

A NEO-LIBERAL PARADOX: AUSTRALIAN STATE FUNDING OF MAJOR SPORTING STADIUMS

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Introduction

Australian cities have a history of state-supported major sporting stadiums. This has intensified into the neo-liberal era dating from the 1980s with state funding of major stadium development, despite the greatly increased professionalization of the various sporting codes using the stadiums and the presumable scope for funding of stadium infrastructure by these codes. The last 20 years have seen a veritable boom in the construction of new or expanded outdoor stadiums in Australian cities, almost entirely funded from the public sector. The resulting developments are a significant element in the physical restructuring of the cities, particularly visible in new sporting precincts such as Olympic Park in Sydney, where the Olympic outdoor and indoor stadiums have led to the development of a major mixed use zone. The main purpose of this paper is to explore reasons for the significant public subsidisation of recent major stadium developments in Australia.

This paper begins by outlining theoretical considerations that help to frame the arguments. It then overviews critiques of such development, principally drawing on American literature. The extent of public funding of new stadium development in Australia is then outlined, and related to the profitability of major users of the new stadiums. Following this, possible reasons for public funding of the stadiums are explored. The reasons analysed are regional economic development and attracting special events; path dependency; popular cultural identity and legitimation; and political influence. The conclusion attempts to assess the relative importance of each of these in driving the public funding of recent Australian stadium development.

Neo-liberalism and state stadium expenditure

The central thesis of this paper is that Australian state expenditure on stadium development is paradoxical in terms of current neo-liberal underpinnings of the states' contemporary political philosophies and management practices. These neoliberal underpinnings have been evident since the 1980s (for example, see Gleeson and Low, 2000). The paradox derives from the nature of neoliberalism. While the standard picture of neoliberalism is one of measures to promote the market and reduce the role of government, Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) have proposed a more nuanced interpretation. Their view is that neoliberalization represents an 'historically specific, unevenly developed, hybrid, patterned tendency of market-disciplinary regulatory restructuring' (p. 330). In particular, neoliberalization involves regulatory experimentation that is context-specific, especially in relation to the existing regulatory context. Thus the neoliberal landscape will be uneven, belying the standard theorization depicting

neoliberalization as simply a spreading of market-oriented policies across the world (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010, p. 334). This can include 'roll out' of new forms of state institutions and intervention rather than a simple 'roll back' of government in favour of the market (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Nevertheless, as Jessop (2002) makes clear, such forms do not include new government expenditure in support of profitable parts of the private sector, such as the large state outlays on sporting stadiums that are analysed here. Rather, they might be regarded as a form of 'neostatism', in the form of public-private partnerships under state guidance or of an expanded role for new collective resources (Jessop, 2002, p. 461).

A central point potentially relevant to this paper is that neoliberalization processes are 'intrinsically contradictory' (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010, p. 333). They entail regulatory changes that frequently work against the institutional and socio-economic conditions necessary for their success (Harvey, 2005). Again, it seems to be stretching the framework to regard state spending on stadiums for profitable sporting leagues as part of such neoliberal contradictions. The contradictory processes arise from attempts to address capitalist crises that are in part now being generated by previous neoliberal policies (c.f. Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010, p. 337), but stadium spending in Australia hardly seems to be aimed at a systemic crisis situation, save for a weakly developed rationale (see below) that such spending helps create needed jobs. While Castells (1977 [1972]) framed action for social infrastructure by urban movements in quasi-crisis terms, there do not appear to have been any equivalent movements in Australia agitating for stadium development. In summary, Australian state expenditure on major stadium development is paradoxical in that it arguably contradicts prevailing state and national Australian neoliberal ideology.

State expenditure on stadiums can instead be viewed as a distinctive type of rent-seeking (payments obtained above normal market value), which Aligica and Tarko (2014) label 'crony capitalism'. They argue that its key distinguishing feature is that 'the prevailing rent-seeking structure is legitimized by means of a populist ideology' (Aligica and Tarko, 2014, p. 157). They identify features of crony capitalism that resonate with the state stadium expenditure experience in Australia. In particular, it involves favoritism based on close relationships, most significantly involving relationships among upper echelons of society or between large firms and politicians. Crony capitalism is seen as deriving political legitimation from opportunistic use of populist rhetoric (Aligica and Tarko, 2014, p. 172). Even so, the Australian stadium case could perhaps be regarded as a special type of crony capitalism, since Aligica and Tarko (2014, p. 165) base their conceptualization on the perspective of lobbying for specific laws and regulations. In the Australian stadium situation, the rent-seeking gains to sporting leagues and the stadium bodies themselves are the subsidized facilities bankrolled by the states.

