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“The whole world’s watching”: New Zealand, International Opinion, and the 1981 Springbok Rugby Tour

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Abstract

The 1981 South Africa rugby tour of New Zealand brought widespread protest and global attention. It should be understood in an international context. Both anti-tour protestors and the New Zealand government viewed international perceptions of New Zealand as important and interacted with institutions and individuals around the world to influence them. For the New Zealand government, in addition to domestic considerations, relations with Britain were important for trade, geopolitical, and cultural reasons. Protestors drew inspiration from antiapartheid protests in Britain stretching back to the late 1950s, along with activism around Africa and throughout the Western world. The tour also needs to be viewed in the context of the cold war and international trade, which directly influenced British and U.S. policy toward South Africa and had a vicarious effect on New Zealand’s attitude toward South Africa sporting contacts.

Keywords: Apartheid, international history, nationalism, identity, decolonization, sport, rugby, Commonwealth

Introduction

On July 25, 1981, approximately four hundred antiapartheid protestors tore down a perimeter fence at Rugby Park in Hamilton, New Zealand, pushed past irate rugby fans on the terraces,

and invaded the playing field. Linking arms in the middle, preventing kick-off between Waikato and the South Africa Springboks rugby team, they repeatedly chanted “[T]he whole world’s watching!”¹ The global media audiences were indeed vast, including rugby fans in South Africa watching their first-ever live overseas sports broadcast; however, one important person was not watching. New Zealand Prime Minister Robert Muldoon was en route to London to meet leaders of other Commonwealth nations, where he hoped to salvage New Zealand’s hosting of the Commonwealth Finance Ministers’ Meeting that September. He was also going to attend the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer at St Paul’s Cathedral on July 29, 1981.²

Even in the most stressful, violent moments of the Springbok rugby union tour of New Zealand in 1981, those on either side of the conflict--protestors and the New Zealand prime minister--were concerned with international perceptions. This is not to say domestic issues did not influence the protests; the government’s precarious political and economic position, the mobilization of marginalized groups, a rise in nationalism and conservatism in New Zealand politics, dispute over whether sports boycotts were an acceptable antiapartheid protest tactic, policing methods, and the combative personal style of Prime Minister Muldoon all played a part in polarizing opinion and stoking dissent. However, the tour was also a battle for global opinion, a point sometimes neglected in the historiography. Much (but by no means all) of the literature written about the tour has been inserted into a “national” story, suggesting New Zealand was on a linear path from loyal British colony in the late 1800s to an increasingly independent and liberal nation from the 1960s onward.³ This mirrored the historiographical tradition, increasingly challenged by revisionists, placing Britain’s global influence on an inevitable and equally linear decline through the twentieth century.⁴ The story often pits New Zealand’s liberal and conservative forces against each other: new ideas versus old, colonized versus oppressors, urban versus rural, educated versus narrow-minded in a

regrettable, Manichean struggle for the moral high ground. Blame for the tour is often directed at a selfish, stubborn New Zealand Rugby Football Union and a government following a “no politics in sport” and “law and order” mantra while cynically courting rural provincial voters for an upcoming election. Such domestically focused narratives often follow brave (or feckless) protestors battling escalating police forces, who themselves are perceived as brutally violent or, in the case of Hamilton, incompetent.⁵

The tour looms large in New Zealand’s popular memory. A TVNZ documentary screened on the twenty-year anniversary titled 1981: New Zealand at War talked of events that “changed New Zealand for ever.” Te Papa, the national museum, described it as “among the most divisive events in New Zealand’s history.” Trevor Richards, an integral figure in the protest movement, said it was “the closest New Zealand has come to civil war in the twentieth century.”⁸ The cover sleeve of his book on the subject says “the tour of 1981 is writ large in New Zealand’s history.”

Yet, despite the hyperbole, relatively few professional historians have tackled the events of 1981. The bulk has been written by those intimate with the protest movements. Tom Newnham, Geoff Chapple, Juliet Morris, and Lindsay Wright all protested and published books in the three years following 1981, while riot squad commander Ross Meurant offered a first-hand account of police action.¹⁰ Humanities and social science departments in New Zealand universities had a short burst of activity following the tour, with the University of Canterbury establishing an archive and Victoria University of Wellington producing a series of papers looking at social and economic impacts.¹¹ Don Cameron captured events from the perspective of a sports journalist. The protests receive summary attention in national narrative histories by James Belich, Michael King, and Philippa Mein Smith; while varying in significance, each portrays the tour as an agent of social change, contributing to or demonstrating a sense of national progression. Barry Gustafson dedicated a

chapter to the tour in his biography of Robert Muldoon, suggesting it represented a “generational and attitudinal clash.” Ranginui Walker and Aroha Harris have evaluated its (largely positive) effect on the Māori protest movement. Harris notes that, in addition to temporarily ending racist sport, the protests increased support for Māori rights, including that from Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) and church groups.¹⁵

There has been a smattering of journal articles, book chapters, and academic theses, including sociologists and political scientists looking at the tour through the prism of ethnicity, class, gender, or sport in New Zealand culture. Views differ on the effect of 1981; some see it as a turning point, while others note, but do not overstate, the tour’s importance in the context of rising feminism, Māori rights, reactionary conservatism, economic turbulence, independent foreign policy, and the extensive liberal economic reforms implemented by the fourth Labour government, 1984-1990.¹⁶

Those who have looked at the tour as international history, albeit as part of broader narratives, include Douglas Booth, Martha Evans, David Black, and John Nauright, who discuss the tour’s effect in South Africa as part of broader research on television’s impact on apartheid and rugby’s role in South African nation building. Diplomatic historian Malcolm McKinnon sees the New Zealand Government exercising dissent in the face of foreign pressure, sacrificing (or not caring) about international opinion to retain domestic political power. He also references a growth in both left- and right-wing nationalism influencing New Zealand’s foreign policy in the 1980s. Malcolm Templeton’s Human Rights and Sporting Contacts chronicles policy changes and diplomatic correspondence that led into the 1981 tour and beyond. He too is sympathetic to the anti-apartheid movement and is critical of the government for not doing more to stop South Africa contacts, largely in keeping with the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs’s policy advice throughout the period (the author was a former foreign policy officer.)¹⁹

