

## **‘Colonial’ Catastrophe: Football Spectatorship and Local Business / Political Culture in a ‘Globalising’ Era**

**Stephen Alomes**

In early 2000, a new ‘state of the art’ stadium opened in Melbourne’s Docklands development area.<sup>1</sup> Adjacent to Spencer St station and the city, this was a Docklands project which had been realised. ‘Colonial Stadium’, naming rights having been bought by the Colonial financial services company, which cost \$450-60 million to build, was touted as the best thing since sliced electronic chips.<sup>2</sup> A few weeks before its opening, I had argued, in unpublished research materials, that it would run into serious problems because of its approach to price and class or category segmentation of the fans. The result of a stadium built by private interests, including News Limited and Channel 7, in association with the Australian Football League, which would own the stadium in 25 years, was a sports and entertainment venue with ticketing policies focused on revenue maximisation and ‘yield maintenance’. It aspired to be a multi-sport and entertainment venue in a global era: popular concerts, soccer and rugby internationals and the first ever indoor one-day cricket match were all scheduled for 2000. However, its major revenue source would come from Australia’s most popular sport, the sport which dominates Melbourne life, Australian Football.

As an historian, in studying a stadium in the context of Australian football spectatorship, the location of the ground and the ‘going to the footy’ experience, it would be my normal approach to adopt a diachronic mode, analysing changing patterns and traditions over time and culminating in the controversial present. However, there is a case for a more synchronic approach, analysing the first six months of the ‘Colonial’ experiment. This is to adopt what some historians have called a ‘slice’ or ‘geological section’ approach to the interlinked economic and political as well as social and cultural characteristics of the new stadium and its public reception.<sup>3</sup> Is Colonial part of a new era in sport and political economy, supplanting the grounds of earlier eras, of local and/or inner suburban football, and then suburbanisation? Does it epitomise the return to the metropolis in the new millennial era of ‘sportainment’?

Colonial ran into problems from day one. Or perhaps the problem was that ‘Day One’ came far too early, as an unfinished stadium opened for football matches, a Barbra Streisand concert and the Ultimate Rock Symphony (the ageing superstars of rock gave an ironically appropriate, flat, introduction to the new venue).<sup>4</sup> It opened with electrical work still being done, construction stickers on uncarpeted superboxes and, most significantly, as later events would demonstrate, newly laid grass. It had some structural problems which may be continuing. It seats much less than 52,000 people with clear sight-lines of the football-playing surface; despite experiments with moving the boundary line slightly, this could not be fixed. The acoustics for concerts seemed inadequate despite the closable roof and use of muffling materials. Its two Panasonic TV screens are smaller than the equivalent

Sony Jumbotrons at Melbourne's largest stadium, the Melbourne Cricket Ground, or MCG. They are also not particularly clear for spectators across the stadium, either for the play or for print messages. Another grey area was inadequate lighting, both for spectators and for television cameras, particularly when the roof was closed, making the play and players seem more distant to spectators than at an open air ground on a sunny day.<sup>5</sup> Another problem may be soluble: a crowd of even 30-40,000 produces considerable congestion on the ramps from the ground and on platforms and trains at Spencer St station.

Colonial's problems would be manifold, the least of them being that the naming rights company was at the same time being taken over.<sup>6</sup> The practical problems were in four main areas: the playing surface, the building, the ticketing and the cost structures for administration, food and beverages. These four would lead to other business complications. One involved the relationship between the AFL and the AFL clubs which had been attracted as tenants to the stadium by promises of good financial returns. The other relationship was between the company which had the entertainment, food and organisation contract and the owner of the ground.

