

Plunging into politics

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Taking the strategic parallels between sport and politics further, Minister Kelly says that, as with a team captain, it's the political leader who sets a party's strategy.

"The leader, like the captain, sets up plays for future success," she says. "The leader is the master tactician. They call the right plays and you draw strength from them in the same way a sporting team looks to its captain. It's their job to keep the team together and when the team's down, it's their job to bring you back for another contest."

Bob McMullan agrees: "What you look for from your leader is a sense of direction," he says. "However, a leader must also show a willingness to take hard decisions. Anybody can make the easy yards, but to stand up when it's hard and say 'Yes. That's where we're going', it's that sort of performance under pressure that people look for in their leaders, whether it's sport, politics or anything else."

Another element of the political life that the professional athlete would appreciate is the tribal loyalty that the political contest brings out in the party faithful.

However, according to Bob McMullan, tribalism in both sport and politics is breaking down. "Children don't necessarily go on to share their parents' sporting or political allegiances, and the reasons for the change are basically the same," he says.

McMullan says sport has undergone what he calls a commodification, where teams have become franchises and players merely bargaining chips to be traded. "It's hard to be passionate about a corporation," he says. "In Canberra, everyone loved the Raiders rugby league team when it won a couple of premierships in the 1980s. It was very important to the city of Canberra.

"However, they lost a lot of support with the commodification that Super League brought to the game. No-one has the same emotional attachment to a commodity and so the traditional allegiance to the team has broken down."

McMullan says that in recent years there's been a similar breakdown in the tribal allegiance usually associated with people's

political loyalties. "Opinion polls tell us that, when asked why they vote in a certain way, the number of people who say 'Because it's the way I always do', is declining.

"I think that's a good thing for democracy," says McMullan. "It means people are making decisions on the merits of the parties in the lead up to an election, though it can make life uncomfortable for Members who previously occupied what were considered safe seats.

"As education standards have increased, people are now more likely to question institutions. That's true about churches. It's true about sporting clubs and it's true for political parties. It's right that these things should be questioned."

Jackie Kelly sees the maintenance of a sense of tribalism as crucial to the success of a political party. "A party's performance is directly related to how tribal it is, how it sticks together, how coordinated it is and how its members support each other," she says.

Ms Kelly says the tribal emotions on display when your party wins an election are the same as when your team wins the grand final. "Your joy is not just for yourself," she says, "but for all your supporters behind the scenes."

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Kate Lundy (left) and Jackie Kelly find time for rowing despite their busy parliamentary schedules.



Ric Charlesworth with members of Australia's Olympic gold medal winning women's hockey team. Photo: Newspix

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Eight years after leaving Parliament behind, Australian supercoach Ric Charlesworth still expresses some frustration at what he experienced in politics.

Charlesworth is one of the best hockey players and coaches Australia has produced. He was also the Member for Perth in the House of Representatives for 10 years from 1983.

Charlesworth played 234 games for Australia, including five Olympics, and was captain of the national team for seven years. He retired as a player after the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In recent years, he's coached the Australian women's hockey team to gold medals at both the Atlanta and Sydney Olympics.

Charlesworth is a giant of Australian sport. He played Sheffield Shield for WA for eight years. He was also a general practitioner. Off-field he's generous with his time and very open. Medicine, like politics, is a profession that calls for a deft personal touch and Charlesworth has that.

His touch with the hockey stick is also something. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* says the hallmark of the short,



Bob McMullan combining his passion for sport with his responsibilities as Federal Member for Fraser.

As for the direct impact of the rules of sport on the conduct of the political process, Bob McMullan points to one notable example, the 'sin bin' which operates in the House of Representatives.

The Member for Cunningham, Stephen Martin, is a former Speaker of the House and was once a first-grade rugby league referee. "When he was Speaker, Stephen said that a Member who became unruly shouldn't be banned from the House for a day or more," says McMullan. "He thought it would be better if they were sent out of the chamber for a little while to cool off, in the same way unruly footballers are sent to the sin bin. It's an initiative that's worked very well."