Malcolm MacLean also helpfully puts the South Africa sporting contacts in an international context, noting that sports boycott campaign was one of the “principal tools” to dismantle the apartheid system. Dancing on Our Bones by Trevor Richards uses some academic rigour, as well as being a semi-autobiographical account of the author’s time as chairman and international secretary of Halt All Racist Tours (HART) from 1969 to 1985. Richards places the tour in a long line of New Zealand protests against racist sport beginning in 1921 and charts the international connections fostered by himself and others in the protest movement.²¹

Such efforts, while useful, leave gaps, particularly in understanding how pro- and anti-tour factions competed to project an image of New Zealand, what Benedict Anderson calls the “nation as an imagined community,” to the rest of the world.²² Likewise, they often fail to show how the perceived international reputation of New Zealand was used by both sides of the dispute to influence domestic opinion. These efforts were facilitated by networks and emerging technologies.²³ Those placing the tour in the “whiggish” context of New Zealand’s national progress and increased independence tend to overlook evidence that both pro- and anti-tour advocates looked out to the world for inspiration, in particular, southern Africa, Britain, and elsewhere in the Western world. This article aims to show that the dispute was fought as much with telexes, press releases, and satellites as with batons, barbed wire, and flour bombs. Viewed this way, the tour can be better conceptualized, not solely as a demonstration of New Zealand’s postcolonial independence but as case study of international networks, with particularly strong links between the former imperial hub of London and nodes in its former colony, 18,000 kilometres away.²⁴

It is not a catch-all narrative. The reaction within South Africa is not included and has already been researched by David Black, John Nauright, and others.²⁵ Nor is the Springboks visit to the United States after departing New Zealand included, which also met with

controversy and protest, along with a pipe bomb.²⁶ The research relies predominantly on New Zealand government archives, particularly communications to and from diplomatic posts, the United Nations, and governments of other nations. It also draws upon files of the Commonwealth Secretariat, which played an important role in the sports boycott against South Africa, and the British government. Papers and propaganda of the protest groups and political opposition have been reviewed, along with media reports and television documentaries. It has not been possible to access archives of the New Zealand or South Africa Rugby Unions. Neither does the article reference the archives of the “new Commonwealth,” Australian, Canadian, or United States governments, which would likely contain nuggets if time and space allowed.

New Zealand’s sporting contacts with South Africa and resultant protests help illuminate international history of the twentieth century. As James Belich puts it, “[A]part from history, there are only two spheres in which New Zealand has been a world superpower. One is the export of protein. The other is sport.” According to Belich, New Zealanders’ participation in rugby union, particularly the national All Black team (named after the color of their uniforms,) has for most of the twentieth century embodied “Better Britishness.” That is, attempting to prove New Zealanders more than any other people display the perceived British characteristics of manliness, fairness, and racial superiority (an optimum blend of Scots, English, and Welsh, while supposedly integrating Māori on an equal basis). Greg Ryan notes that rugby endowed the New Zealand nation (as it was perceived domestically and internationally) with qualities of innovation, rural pragmatism, and egalitarianism. These ideals resonated in the British metropolis, where sport and other cultural and economic interaction in the twentieth century enabled New Zealand to reinvent itself as an extension of Britain: a pleasant, egalitarian farming hinterland, perhaps analogous to Devon or Hampshire, despite being 18,000 kilometres away.³⁰ Such cultural reinvention has interesting parallels

and contrasts in other settler societies, which in itself warrants further study of the New Zealand example.

Sports Boycotts and the Anti-Apartheid Movement in an International Context

Increasingly, historians are recognizing connections and continuities in colonization across the English-speaking world, particularly in the long nineteenth-century.³¹ This is also true of the antiapartheid movement. Rob Skinner has shown moral debates originating from the South African War, 1899-1902, particularly influenced by Christianity and missionary endeavors, extended through to the extensive global antiapartheid activism in the 1970s and 1980s. He argues networks of personal imperial connections generated exchanges of knowledge that later enabled antiapartheid activism. Such ideas are compatible with thinking on global networks by Chris Wickham, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and James Belich, whereby technologies help or hinder the transmission of culture, capital, goods and people between “hubs” (such as London, in the case of British imperialism) and “nodes” in colonies.³³

This helps explain how the antiapartheid and sports boycott movements traveled vast distances of time and space, from origins in imperial South Africa to the British metropolis of London in the era of decolonization, then to outlying but important former colonies such as New Zealand. As Roger Fieldhouse has shown, the British antiapartheid movement has always had an international dimension. It was given impetus by the Boycott Committee founded in Britain in 1952 and was influenced by decolonization organizations in Africa and elsewhere, as well as multilateral organizations such as the UN, labor movements, and religious groups. It was stimulated by the hardening of the South Africa apartheid regime, Sharpeville Massacre, and South Africa’s exit from the Commonwealth in 1960 and the transformation of the African National Congress into an armed organization with leadership

in exile or prison in the 1970s.³⁴

The antiapartheid and South Africa boycott movements (including sporting boycotts) have their origins in southern Africa; however, London was integral to their globalization. The British capital was a purveyor of radicalism, as well as conservative thought. Britain long had channels for disseminating political thought and culture to its global interests and vice-versa, and the antiapartheid movement was ready and willing to use these channels for its own ends.³⁵ The coalition initially opposing apartheid included the Committee of African Organisations, largely made up of Africans agitating for anticolonialism. They allied themselves with the emerging peace and antinuclear movements and opponents of racism in Britain. Trade unions, churches, and Britain's growing black communities were represented, calling for antiapartheid movements to be established not only in Britain and southern Africa but across the English-speaking world. From at least the 1930s, London and Oxbridge were the places of education for many anticolonial elites.³⁶ Such groups were increasingly helped by improved telecommunications, mass media, and the advent of jet air travel.³⁷ The concept of "boycott" was itself derived from disparate parts of the British Empire. References to boycotts were initially used by the nationalist movement in Ireland. Mahatma Gandhi instigated boycotts against businesses, taxes, courts, and foreign cloth in India. South African activists were influenced by Gandhi, who had spent his formative political years advocating for civil rights in Durban and Johannesburg.³⁸

