile towards them.

Then there are the cases of NSW and Queensland, where infinite patience and unlimited funding have been provided to sustain clubs which for many years attracted little public support. The fact that the game's administration felt compelled to develop the code in two of the nation's three most populous states is understood and accepted, but Tasmanians – who through this time have been watching the local game die in their own heartland state – are entitled to ask: "What about us?"

And now the intention is that new clubs will be developed in these two states while Tasmania continues to be kept waiting. Again, it is understood that there are specific population growth-areas in these states that make them strategically important to football, but, again, Tasmanians are entitled to ask: "What about us?"

The arguments on behalf of the mooted new clubs are so different from those in support of Tasmania that it's impossible to measure them side by side. It can be safely said, though, that Tasmania offers a constituency of already-committed Australian football supporters the like of which it will take the new territories many years to achieve.

Of course there is always a reason that can be found for Tasmania's exclusion. Another commonly heard one relates to the island's historic inability to overcome its tendency for regional in-fighting. Questions as to where the games would be played, and whether people from one end of the island would travel to watch games if their region wasn't included in the scheduling, have long been used to condemn the Tasmanian cause. Yet ultimately this very real issue might provide the most compelling argument on behalf of a Tasmanian team.

The fact is it's true that regional self-interest has often prevented Tasmania from achieving the best for itself. This has been as true for many other aspects of the state's life as it has been for sport. Popular football the world over, though, has an almost unrivalled power to bring disparate groups of people together. This is a power that has historically been denied the people of the nation's smallest and most isolated state. Were they given their own AFL team, I suspect Tasmanians would be unified by it in a way that would surprise them, and in a way that has never happened in the state's history. It would cause people from all over the island to want to converge in one place on a regular basis and, without needing to think about it, to consider themselves as Tasmanians rather than as southerners, northerners, north-west coasters, or of any other regional zone.

The AFL has done many things to make its mark on Australian life in recent years, most notably in its embracing and showcasing of indigenous players, thus setting a benchmark for other sports,

and by raising the bar in terms of the behavioural standards expected of elite-level sports performers. It has also ensured that the elite-level game is now taken the length and breadth of the continent in a way it once never was.

Yet, if it were to look at the issue of Tasmania a little more closely, it might see that it has it within its power the chance to perform one of the greatest services to one Australian state that has ever been provided.

Tasmania would be unified and uplifted in a way never before achieved if it were to be given its own AFL team.

Inclusion in the AFL is the only way Tasmanian football fans can ever be given first-class quality of football life. It would provide them with eleven games each season at home, and on the alternate weeks they could watch their team on television as it played interstate, perhaps even travelling to one or more of these games each season. There would be benefits to tourism on both sides of Bass Strait, but Tasmania would be the chief beneficiary as an influx of supporters for each of the team's home games could be expected from the mainland.

The fact that it has taken so long for this case to be given serious consideration is a pity, and has cost Tasmanian football dearly. Perhaps, though, it has been inevitable that, as the AFL has dealt with the challenge of re-shaping its competition over 20 years, that the smallest state would be forced to wait the longest.

Successive AFL administrations have recognised that the deterioration of Tasmanian football has been a problem, but have never felt that the stars have aligned in such a way as to make the inclusion of the island state possible. The stars are now aligning in a way to not only make it possible, but, if the current administration is genuine in its commitment to the development of football in all states, to make it imperative.