Public funding of sports stadiums

Academic analyses of public funding of sports stadium development is dominated by American literature. This is a product of the distinctive US context in which city governments, often with state government support, outlay public funds or give tax incentives to keep or, more rarely, attract, major league teams, especially in baseball and NFL. This is because major league teams can move between cities, making city incentives a key location factor. By contrast, in Europe teams in the major outdoor sport, football, usually build and own their own stadiums. The same is true in other outdoor sports such as cricket.

By 1996, total completed and planned spending on US sports stadiums for the 1990s was over \$9 billion, with over 80 per cent of funding provided by state and local governments (*USA Today*, 1996). Baade (2003) estimates that of the 139 US stadiums built since 1945 at a cost of \$26.5 billion (1997 prices), over \$20 million came from public subsidies. Rich (2000, p.138) explains the political imperatives for new stadium development in the US, with its context of footloose major league teams:

“ Mayors fear the damage to their reputations and political influence that may result from losing a team to another city, and anticipate taking credit for keeping it in a new, publicly supported stadium.”

Pelissero *et al* (1991) widen this perspective to identify that the influence of demands by local urban corporate regimes can be central to decisions to develop new stadiums.

Wilson and Pomfret (2008, p.8) note the contradiction involved in publicly-funded new stadiums built for professional big league teams:

“A particularly generous form of public support has been the provision of subsidized stadia, reducing what would have been the clubs’ main non-labour cost, despite the overwhelming verdict of the economics literature that such subsidies rarely if ever are welfare enhancing.”

New stadium facilities can improve the profitability of teams and their associations by increasing the number of fee-paying spectators, at potentially increased ticket prices if the new facilities are significantly better (such as replacing standing areas with seating, or making wi fi access available at the SCG as part of the rebuilding of spectator capacity there). This can also indirectly improve income from broadcasting rights with the better crowd ‘atmosphere’ from bigger attendances. But as Wilson and Pomfret (2008, p.14) observe, many of the subsidised stadium redevelopments do not significantly add to existing stadium capacity. Instead, they improve facilities for preferred spectators such as members, or customers of corporate boxes. One attraction of new or redeveloped stadiums for their trustees is the possibility of greatly increasing the capacity of corporate boxes, which are much more profitable per seat than general seating. This is reflected in most of the new developments in Australia, where increased corporate box capacity is very large whereas the increase in general seat numbers is relatively small. This is similar to outcomes for new stadiums in the US (Wilson and Pomfret, 2008). For example, the new SCG stands

give the SCG only an additional 2,000 seats (capacity is now approximately 48,000), although the SCG Trust claims the redevelopment will bring spectators closer to the field of play and put more of them undercover.

The literature consistently suggests that expenditure on sports stadia has little positive impact on regional economic development (Johnson and Whitehead, 2000, p.49; Siegfried and Zimbalist, 2000, p.103). *Ex post* studies of new sports facilities are almost unanimous that their economic impact is negligible (Humphreys, 2006, p.215). Claims of employment and income that are generated usually ignore the opportunity costs of drawing construction labour and other resources from alternative uses, and are only equivalent to net economic gains if the workers and construction materials were otherwise unused (see Burgan and Mules, 2000). Similarly, such claims almost invariably ignore opportunity costs as well as loss of expenditure diverted from other outlets in the state (Noll and Zimbalist, 1997, p.496). Baade (2006) argues that this happened during the Sydney Olympic Games, with significant expenditure shifting having taken place. In addition, there is the possibility that residents will actually leave the city during sporting events to avoid congestion and other negative impacts (Baade, Baumann and Matheson, 2008).

The experience of the Sydney Olympics provides a salutary lesson concerning the economic benefits of special sporting events focused on large stadiums. The year 2000 Olympic Games generated a loss in Australian real private and public consumption of \$2.1 billion, according to calculations by Giesecke and Madden (2007).