Britain's antiapartheid movement was aligned against successive British governments, which justified inaction toward South Africa's racial segregation policies, legislated since 1948, in several ways. First and perhaps foremost, Britain did not want to damage economic relations with southern Africa (particularly the lucrative minerals trade). There are plentiful examples of the Cabinet using business interests as the primary determinant of foreign policy decisions, especially in times of economic distress.³⁹ There

were other reasons, too. Prior to 1961, Britain sought to keep South Africa within the Commonwealth; then, after it withdrew in that year, ministers often used its sovereign status as a reason not to interfere. There was also a desire to maintain South Africa's support for British policy in Rhodesia and to limit Soviet influence in the region (an objective strongly supported by the United States.) Early in the antiapartheid struggle, before the widespread public critique of racial hierarchies, there was a conscious or unconscious failure to recognize the inherent inequities in the apartheid regime. This can variously be explained by structural racial prejudice, cynical pragmatism, or naiveté. Although of lesser importance, some Britons also had personal connections to white communities in southern Africa, which may have engendered sympathy for policies of the South African government.⁴⁰

Legitimization of sports boycotts to influence South African racial policies was in part facilitated by the changing structure of sport administration in the 1960s. Newly formed multilateral sports organizations such as the Permanent General Assembly of National Olympic Committees and the General Assembly of International Federations challenged sports bodies hitherto based on imperial lines, dominated by white, Western communities. Communist bloc and third-world nations, including those recently decolonized in Africa and the Caribbean, began to coalesce within these organizations to challenge the status quo. In 1963, the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC) asked all Olympic nations to join the struggle against racist sport. Another of these new pannational organizations constituted by recently decolonized nations, the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, voted in 1966 to "use every means" to expel South Africa from international sport.⁴¹ Even though it was not until 1970 that the International Olympic Committee narrowly voted to expel South Africa, it was clear that nations formerly on the periphery of world sport and politics were now more influential.

Protests against South African sporting contacts were taken up with alacrity in

Britain. Demonstrations against the 1969 South Africa rugby tour of Britain and Ireland, organized by Peter Hain, Dennis Brutus, and the National League of Young Liberals, have been described by Rob Nixon as “the most successful mass action in post-World War II British history.” The result, as in New Zealand in 1981, was rugby played behind barbed wire with large-scale police presence. The 1970 South Africa cricket tour of England was subsequently cancelled. Widespread protests also accompanied the 1971 South Africa rugby tour of Australia, which particularly resonated with New Zealand audiences.⁴³ Protestors recognized sport’s ability to generate substantial media interest, especially from the newly dominant medium of television, and to engage a large and influential portion of the populace who previously had little interest in international politics. A case in point is the Basil D’Oliveira affair of 1968-69, which saw South African Prime Minister John Vorster refuse to allow a South African-born Cape-“coloured” cricketer to tour the republic with the England cricket team. It prompted criticism from sports followers because politics were now seen to interfere with sports’ ethics. Former Conservative British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan described it as “beyond the pale of civilised cricket.”⁴⁴

The history of antiapartheid protest in Britain is relevant to the 1981 Springbok tour because it closely mirrors the New Zealand experience. From 1921 to 1960, New Zealanders’ protest and indignation were largely directed toward treatment of Māori players, who were excluded from touring South Africa at the request of the hosts. This led to the creation of groups such as the Citizens’ All Black Tour Association (CABTA) and the “No Māori—No Tour” movement of 1959-60. Despite this, up until the 1960s, there was relatively little criticism in New Zealand of treatment of the black population in South Africa (at least from Pākehā, the term for New Zealanders of European descent).⁴⁵ In 1964, partly emulating the British equivalents, Citizens Association for Racial Equality (CARE) was founded in Auckland by Harold Inness to campaign against racist policies. Before long, sport was an

important focus of activity; in 1965, CARE issued An Appeal to Conscience asking New Zealanders not to attend that year's tour games played by the South Africa rugby team.⁴⁶ In 1969, Halt all Racist Tours (HART) was established in New Zealand to campaign specifically against sporting contact with South Africa; STET it later merged with the New Zealand Anti-Apartheid Council in 1980 partly as a response to a government campaign to discredit it and was among several new antiapartheid activist groups established in the 1960s and '70s.⁴⁷ These movements, allied with international pressure, had some success. An outbound All Black tour to South Africa was cancelled in 1967 and the New Zealand government under Labour Prime Minister Norman Kirk prevented the 1973 inbound South Africa tour. A New Zealand rugby team did tour South Africa in 1970 but was heavily criticized (as a compromise, three Māori and one Samoan New Zealander were included in the squad after being designated "honorary whites" by the South African government.)⁴⁸

Looking back in his memoirs, HART founding chairman Trevor Richards saw himself joining an internationalist movement that challenged the established order across the Western world, campaigning on issues such as Vietnam, Biafra, nuclear testing, and South Africa. Like CARE and the New Zealand Anti-Apartheid Council, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, HART created links with international movements elsewhere, not only in countries such as Britain, Australia, South Africa, Nigeria, and Tanzania but with multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, International Olympic Committee, and, as we shall see, the Commonwealth Secretariat based in London. Close connections were formed with key southern African liberation groups, including the ANC, South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), Pan Africanist Congress and others. Like in Britain, protest groups such as HART and CARE were often allied with New Zealand's trade union movement and major church denominations, which also had strong international links.⁴⁹