The footballing problems were also fundamental. One may be structural. The ground is the same length as the MCG, but narrower, undoubtedly reducing the cost and difficulty of integrating a closing roof (Australian Football has no specified playing size for grounds as it evolved on cricket ovals of varying sizes). According to Western Bulldogs coach, Terry Wallace, it may become a 'collision ground', better suiting the sides which are 'harder at the ball', and not enhancing the free-flowing beauties of the sport.<sup>7</sup> As playing strategies and tactics, and as a result rules, change endlessly, only time will tell. Nor was the grass greener at Colonial. The more practical problem was the laying of an instant turf surface on sand, gravel and mesh layers on a concrete base. Despite the penetrometer readings suggesting that the surface was soft, not hard, players complained of leg soreness, especially when wearing boots with stops which give a better grip than moulded sole boots.<sup>8</sup> Here also lay another, possibly structural, problem. Part of the eastern wing of the ground received no sun at all, making it impossible for the grass to grow.

The use of replacement grass, as a concentration of matches in March wore down the grass, raised questions about the player safety of this patchwork quilt of a surface. It was asked whether the AFL had provided its employees with a safe workplace as it was obliged to do and inspections were carried out by AFL ground operations staff, including manager Jill Lindsay, and AFL Players Association representatives before matches could go ahead.<sup>9</sup> The problems were compounded by the replacement grass laid in the sunless area. Contractor, StrathAyr turf systems, ran out of suitable rye and couch grass and experimented with Kentucky blue grass in this section. From the very beginning this wing was like an ice rink as players slipped and slid on the unstable surface. Radio commentators, beginning with 3MMM, dubbed it 'Death Valley'.<sup>10</sup> It was hardly music to the ears of either Colonial, the AFL or the clubs which apprehensively anticipated the prospect of a lawsuit for compensation over a serious knee injury. When a sand element was added, the visual impression created by flying sand was as if the players were frolicking in water as they raised the surface. When Craig Hutchinson, a television sports reporter on the station which part-owned the ground and televised the AFL, Channel 7, was suspended for two weeks for using the term 'Death Valley', it suggested other problems even deeper than the playing surface.<sup>11</sup> When St Kilda

player Jason Traianidis discovered a Stanley knife blade during a game against Port Adelaide, it seemed that underlying folly was being overlaid by dangerous high farce.<sup>12</sup> Eventually, some games were moved from Colonial to the MCG. Other fans in the eastern suburbs demanded that they go to Waverley Park, the outer eastern ground which the AFL was about to sell, ideally for up to \$80 million, to raise the down payment it had to make on Colonial.<sup>13</sup> In June, an Australia-Paraguay soccer international was also moved, due to the surface and the lack of appeal of the ground, and also the match, to Olympic Park.<sup>14</sup>

The most fundamental problem, which would engender hundreds of talkback calls to radio and dozens of letters to the press, was that of ticketing at Colonial, both the structures and the inefficiency. The everyday practicalities of the first few months began with patrons, standing in long queues outside the ground, waiting to pick up tickets; sometimes they used mobile phones to ring the media, or were short with ticketing and security staff when they finally gained entrance. On one notorious April Sunday, Melbourne vs West Coast Eagles, thousands of Melbourne fans left in disgust when they had not entered the ground by the end of the first quarter. At-the-ground and on-the-day problems also mirrored similar delays in telephone queues for ticket booking; one ABC sports broadcaster rang up 100 times before he got through.<sup>15</sup> These practical problems were also rooted in structural imperatives.