Beyond regional economic development arguments, subsidies for sports facilities might be justified because of wider public goods characteristics of sport (that is, benefits that cannot be captured through the market) or the generation of positive externalities. An example might be the generation of local unity, fan loyalty, civic pride, and satisfaction from living in a 'major league city' (Johnson, Groothuis and Whitehead 2001, Swindell and Rosentraub 1998, Fort 2003). As a result, the cultural significance of sports (and thus stadia) has been argued to exceed its economic significance as a business in the US (Noll and Zimbalist, 1997, p.56). However such impacts might not be very significant in the Australian case, where the major cities all have major league teams of various hues that are not potentially footloose, unlike major league teams in the US cities to which this literature refers.

Profitability in Australian Professional Team Sports

The main argument against subsidised public provision of funding for new or expanded sports stadiums is that the teams and their associations which are the main users of the new stadium facilities are very profitable and do not need such subsidies. While most Australian teams are structured as members' clubs, this does not stop them from being profitable.

The first evaluation of the profitability of Australian team sports was carried out by Wilson and Pomfret (2008), who focused on the AFL. They found that in the

2005-06 year, total AFL revenue was \$215 million. Over the same period, the operating surplus of the league was \$140 million, which is not taxable. Individual clubs are also profitable. Twelve of the sixteen AFL clubs reports profits in 2006, with aggregate club profits amounting to \$11 million (Wilson and Pomfret, 2008, p.12). Most of the revenue comes from TV rights. In 2006, the AFL agreed on a new five year TV rights deal worth \$840 million (*ibid.*). The next broadcast rights deal for 2012-2016 was worth \$1.25 billion. As Wilson and Pomfret (2008, p.12) note, the value of such rights 'is perhaps the best indicator of the increasingly commercial aspect of team sports in Australia'.

The situation in the next biggest professional league, the NRL, is similar to that of the AFL. In 2013-14, the NRL had an operating surplus of \$50 million (NRL, 2014). This came from total revenue of \$345 million, of which broadcast revenue was \$226 million.

There is little evidence that the state-controlled stadiums are extracting high profits themselves from sporting leagues and individual teams. Payments to or by clubs vary considerably between stadiums: home AFL clubs receive 41 per cent of match revenue plus \$100,000 per match at the MCG, and 77 per cent at Subiaco Oval (McIlwraith, 2011), whereas the Titans NRL club pay \$300,000 per game rental at the state government's Skilled Park stadium (Masters, 2011). Such arrangements mean that the stadiums are returning reasonable but not excessive annual operating surpluses. The MCG Trust reported a surplus of \$18.9m in 2013-14 (MCG Trust, 2014), while the Sydney Cricket and Sports Ground Trust had a surplus of \$14.1m in 2014-15 (SCSG Trust, 2015).

Recent public funding of Australian sports stadiums

The following projects are recent and current examples of major stadium construction that have been largely or wholly financed with public funds.

Metricon Stadium, Gold Coast: Total cost of developing the stadium for AFL was \$144 million, shared between the Queensland government (\$60 million), Gold Coast Council (\$20 million), the Commonwealth government (\$36 million), and the AFL itself (\$10 million) (Hinds, 2009; Spits, 2009).

Melbourne Cricket Ground: The upgrading of the Great Southern Stand at the MCG in 2011-2013 was funded by a state government grant of \$35m and a Melbourne Cricket Club (which manages the MCG) contribution of \$20m.

AAMI Park stadium, Melbourne: Total cost of this new rectangular stadium was \$267.5 million, funded by the Victorian government.

Simonds Stadium, Geelong: Stage 4: This \$90 million project is at the planning stage, with the state government promising a grant of \$75 million and the Geelong Football Club a grant of \$4 million. The City Council and the AFL are being requested to provide remaining funding (Wade, 2015).

Sydney Cricket Ground: Old grandstands were demolished and three new stands built between 2012 and 2014. To finance construction, the government's SCG Trust received a NSW government grant of \$97.5m and a Commonwealth government grant of \$50m (Sydney Cricket & Sports Ground Trust, 2014).

Adelaide Oval: New grandstands were built and opened in 2014 at a cost of \$610 million, funded from a Commonwealth grant of \$35 million, an AFL grant of \$5 million, and the remainder from a state government grant (Naughton, 2015).