The New Zealand government had its own international concerns. Since the invention of refrigeration in the 1880s, the country had maintained a close trading relationship with Britain based on New Zealand's export of dairy and sheep products. In return, New Zealand "imported" British culture and goods, which, it has been argued, recolonized the nation as "Better Britain," controlled by a politically dominant farming elite. The relationship largely suited both metropolis and colony: in the 1950s, New Zealand boasted one of the highest living standards in the world.⁵⁰ However, from the 1960s to the 1980s, this economic, political, and cultural edifice, dubbed "the protein bridge" by James Belich, was under threat.⁵¹ Britain's economic difficulties and its repeated attempts to join the European Economic Community (EEC) threatened to bring prohibitive trade barriers for New Zealand commodities. Britain eventually entered the EEC in 1973, negotiating a five-year partial tariff and quota exemption for New Zealand butter and cheese.⁵² From the early 1960s to the 1990s, as New Zealand Prime Minister Robert Muldoon put it, "[O]ur foreign policy is trade."⁵³ While also seeking to diversify markets, New Zealand governments made greater trade access to Europe a primary foreign policy objective, pressing Britain to make the case to the EEC.⁵⁴ They were encouraged by the belief that New Zealand's dairy quota would increase over time as Britain gained influence in Europe.⁵⁵ In 1977, New Zealand Prime Minister Rob Muldoon noted the OPEC oil crisis had caused New Zealand's sharpest fall in export receipts since 1928. The solution, he felt, still lay in Britain's hands: "I must record the great weight we attach to working with Britain in current and international economic discussions. . . . Sense will prevail in accessing the British trade market."⁵⁶ Indeed, in March 1981, the EEC Council of Agricultural Ministers authorized Britain to import special quotas of New Zealand butter at a reduced levy.⁵⁷

This relationship partly explains why New Zealand's policy on contacts with South Africa so closely resembled Britain's during the late 1970s and 1980s, even when other

“white” Commonwealth nations like Australia and Canada began to disassociate from the apartheid regime. From the mid-1940s to the 1960s, the New Zealand government largely justified inaction toward apartheid through a policy of “domestic jurisdiction.” Along with other white Commonwealth nations, New Zealand argued that the UN should prioritize collective security over internal issues in other states and frequently opposed or abstained from UN antiapartheid resolutions.⁵⁸ This view softened over time, particularly with the Norman Kirk-led Labour government of 1972-75, although New Zealand was slower to change than most. Much like the British government, from the election of the National Party in 1975, the New Zealand government’s policy held that, while apartheid was deplorable and in need of reform, the government could not legally interfere (“coerce” was often the verb used) to prevent sporting contacts with nonracially selected South African teams.⁵⁹ The claim that New Zealand’s policy was in line with Britain was used many times in the lead up to 1981 and beyond, although not often mentioned was the fact that Britain practiced an indirect sanction by removing government funding for sports bodies that had contact with South Africa, something New Zealand often did not.⁶⁰ The policy was one of six major platforms in the New Zealand National Party 1975 election manifesto, which said, “[E]very New Zealander should be free to have contact or to play sport with . . . anyone in the world.”⁶¹ It stood in contrast to the Labour Party, which had prevented the 1973 South Africa tour. The National Party under Rob Muldoon duly won the 1975 election and did not stop the All Blacks from touring South Africa in 1976. This was despite New Zealand’s signing a unanimous UN General Assembly resolution the previous November calling on all governments and sports bodies to avoid sports contact with South Africa.⁶²

Arguably the nadir of New Zealand’s international reputation came in the aftermath of the 1976 South Africa rugby tour, rather than in 1981. The government seemed to underestimate the impact globally and domestically, despite a warning by Abraham Ordia,

president of the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa, of boycotts of the Olympics by African nations and their allies should the All Blacks tour proceed. "Time will tell," was Muldoon's response to the boycott threat.⁶³ The 1976 tour coincided with the Soweto uprising, adding to the international outrage, and twenty-eight African, Middle Eastern, Asian, and Caribbean nations protested New Zealand's presence at the 1976 Montreal Olympics by calling their athletes home before the opening ceremony.⁶⁴

The outcry led to a further softening of New Zealand's policy and the signing of the Gleneagles Agreement at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in June 1977. Gleneagles was instigated by Commonwealth Secretary-General Sir Shridath Ramphal and committed governments and sports bodies to take "every practical step to discourage" sporting contact with South Africa.⁶⁵ At Muldoon's behest, the agreement remained vague enough to avoid the New Zealand government from having to use coercive powers such as withdrawing visas and passports; however, to the outside world, it looked as if New Zealand was finally falling into line with global opinion. It seems Muldoon either thought or hoped the shift in domestic public opinion would make a future South Africa rugby tour unlikely.⁶⁶ In explaining Gleneagles to journalists, Muldoon pointed out, as usual, that it aligned with the existing policy of the British government. He also predicted "the [New Zealand] Rugby Union is not going to invite a Springbok team here. . . . [T]he next team that comes will be when South African rugby is totally integrated at all levels."⁶⁷

Of course, Muldoon was wrong. In September 1980, the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) invited the South Africa team to tour, but not before New Zealand Foreign Minister Brian Talboys went to some effort to dissuade them on the basis they would contravene the Gleneagles Agreement. On April 9, 1980, Talboys wrote to Ces Blazey, chairman of NZRFU:

"A Springbok tour would dash to the ground all that has been achieved as a result of

international acceptance. . . . that New Zealand does not in any way condone . . . the apartheid regime in South Africa. . . . [The tour] may affect the harmonious development of the Commonwealth and international sport.”⁶⁸

Talboys exerted public pressure too, telling a London press conference in October 1980 that New Zealand public opinion was moving away from the tour proceeding because of the “experience of the Montreal Olympics. I might even claim some success myself in seeking to persuade New Zealanders that we do not live in a white Anglo-Saxon world. We live in a world in which New Zealand has to develop . . . associations with people of different cultures. I think to some extent this obviously is happening.”⁶⁹

Talboys was more inclined to prevent South African sporting contacts than his prime minister; however, rhetoric from both suggested that a South Africa rugby tour of New Zealand would not take place in 1981. This created a greater sense of indignation when the tour proceeded, stirred in part by perceptions that New Zealand had not fulfilled an international commitment.