Whether you're in the chamber, or in the stadium, you're barracking for your team.

Though she's never been sin binned, Jackie Kelly concedes that she is sometimes cautioned by the Speaker for rowdy behaviour. "I liken the House in Question Time to the sporting field," she says. "If the other team's supporters get up and yell really hard, then your supporters have to yell hard as well.

"That often means you end up with a raucous chamber, but it's like when you're at the Olympics and the Americans start yelling 'U-S-A

U-S-A'. The Australians know they've got to come over the top of them with the Aussie chant," says Ms Kelly. "Whether you're in the chamber, or in the stadium, you're barracking for your team. You're trying to stop the other side, trying to put them off their game, distract them. It's faking, it's play acting, but it's necessary."

Despite the gladiatorial nature of both politics and sport, it's interesting that sport can serve as a great unifier in politics. A couple of years ago Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley were seen exchanging notes during Question Time.

It turned out that the two leaders were keeping each other up to date on the score in a nail biting Test match between the Australian cricket team and Pakistan which was being played that day in Tasmania.

And while sport may not be as important to the electorate as the economic outcomes a government can deliver, the fortunes of our national sporting teams have a big impact on the national mood.

Bob McMullan says the sense of national well-being that's prompted by the success of an Australian sporting team is a big part of the reason why governments spend a lot of money to help our elite athletes succeed.

"And some of that money goes into the pockets of very high income earners," says McMullan. "If it happened in any other area of life there would be concern, but I think it's a proper way to spend public money because we all get great benefit."

Article by Peter Cotton, a freelance journalist from Canberra.

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sturdily built inside right was his "outstanding stick work and a mastery of individual skills: the body swerve, the dribble, the feint, an ability to beat opponents on either side of his body".

"On-field," says the *Oxford Companion*, "Charlesworth was noted for his determination, aggression and high work rate."

On the field, and in coaching, Charlesworth is a hard task-master, frustrated by anything but the best. It's why, after eight years, he's still frustrated at never being elevated to the Ministry under PM Bob Hawke.

Charlesworth was elected to the House the year Bob Hawke became Prime Minister. During his first five years in Parliament, he continued to play for Australia and was content to remain a hockey-playing backbencher. "I saw it as my training period in the Parliament," he says. "Sometime after I gave playing away, I thought it was reasonable that I aspire to make it into the Ministry."

However, the selection process for Ministers falls far short of best practice, selection on merit, the way it happens in sport. In politics, says Charlesworth, Ministers often get the nod according to their

State, their gender, and their willingness to support factional positions. "I'd rather have a group of selectors choosing (the Ministry)," he says.

Charlesworth concedes that bad timing played a part in his failure to make the Ministry: "A lot of quality Labor people entered Parliament at the 1980 election and became Ministers after 1983," he says. "They were still Ministers when I left 10 years later.

"Also, there's a time in your life when a political career is more appropriate, when your children have left home and you still have the energy and enthusiasm to be very productive, like a John Button, a Neil Blewett or a Peter Walsh," says Charlesworth. "I had young children I wasn't seeing, and in retrospect, I think I was too young. But in politics, you take the chance when it comes along."

Charlesworth says politics often involves the opposite of team work. "There are lots of ambitious people for whom the ends justify the means," he says. "In my time, it was nothing for some people to background a journalist about something that would embarrass their own government."

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Election timing

Speculation over election timing is a popular pastime. There are a few constitutional and political limits which apply.

Constitutionally, the next election for the House of Representatives must be held by 12 January 2002.

Constitutionally, the next normal election for the Senate (a standard half-Senate election¹) must be held between 1 July 2001 and 30 June 2002.

In practical terms, the constitutional window for a standard House of Representatives/half-Senate election is therefore July 2001 to mid-December 2001.