Rectangular Stadium, Perth: Recently completed through funding by the state government of \$103 million.

Perth Stadium: The new 60,000 seat Perth stadium is being funded by the WA government at a cost of \$1.1 billion.

Reasons for public subsidies for Australian stadium construction

Economic development

The increase in economic development in terms of added jobs and income is frequently and increasingly claimed as a justification for new stadium development. In particular, since the 1990s, when the Victorian government under Premier Jeff Kennett adopted a policy of boosting Melbourne's economic development through special events, attracting such events has come to be a central rationale for major stadium development. New South Wales and South Australia have followed Victoria in setting up dedicated offices for event attraction. Stadiums have now become a weapon for attracting major professional team sports games from interstate and overseas. In 2015 the MCG hosted a State of Origin game, one of the highlights of the rugby league season, at the expense of Sydney and Brisbane. The SCG has recently hosted a major league US baseball game.

A central 'message' that the government task force to develop a major stadiums plan for Perth sought to convey to target stakeholders was that a new stadium would enable Perth to attract more international events (Professional Public Relations, 2008). The revised stadium plan for a new Perth Stadium and Sports Precinct is similarly being justified on the basis of its ability to 'significantly enhance Perth's capacity to host major events and attract visitors to WA, creating a tourism economic boom for the State' (Tourism Council Western Australia, 2015). It is claimed 1,390 jobs in the WA economy will be created, assuming the project attracts one new major entertainment event per annum (generating international as well as interstate visitation) and one new major international sporting event each year. Total (gross) economic output would be \$291m a year (ibid.).

The Simonds Stadium redevelopment (Stage 4 and 5) is intended to complete its transformation into Victoria's third national multi-purpose stadium, providing infrastructure required to attract a range of nationally significant events including AFL, T20 Big Bash, Super 15 Rugby, A-League Soccer and concerts. The

current state premier confirmed this objective, justifying the ground's upgrading as giving it the capacity to host 'bigger and better events all year round' (Australian Tenders, 2015).

Fuller cost-benefit economic evaluations are also used to justify stadium (re)development. A cost-benefit analysis of the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust's current master Plan, of which the two recently completed stands are a central component, claims that the Master Plan will yield net benefits with present day value of \$197m to NSW (Sydney Cricket & Sports Ground Trust, 2014, p.30). However, as noted above, such claims for economic benefits almost certainly ignore considerations such as the opportunity cost of stadium construction resources, diverted expenditure by attendees, and event avoidance by residents.

Path dependency

Australian state governments have had a historical role of administering present day main cricket stadiums (which later also hosted football - Australian football or rugby - matches) from colonial times onward. These were located on land owned by the colonial governments that was usually reserved for recreation. State funding of grandstands in these stadiums is more recent. Victorian government funding of MCG grandstands did not take place until well into the twentieth century, with the Melbourne Cricket Club having paid for the early MCG grandstands. State capital funding for the Sydney Cricket Ground did not start until the last decade of the twentieth century. State grants for operating costs of the stadiums have a much longer history.

Until relatively recently, this state support took place in an era when there was very limited professionalization of the team sports played in these stadiums, unlike the sports played in American and European stadiums from late in the nineteenth century. Hence the various sporting associations and their teams had few financial resources. Thus state subsidies for Australian stadium operations have been the norm for well over a century, generating an expectation that this would continue into the present era of highly professional stadium sports, given the legitimacy conferred by popular support (see below) for those sports. Even today, the very profitable AFL is only making very minor contributions to some stadium redevelopments, although it developed its own stadium at Docklands as the second major AFL ground in Melbourne.

Popular cultural identity and political legitimation

Maintaining or expanding city and state prestige also seems to be a significant legitimating force for much stadium spending. For example, Premier John Brumby said the MCG's Great Southern Stand upgrade was needed for the MCG to remain the nation's greatest sports venue (McMahon, 2010).