The 1981 Tour as an International Dispute

The NZRFU decision to invite the Springboks to tour had a recent precedent. Predictably, this came from Britain, with the British and Irish Lions rugby team touring South Africa in May<EN>-July 1980. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher outlined her government’s reasons for not preventing the Lions tour in a letter to Abraham Ordia in May 1980. She reiterated that Britain remains “firmly opposed to the policy of apartheid,” that it “publicly deplored” the Lions’ decision to tour South Africa, and that it “fully accepts the Gleneagles Agreement.” She went on to say, however, that Britain’s democratic traditions did not permit

withdrawal of passports and, therefore, the government could do nothing further to prevent the tour from proceeding. She also noted that no government assistance was provided to the touring team. In Thatcher's view, this removed any inconsistency in approach between the Lions touring South Africa and the 1980 Moscow Olympics, ahead of which the government had withdrawn funding for the British Olympic Association to attempt to prevent British athletes competing.⁷⁰

Not only was Britain's policy echoed by the New Zealand government throughout 1981, but it gave the NZRFU further justification for the Springbok tour invitation. Blazey explicitly referred to the Lions tour precedent in a letter to Talboys explaining the NZRFU decision. In response to fears of a boycott of the 1982 Commonwealth Games by African nations, Blazey claimed that, thanks to the 1980 Lions tour, "upset of the 1982 Commonwealth Games already exists."⁷¹ Talboys was critical of NZRFU's disregard for the Gleneagles Agreement and later made an emotional plea to Blazey: "[F]or the sake of other New Zealand sportsmen, to avoid dividing and damaging our society and for the international reputation of your country, I ask you to think again."⁷² Blazey and the NZRFU board would not change their decision, and the tour began as planned in Gisborne on July 22, 1981.

The NZRFU decision was predictably greeted with criticism from around the world. The Commonwealth Secretariat said the news had been "received with revulsion throughout the Commonwealth" and STET "an expression of contempt for international obligations."⁷³ Sam Ramsamy, chair of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC) claimed that, in retaliation, African states would not attend the 1982 Commonwealth Games and Arab states would boycott NZ\$400m worth of New Zealand trade.⁷⁴ Alexander Ross, chair of the Commonwealth Games Federation, was concerned about the impact on the 1982 games and expressed "extreme disquiet."⁷⁵

The Australian government was also alarmed. New Zealand's actions meant that, in

addition to the at-risk Commonwealth Games, potential existed for a boycott of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting due to be hosted in Melbourne in October 1981. An Australian Department of Foreign Affairs circular felt New Zealand “singled itself out by disappointing expectations aroused in Commonwealth countries by the Gleneagles Agreement.”⁷⁶ Commonwealth secretariat advisor (and former All Black) Chris Laidlaw, after speaking to the Australian Foreign Department, predicted “open conflict” between the Australian and New Zealand governments should the tour proceed.⁷⁷ As well as conveying concerns to New Zealand directly, Australia also attempted to bring pressure to bear from the United States, warning the Soviet bloc would use the issue as an excuse to boycott the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.⁷⁸

On the other hand, the response from Britain was muted. Conscious of trade with South Africa and its own recent sporting contacts, British officials said New Zealand’s actions were consistent with the Gleneagles Agreement and that the New Zealand government should not withhold visas to the South Africans.⁷⁹ There was some parliamentary and media pressure on this view, especially when it became known the British consulate in Pretoria issued visas on New Zealand’s behalf, and there were suggestions the Springboks would transit through Hong Kong, a Crown colony (in the end, STET the team transited via the United States both ways, after Australia declined access to its airports for refuelling). Lord Carrington, secretary of state for foreign and commonwealth affairs, was asked in the House of Lords whether the British government would withhold assistance. The reply was negative.⁸⁰ This comfortably conformed to Britain’s previous policy statements. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) also attempted to alleviate international pressure on New Zealand. Roger Baltrop, head of the FCO’s Commonwealth Division, offered to write to Commonwealth Secretary-General Ramphal to “reduce the temperature” on the issue, advising that, in Britain’s view, the tour would not contravene the Gleneagles Agreement.⁸¹

Both the anti-tour movement and New Zealand government proactively engaged with international, as well as New Zealand, news media to convey their points of view. Anti-tour activists such as writer James McNeish and former All Black and diplomat Chris Laidlaw wrote opinion pieces or undertook interviews in the British national newspapers. Other eminent New Zealanders, including academics, wrote letters to the editors of the leading British newspapers.⁸² This suggests they saw London-based media as important to their cause, in part because, as a global “hub” with vast international links, messages conveyed via London media were more likely to reach southern Africa. Muldoon gave numerous interviews to the British press and publicly lauded the way its newspapers reported the position of the New Zealand government, criticizing the domestic media for not taking the same approach.⁸⁴

There was significant international media interest in the tour, attracted by the strong words of intergovernmental organizations and the prospect of violent confrontation. Over 150 foreign journalists journeyed to New Zealand, including twelve UK Press Association correspondents and reporters from all major newspapers and television networks in Britain, Australia, and South Africa. CBS and NBC television crews came from the United States, which had only happened previously on state visits and after the Mount Erebus air disaster in 1979.⁸⁵ This number of journalists could not have moved around provincial New Zealand unnoticed, adding to the sense that the tour placed the nation on the world stage. Global media attendance was also reported by domestic media, relaying the international significance of the event to the New Zealand population.⁸⁶