A fundamental sales, marketing and consumer imperative was the underlying idea that Colonial would be an all-ticket stadium and that football followers, from club members to the general public, would be 'educated' to pre-pay and pre-pick up tickets. A similar view had prevailed regarding the city's new tollways, City Link, whereby the public was to be educated to buy an electronic tag, or E-tag, rather than to buy daily passes or pay in coin. The problems with the ticketing were twofold, even aside from the inability of Ticketmaster to handle the volume and to provide reasonable seats.<sup>16</sup> Was a company which mainly sold small numbers of theatre and concert tickets not ready for the volume leap to 35,000 football tickets? The first problem involved the tiering of prices, moving up from the basic general admission at \$14.00 to 'better tickets' (category 1, 2 and 3 at \$19.00, \$23.00, \$27.00 and 'gold reserve seats' at \$39.00). Whatever the new business jargon of 'revenue maximisation' and 'yield maintenance', the 'pricey' result stuck in the craw of football traditionalists, as most fans defined themselves, however traditional their football-going and allegiances in fact were. Football fans generally didn't like overpriced tickets to see a game of footy. A major result was that the best level for seeing the ground, the middle level, 2, was frequently almost empty, providing a dismal sight for the television cameras. Arguably, this confounded the recurrent criticism that Colonial, with Channel 7 building its studios nearby, was just a 'TV stadium' and that the football-going fans didn't matter. The second problem concerned the booking fees for tickets. A fee of \$3.25 for an AFL member with free entry to a stadium seemed ridiculous, after the \$308 already paid for annual membership. A booking fee of \$8.25, including telephone \$5.00 booking fee, was around 59 per cent of the price of a \$14.00 admission. While the Colonial marketers loved the idea of 'premium seats' (the \$4,000 per annum Medallion Club and the next level in the pecking order, 'Axxcess One' membership), many fans thought that even these lower ticket-booking premiums were 'over the odds'. In relative terms the surcharge was very different to paying \$3.25 or \$8.25 on a \$90-140 ticket to a rock special or a Lloyd Webber musical.<sup>17</sup>

The popular response to this administrative chaos was general disgruntlement, expressed in talkback calls and numerous letters to the press, particularly the *Herald-Sun*. This opposition also resulted in a de facto fan boycott of the ground. Attendance figures of 15-30,000 were way below the anticipated crowds. For the first time in many years media commentators talked of fudged crowd figures, something which had been normal in the National Rugby League as teams battled for survival, but had been both unacceptable and unnecessary in the record-breaking AFL. While overall AFL crowds were expected to drop from the centenary peak of 1997, the early 2000 decline was greater than expected. In part this was a product of the number of night matches, which did not appeal to the under-sevens or over-70s or to many women, in part due to media-nurtured fears about the danger of public transport at night. Eventually, in May, Colonial reduced the chaos by creating unticketed and open seating on level four for several categories of admissions.

Popular disgust was often voiced in populist and witty terms. 'Death Valley' was not the only sobriquet given to Colonial. Critics' names ranged from 'Calamity Castle' or 'Catastrophe Castle' to 'House of Horrors' or 'Darklands'. Some critics, commenting on the queues and the sewerage problems, suggested that 'even the turds had to queue at Colonial'. This contrasted with the 'world class' marketing hype before the concert opened and the May 2000 edition of the *Colonial News* PR magazine. Even as troubles worsened, its front-page headlines, in large lettering, read 'What a Show! What a Stadium!' regarding the Streisand concert.<sup>18</sup>

Some suggested that the saturation advertising campaign for Medallion Club membership, at \$4,000 a year, on part-owner Channel 7, guaranteed popular alienation from the ground. Club promoters tried to persuade their members to come. Tenant club, the Western Bulldogs, renamed it 'Doglands' as it was at the other end of Footscray Rd (or what remained of it after City Link had done its worst), not far from the west. St Kilda, seeking to lure its fans from the south-eastern suburbs and from nearer to eastern Waverley to beyond the city, promoted it on television as 'A Heaven on Earth for Saints', maintaining the tendency towards euphoric excess. In a season of on-field disaster, as they languished at the bottom of the League ladder, one newspaper headline reported the latest inglorious defeat under 'A Hell on Earth for Saints'.

In football club terms, as several Melbourne terms battled to find their way back into the black, rather than die in a sea of red ink, it was arguably even worse. The promise of much cheaper cost structures than the 'old-fashioned' MCG (for admission, attendants and food and drink) and greater revenue returns as a consequence proved unfounded. Clubs received less than they would have at the MCG and Colonial was providing a year of financial disaster for the tenant clubs (St Kilda, Western Bulldogs and Kangaroos) and for other clubs which played some 'home' games there. Only prospering Essendon, with its large membership and, the critics suggested, a lot of red and some black in the colour or feature aspects of the stadium, seemed to do well and to draw large crowds.<sup>19</sup>

Behind these immediate events, involving concrete, grass, electronics, people and money were a number of Melbourne scenarios, showing the links between football and business in this football mad town and, when it came to television, in Australia more generally. The first was a story of two other grounds, the AFL's own Waverley Park in outer suburban Mulgrave, and the MCG in Jolimont on the other side of the city, where it paid the rent and more, but did not own the ground.