A legitimation process was actively pursued by the Western Australian government in 2007 to build community support for a new, multi-purpose outdoor stadium (Professional Public Relations, 2008). The stadium task force hired a public relations company, which targeted four key stakeholders (state

government, stadium users and patrons, media, and three local governments). The strategy was to engage with these groups regularly and tell them how a new stadium would benefit Western Australia. Briefings were organised for local government and community groups as well as public meetings; materials and advice were prepared for the task force briefings to the media; and a communications plan was prepared for the state government. Besides the case for enabling attraction of more international events, a second key message was that Perth sports fans deserved the best possible stadium.

The wider cultural context that allows and fosters such legitimisation is the pre-eminent place of sport in Australian culture. Sporting champions are lionized in the media, and in popular culture generally. Public spending on new facilities for sport at the highest levels is therefore seen as appropriate. As Wilson and Pomfret (2008, p.4) observe, 'subsidies to team sports have ... far less public scrutiny ... than would occur in other sectors'.

Thus subsidising sports stadiums is politically popular. Wilson and Pomfret (2008, p. 16) attribute this to a calculation that 'more votes will be gained from rabid sports fans than will be lost to taxpayers uninterested in sports, whose vote is likely to be determined by other issues'. They note the competition between political parties in South Australia to fund stadium building in order to attract FIFA World Cup games to Adelaide (*ibid.*). At the same time, this means governments are concerned about 'not informing and alienating non-sports-oriented voters' via opacity about the total size of public subsidies for professional sports (Wilson and Pomfret, 2008, p.18). The favoured sports are seen as central to the national psyche and identity. It might be added that the attractions to politicians of building large pieces of infrastructure that are highly visible to electors, and that they can announce and eventually open in a blaze of publicity, have long been evident. The current wave of stadium developments is no exception.

Interest group influence

As well as general cultural factors influencing political decisions in favour of public subsidies for stadium development, more direct political influences might be inferred. One potential avenue for these are the social networks between stadium administrators (and the leaders in the sports associations that are the major clients of the stadiums), and state politicians. In particular, the political influence of well-connected members of the various trusts and other bodies that administer the stadiums on behalf of the state is potentially significant.

Such political intervention from stadium trustees can allow new developments to significantly improve stadium finances. While agreements with most sports teams provide returns to teams based on total attendance numbers, stadium redevelopment can allow the provision of enhanced corporate box numbers and facilities. This can reap profits that the stadium trusts can retain.

The SCG Trust membership illustrates the high status and potential influence of trustees, which might be brought to bear on politicians for favourable funding

decisions. Trustees listed in the 2013/14 report of the Sydney Cricket & Sports Ground Trust (2014) included an ex-state government minister, the lead player in organising the Sydney Olympic Games (Rod McGeoch), the immediate past president of the Business Council of Australia, the former CEO of News Ltd., the chairman of the NSW Multicultural Business Advisory Panel, a former Australian rugby union coach and influential broadcaster (Alan Jones), a former president of NSW Rugby Union and former Australian rugby union captain, the CEO of Westpac, former chairman of Tourism NSW/Deutsche Bank ANZ/Australian Securities Exchange, former Australian cricket captain and Australian of the year, CEO Harvey Norman retailers, former chairman Australian Rugby Union, and former captain Australian women's cricket team.

Conclusions

While the neo-liberal era has brought increasing privatisation of public activities that the private sector can carry out profitably, in Australia the public subsidisation of stadium developments for major team sports has continued apace. This is despite the main clients of redeveloped stadiums being teams in increasingly profitable sporting associations or their clubs. Claims that such redevelopment generates significant income and jobs usually overlook various opportunity costs or inflate the likelihood that special sporting and other events will justify much of the costs. On the other hand, the extensive corporate box expansion that is usually part of the redevelopment process is very profitable for stadium trusts and operators.

In practice it is non-economic factors that appear to be the main drivers of public funding of stadium development. There is a long history of support by state governments, which has generated expectations that this would keep going in the context of wide public support in Australia for major team sports. Politicians appear to see that more votes can be won from sports-loving electors through public funding of stadium development that might be lost from other electors. The real costs are frequently hidden from the latter in documents such as state budgets (Wilson and Pomfret, 2008) or downplayed in public relations claims of likely job and income generation. Politicians are also subject to potential influence by powerful members of stadium trusts. Thus the public subsidisation of stadium development in Australia illustrates the way in which powerful rent-seeking groups can counter prevailing neo-liberal ideology by being agents of popular legitimation for state actions.

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