The presence of international media was facilitated by improvements to New Zealand’s telecommunications in the 1970s. News was filed almost instantly over vast distances via cable, telephone, or satellite broadcast, something impossible on the previous Springbok tour in 1965 (New Zealand’s first satellite station was installed in 1971).⁸⁷ The

tour also featured the first live television broadcast to South Africa, coincidentally the cancelled game in Hamilton, but only after significant debate and strike threats within the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation.⁸⁸

It is occasionally claimed the tour created or reflected a clear rural/urban divide in New Zealand, with pro-tour sentiment coming from predominantly older, less educated, provincial demographics and anti-tour movements largely made up of city-dwelling, educated, and marginalized groups (such as women and Māori).⁸⁹ However, a closer look at the statistics creates a more complex picture. A New Zealand Herald poll from the end of July 1981 showed 42 percent of New Zealanders in favor of the tour and 49 percent against (the numbers against had perceptibly increased during the tour, probably due to the disruption caused.) Conforming to the accepted narrative, larger centers Wellington (57 percent), Christchurch (57 percent), and Dunedin (68 percent) all had relatively clear majorities against the tour; however, Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city, was less clear cut, with only 50 percent being anti-tour. Moreover, small towns such as Greymouth were clearly anti-tour (perhaps in this case because it did not have a match scheduled,) while more substantial provincial centers like Hamilton and Invercargill were pro-tour. Rotorua and Gisborne both had large Māori populations, yet the former was substantially pro-tour and the latter was anti-. Aroha Harris has suggested divisions among Māori, with many activists and the Māori Council firmly opposed, while more conservative institutions were ambiguous.⁹¹

The lack of statistical clarity suggests that being in an urban or rural location was not the best indicator of anti- or pro-tour sympathies. A better gauge may be the image of New Zealand that a particular person, group, or community wanted to uphold and portray to the rest of the world. This becomes clear when reviewing the communication of anti-tour activists, many of whom were concerned about how "New Zealand" was defined, particularly internationally. Mobilisation to Stop the Tour (MOST), an Auckland-based coalition

established for the 1981 protests, told its supporters, “New Zealand’s place in the whole human community will be in your hands.”⁹² Derek Wilson, on the Left of the Labour Party, saw New Zealand’s antiapartheid protests as contributing to the worldwide struggle against international capitalism. A HART newsletter said the tour should be opposed because it “will be a further attack on New Zealand’s so-called egalitarian, multi-racial society.” The campaign group Artists against Apartheid put it explicitly: “It was like a battle for a definition of a society.”⁹⁵

It was not just those on the traditional Left who were anti-tour. Opposition also came from social, economic, and sporting elites, who saw it as running counter to their notion of New Zealand, especially as it pertained to the outside world. Graham Mourie, incumbent All Black captain and a farmer from the ostensibly pro-tour Taranaki province, chose not to play in 1981 for “moral” reasons. He argued New Zealand was losing in world opinion, even if it won on the pitch.⁹⁶

Some business leaders were also anti-tour. New Zealanders had spent a century cultivating a reputation as a trading nation and some thought the tour jeopardised this. Former All Black captains Wilson Whineray, a senior business executive, and John Graham, headmaster of a leading secondary school, publicly denounced the tour, with Graham writing in the Auckland Star, “The standing of New Zealand world-wide is very important from a position of economic well-being and we simply can’t put ourselves in a position where countries . . . have any reason not to trade with us.”⁹⁷ Fred Turnovsky, another successful exporting businessman, wrote to Governor-General David Beattie asking him to press Muldoon to stop the tour: “Our international standing is threatened. . . . In the past 50 years we have been developing a viable, participatory democracy, intelligent, caring and multicultural.”⁹⁸ Businessmen such as Turnovsky and Whineray were involved in export markets outside Britain so may have seen the tour as more costly than farming communities

that still heavily relied on Britain. The New Zealand Meat Board supported the government by publicly doubting the tour would have a negative effect on trade, although, as in the case of Mourie, it was clear some farmers were anti-tour.⁹⁹

Interaction with international organizations was integral to the anti-tour movement. As we have seen, HART and CARE derived from 1960s international protest movements, and their evolution mirrored that of Britain. Throughout 1981, they invited activists from Africa, Australia, and elsewhere to address protest gatherings in New Zealand.¹⁰⁰ Protest groups also relied on international bodies for financial support. In September 1980, World Council of Churches donated NZ\$5,000 to HART to ease its financial situation, which at that time included debts of over NZ\$3,300.¹⁰¹ Leadership of mainstream religious denominations were predominantly anti-tour (although their congregations may have been divided). Rector John Weir, an active protestor, felt Pope John-Paul's II's call to confront human rights abuses was a significant factor in Catholic opposition.¹⁰²

As international secretary of HART, Trevor Richards was specifically employed to generate international support. As well as African activist groups, he was a regular correspondent with the United Nations Centre against Apartheid, the Commonwealth Secretariat, New Zealand diplomats, and foreign affairs ministries of other Commonwealth countries. He wrote to Chris Laidlaw in the Commonwealth Secretariat in September 1981: "75,000 people from 29 centres throughout New Zealand participated in marches and rallies against the Springbok tour. An immediate international response . . . would greatly help further build the campaign in New Zealand."¹⁰³

Richards was not alone in establishing an international network. Ramphal's files in the Commonwealth Secretariat include letters from New Zealanders asking him to pressure the New Zealand government and the NZRFU to prevent the tour. Some wrote on behalf of influential organizations, such as Leader of the Opposition Bill Rowling and President of

New Zealand Federation of Labour Ken Douglas. There were also letters from individual New Zealanders concerned at the impact the tour would have on perceptions of their country.¹⁰⁴ This suggests international activism was also happening at the grassroots of New Zealand society in 1981.