For an election to be held *before* July 2001, one of two 'unusual' things must happen:

- either the Prime Minister seeks a House of Representatives only election; or
- the Prime Minister seeks a double-dissolution election (that is, an election of the House of Representatives and the whole Senate).

House-only election: While there is no constitutional requirement for elections of the House of Representatives and the Senate to be held simultaneously, they almost always are. The last House-only election was in 1972. If a House-only election were held there would still need to be a half-Senate election between 1 July 2001 and 30 June 2002.

Double-dissolution election: For the Prime Minister to seek a double-dissolution election from the Governor-General, he must be able to show that the Senate has been obstructing the legislative program of the Government. The legislation need not be Budget or other 'vital' legislation; 'non-crisis' double-dissolution elections have been held recently, in 1983 and 1987.

Specifically, the Senate must have rejected or unacceptably amended the same piece of Government legislation twice, with a minimum of three months between the first rejection and the House passing it again. Once the Senate then rejects or unacceptably amends the legislation a second time, it becomes what is known as a 'trigger'.

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He cites the case of a Government Senator – no names, no pack drill – who fed the Opposition a question to embarrass one of his own Ministers. "Maybe this is the art of politics. Maybe you've got to be Machiavellian. But I'm not convinced," says Charlesworth. "Some would say I'm naive, but I believe the best way to get re-elected is to govern well, rather than pork-barrel before elections."

As with all life experiences, Charlesworth gained many positives from politics. "I learnt a great number of things," he says. "It's a very interesting job, perhaps the most interesting job you can do, but it's a very difficult lifestyle. Had I understood what was involved before I went into politics, I'm sure I would still have done it."

Charlesworth's interest in politics was fired in the 1970s by Vietnam, the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, and the Fraser Government's boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980.

Interestingly, despite his misgivings, Charlesworth doesn't rule out a return to the political life: "I could see myself doing it again," he says, "but at a different stage of my life. There's nothing more noble than public service. You can make a difference, really change things. I take pride in many of the things we did in government, even though, as a backbencher, I didn't drive them."



Currently, the Government has one piece of legislation – the Workplace Relations Amendment (Unfair Dismissals) Bill 1998 – which has been rejected once and reintroduced into the House more than three months later². If the current sitting pattern is maintained, the House would have to pass and the Senate reject that Bill (or another which meets the criteria) a second time by Thursday 5 April 2001 – the last scheduled sitting day before another critical date, 9 May 2001.

That date is the last a double-dissolution can occur in this cycle. This is because of the combination of two Constitutional provisions:

- a double-dissolution cannot take place *within six months* of the three-year term of the House 'expiring'; and
- the House 'expires' three years from the date of its first sitting – in this case on 9 November 2001.

¹ *Half-Senate election: States are represented by 12 Senators. In normal circumstances, only half of each State's Senators are up for re-election every three years (Senators are elected for six-year fixed terms). Territories are different, with two Senators from each Territory elected concurrently with every House election.*

² *Rejected by the Senate 14 August 2000, reintroduced to the House 29 November 2000; as at mid-February 2001 it had not been re-passed by the House and sent to the Senate a second time.*

Then Charlesworth says: "You'd like to have two lives and the chance to do everything you wanted to do. Part of me feels that my political career was not completed. That's just the way it is. No-one's life is ever perfectly fulfilling."

Apart from being able to see a lot of his kids, the thing Charlesworth liked most about life after politics was the control he regained. As coach of the Australian women's team, he had autonomy managing the program.

When he recently stepped down from the job, it was an open secret that the men's team was after him, but he opted for a coaching role with AFL team the Fremantle Dockers.

He almost went to Perth's other AFL team, the West Coast Eagles. "But their problems are pretty easy to define," he says. "The Dockers are more of a mystery. That makes working with them a much harder proposition. It's a very exciting opportunity. I might get involved in hockey again in four years, but for now I want to do something completely different."

That's how it is for Ric Charlesworth.

Article by Peter Cotton, a freelance journalist from Canberra.