Even as the tour was underway, protesters were weaving their actions into a “national” narrative and projecting this not only to other New Zealanders but to an international audience. C. K. Stead, an eminent writer, wrote in a newspaper column that “reports coming in from all over show New Zealand’s image abroad has been saved by those who protested. They are the patriots.”¹⁰⁵ The national anthem “God Defend New Zealand” was frequently sung at protests, including in the middle of Rugby Park, Hamilton. Trevor Richards told fellow protesters, “The HART office has received calls from around the world; from London, from Paris, from Montreal, African states and from South Africa. The message . . . is the only people standing between New Zealand and total shame is the anti-tour movement.”¹⁰⁶ Individual New Zealanders echoed this national “pride.” Terry Bell, traveling in Tanzania during the tour wrote of “feeling (openly) proud we came here from New Zealand.” Fred Turnovsky, having attended an UNESCO board meeting in Paris, wrote of his fellow board members being “greatly surprised by the strong disapproval displayed by New Zealanders of all walks of life, . . . This has without doubt helped to restore the respect New Zealand is held. . . . We can take some satisfaction from having saved New Zealand’s face.” Patriotism also existed among pro-tour advocates. David Sparks, a rugby supporter, after attending the cancelled game in Hamilton and witnessing violence outside the ground thought that “national pride had to be restored” and immediately installed a New Zealand flag at his home.¹⁰⁹

It has been suggested that the New Zealand government sacrificed international reputation for domestic electoral gain in 1981.¹¹⁰ However, the behavior of Prime Minister

Robert Muldoon in 1981 did not tally with someone who placed no importance on global opinion. As we have seen, he travelled to London during the tour to attempt to limit international fall out. He also frequently defended New Zealand's record on race relations to international audiences. He derided "misinformation" propagated by the protest movements for damaging New Zealand's international reputation, suggesting links to the Communist Party and KGB.¹¹¹ At a meeting with pro- and anti-tour groups immediately after the tour, Muldoon said the international image of New Zealand was "the key thing." In the same meeting, he claimed, "New Zealand's international image is not as bad as made out," explaining that the balance of rights struck between those wanting to play and watch sport and those protesting "stemmed from the British tradition (emphasis added)."¹¹² Britain was arguably the place where international opinion mattered most to Muldoon.

The Fall Out?

It has been said the tour was a "watershed" in New Zealand history, changing the nation forever.¹¹³ This narrative obscures continuities, including policies toward South Africa that did not greatly change after 1981. Moreover, the international fallout from the tour was arguably not as great as imagined, with the protests enhancing New Zealand's international standing (even if the policy allowing the tour to proceed did not).

The Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Meeting (CFM), due in Auckland shortly after the tour's conclusion in September 1981, was a revealing case study of New Zealand Prime Minister Rob Muldoon's efforts to keep Britain and the other white Commonwealth nations onside. Unusually, Muldoon was finance minister as well as prime minister and so would have assumed a central role in the Auckland CFM. New Zealand officials carefully prepared the agenda to exclude the sensitive issue of South Africa; however, it did allow for socializing and showcasing New Zealand's burgeoning tourism industry, with dinners,

helicopter trips, and a vineyard visit for the finance ministers and their wives.¹¹⁴

On June 10 and 23, 1981, New Zealand's high commissioner in London alerted Muldoon's office to the prospect of African nations not attending the CFM because it coincided with the tour.¹¹⁵ Some nations, including Nigeria, flatly declined the invitation. Others pledged to attend on condition the tour was cancelled. Australia prevaricated, with Finance Minister John Howard saying his attendance would be "subject to other commitments."¹¹⁶ These commitments were not explained; however, it was clear the Australians were concerned about boycotts of their own hosting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in October and the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane in 1982.¹¹⁷ The only unconditional acceptance was Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Geoffrey Howe.¹¹⁸

Commonwealth Secretary-General Shridath Ramphal tried to delay a decision on New Zealand's CFM hosting in the hope that the tour would be called off, a move supported by Australia.¹¹⁹ However, by the time Muldoon arrived in London to meet with other Commonwealth leaders on July 26, 1981, it was too late: the Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa, made up of high commissioners, had resolved to move the CFM to the Bahamas. New Zealand's instruction to diplomats through this process was telling. White Commonwealth nations were to be consulted on the New Zealand position first and presumably Muldoon expected support.¹²⁰ It made little difference. Only Britain, New Zealand's erstwhile ally on South Africa issues, spoke against moving the CFM, with Canada and Australia not dissenting from the majority view. Britain's representative argued that New Zealand had fulfilled its Gleneagles obligations and that other Commonwealth principles such as "liberty of the individual" and a "free and democratic process" should be considered.¹²¹ Interestingly, the FCO declined to host the CFM in London, saying it was too busy with Britain's presidency of the Council of European Communities.¹²² It is a small piece

of evidence; however, prioritization of Europe above the Commonwealth may be indicative of Britain's wider strategy.

Notwithstanding the CFM snub, it can be argued the scale of the anti-tour protests, combined with diplomatic efforts of Ramphal and Australia, in some ways helped New Zealand's position internationally, preventing African boycotts of the CHOGM and the 1982 Commonwealth Games. Ramphal let it be known that New Zealand's invitation to the games could not legally be rescinded.¹²³ He also made clear to Commonwealth members that the main target of sanctions should be South Africa (not New Zealand), that anti-tour protesters (rather than the NZRFU) represented the true position of New Zealand, and that, apart from the 1981 tour, New Zealand's record since the Gleneagles Agreement had been good. His address following the decision to move the CFM paid public tribute to "the people of New Zealand who have taken a principled stand against apartheid."¹²⁴ The sentiment was echoed by the Tanzania President Julius Nyerere and separately, Zambia President Kenneth Kaunda who thanked "the people of New Zealand for the hard time they gave the rugby organisation."¹²⁵ The protests may have strengthened the New Zealand government's hand in other ways, too; Tourism Minister Derek Quigley claimed the tour's publicity helped attract international visitors, although this was met with incredulity.¹²⁶

Muldoon's tactics, meanwhile, remained combative and focused on winning the favor of Britain and the white Commonwealth nations. In protest at being stripped of its hosting, New Zealand did not send a delegate to the CFM in the Bahamas, a move preacknowledged by Britain (although Geoffrey Howe still went).¹²⁷ At the CHOGM in October 1981, Muldoon threatened to pull out of the Gleneagles Agreement if an African boycott of the 1982 Commonwealth Games went ahead.¹²⁸ He wrote to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser:

"There has been an intrusion of the methods which some of our Commonwealth colleagues

use in their own countries but are alien to us. . . . I believe the countries of the old Commonwealth must resist such methods and gradually educate our newer colleagues in ways of democracy and rule of law.”¹²⁹

At an extraordinary meeting of the Commonwealth Games Federation in London in May 1982, Tanzania put forward a resolution to bar New Zealand from competing at the 1982 games in Brisbane. It received little support; however, a Code of Conduct was agreed to strengthen the Gleneagles Agreement, better defining what constituted a breach. New Zealand and all other Commonwealth nations subsequently attended the Brisbane games, with the lack of boycott partly reflecting a change in strategy by the Supreme Council for Sport in Africa to isolate South Africa, rather than other African nations, from international sport. The Code of Conduct remained contentious for years to come; however, it seemed that, apart from being stripped of the CFM hosting and receiving widespread criticism, New Zealand largely escaped major diplomatic and sporting sanction for the 1981 tour.¹³⁰

Some continuities in New Zealand’s foreign policy remained beyond 1981. During the 1982 Falklands crisis, New Zealand supported Britain by immediately banning all trade with Argentina, having repeatedly refused to do the same with South Africa in preceding years. The foreign affairs minister at the time felt the threat to Britain and the Commonwealth outweighed the importance of trade.¹³¹ In 1984, following the landslide election of the David Lange-led Labour government, New Zealand’s diplomatic ties with the apartheid regime were cut off, and a partial ban was placed on New Zealand gas exports to South Africa in 1985 (broadly corresponding with policies in London and Washington.) However, despite much rhetoric, David Lange, like Muldoon in 1976, was unable to prevent an All Black tour to South Africa in 1985. It was two rugby club members arguing a breach of the NZRFU constitution that brought a judicial halt to the 1985 tour, removing the government from a

bind. Lange was “enormously relieved.”¹³² His government, despite being widely perceived as pursuing more independent foreign affairs policies, still saw European trade access as a fundamental concern.¹³³

Conclusion

Southern Africa is obviously important as the genesis and beneficiary of the global antiapartheid and sports boycotts movements; however, the significance of London as a hub can also be seen here. Although not the only location, the imperial metropolis helped globalize and coalesce conservative and radical thought at the end of the twentieth century, even after the formal bonds of empire had largely been severed. It did this partly through its pre-existing international links and new technologies, such as mass media, telecommunications, and jet air travel. In 1981, pro- and anti-tour groups used these links to define and project their ideal “New Zealand” not only to their compatriots but around the world.

This article aims to build on histories challenging the popular notion that the 1981 tour represented a Manichean struggle between a “new” and “old” New Zealand, with the archaic values of an Anglo-centric country swept away by the force of the protest movement. It also tests the view that Muldoon’s government cynically traded New Zealand’s international reputation for electoral gain in 1981. The reality was more complicated. Of course, domestic processes were at play in New Zealand in 1981. A faltering economy linked to the failure of Muldoon’s “Think Big” economic policies, Māori activism, feminism, police tactics, the precarious political situation, and the government’s strong desire to win the upcoming election all played a part in events. There was also Muldoon’s uncompromising, aggressive political style, described by a contemporary as “sheer bloody-minded pig-headedness.”¹³⁴ However, the domestic considerations should not preclude recognition of

international influences. Indeed, they often intersected with each other. Acknowledging this helps us better understand the history of the 1981 Springbok tour of New Zealand.

Notes

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¹¹⁰ Richards, Dancing on Our Bones, 230; Gustafson, His Way, 233; Mourie, with Palenski, Graham Mourie, 35; Peter Bromhead, cartoon published in Auckland Star, 11 July 1981, Alexander Turnbull Library, A-322-049/074.

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¹¹² "Cabinet Office—Minutes of Post Tour Meeting," 23 September 1981, Archives New Zealand, AAXO W4246 22138, box 23, Wellington.

¹¹³ Richards, Dancing on Our Bones, 239.

¹¹⁴ "Agenda of Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting," Archives New Zealand, AAFD 807 W3738/464, Wellington.

¹¹⁵ "High Commissioner Gandar to Prime Minister's Office," 10 September 1981 and 23 June 1981, AAFD 807 W3 738/464, Wellington.

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¹¹⁸ Letter, “Geoffrey Howe to Muldoon,” Archives New Zealand, AAFD W3738/464, Wellington.

¹¹⁹ “Brief for Secretary General as Chair of Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa,” 10 July 1981, Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012/074, London.

¹²⁰ “Note from Talboys to NZ High Commissioner London,” 17 July 1981, New Zealand Archives, AALR W5427 873, box 981, Wellington.

¹²¹ “Minutes of Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa,” 14 July 1981 and 21 July 1981, Commonwealth Secretariat Archive, 2012/074, London.

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¹²⁴ “Secretary General’s Address to Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa,” 21 July 1981, Commonwealth Secretariat Archive, 2011/8, London; “NZ High Commissioner Cable to Wellington,” 17 July 1981, Archives New Zealand, AAYK W33991, box 4; and “Secretary General’s address to Commonwealth Committee on Southern Africa,” 21 July 1981, Archives New Zealand, AALR W5427 873, box 981, Wellington.

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¹²⁹ Letter, “Muldoon to Fraser,” 27 October 1981, *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Donald Macintosh and Michael Hawes, Sport and Canadian Diplomacy (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 111-12.

¹³¹ Templeton, Human Rights and Sporting Contacts, 241.

¹³² Lange, My Life, 139, 212.

¹³³ Bruce Brown, “New Zealand in the World Economy: Trade Negotiations and Diversification,” in New Zealand in World Affairs III, 1972-1990, ed. Bruce Brown (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1999), 30-31.

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