The 30 years-old Waverley Park, opened as VFL Park in 1970 on the freeway but without a train connection, was to be the ground which got the then Victorian Football League out of the clutches of the cricket clubs and councils which owned most grounds.<sup>20</sup> Like most Australians, the VFL wanted to own its own house, rather than remain an exploited tenant for ever. That AFL maintained that aspiration. In 2000, it looked towards the prospect of owning the Docklands stadium after 25 years, having made its initial down-payment of \$30 million by the end of the year. It had also maximised revenue for the ground's owners and original builders by the scheduling of as many matches as possible at the ground.

The third factor in the ground game was the MCG, long misnamed the Melbourne Cricket Ground, when its principal role was to host football, particularly the Grand Final. It was run by the private Melbourne Cricket Club and the government appointed MCG Trust; the club no longer paid just a peppercorn rent for the crown land of Yarra Park, where Australian Football had originated in 1858. It appropriated the term 'the people's ground' for itself as warfare escalated. Long running a propaganda campaign, it added the term to the scoreboard, ran a banner along the outside of the Great Southern Stand while its chief propagandist, crowd warm-up man Stig Wemyss, aka 'The Voice of the G', welcomed fans to 'the people's ground'.<sup>21</sup>

The problems were manifold. While the ground was popular and traditional, the Melbourne Cricket Club was only marginally more the people's club than the Melbourne Club. Its other agenda was more selfish than popular. At the same time as these events were happening, in association with the Carlton President John Elliott — popular as 'the people's schnozzle', a 1980s-style businessman and successful Toorak populist — the AFL broadcaster Channel 7 and the AFL were being taken to court in a legal battle for the intellectual property and television play rights to Australian Football.<sup>22</sup> The test case concerned Channel 7 and a match played at Carlton's 'Optus Oval' in Princes Park. The ground-owners claimed that they, not the AFL which staged the games, had the rights to matches, ones saleable to television companies for millions of dollars, and could also control and charge for television crews' access to their grounds. The MCG had an argument relating to another matter, the unwillingness of the AFL to contribute to the rebuilding of the Olympic Stand in time for 2006 Commonwealth Games, an event of much hyperbole in Victoria and Australia but of limited international sporting significance.<sup>23</sup> The legal assertion regarding ownership of television rights was extreme as far as the future of the game went. Even Premier Steve Bracks, who hopped on the popular bandwagon of the MCG as the traditional home of football,<sup>24</sup> did not seem to realise that a verdict for the ground owners and managers would make the grounds more important than the game itself. It was as if the theatre was more important than *Hamlet* or society valued houses more than the people who lived in them. If successful, it would lead to grand stadiums and impoverished professional sports.<sup>25</sup>

But, this was only part of the story. In the background, Australian, international and Melbourne business syndicates were at work. It wasn't just that in Melbourne, more than any other Australian city, a corporate stadium could readily sell its exclusive seats and boxes to people who either loved football or the prospect of doing business at the football. Nor was it just the story of the naming rights company, even though that had its own amusing twist — as the stadium struggled with all these difficulties, the Commonwealth Bank was taking over the Colonial company, in a process consummated in June 2000. Thus, the most tarnished association in contemporary

corporate image marketing, acquired in only six months, might be ended. The ten-year naming rights would either be used by the bank or handballed, for a price (probably less than the original \$50 million<sup>26</sup>), to some other corporate entity willing to take a risk.

The Docklands stadium was part of a larger, and now struggling, Docklands development. Stimulated by similar urban redevelopments overseas, including the sometimes troubled London one from which it took the name, the idea had been initiated by the previous Labor government. It had been taken up enthusiastically by the radical Liberal Premier, Jeff Kennett, who was in power from 1992-1999.<sup>27</sup> Kennett was not just the maestro of the privatisation of government utilities. He was also the architect of special projects, such as Transurban City Link and the new city convention centre ('Jeff's Shed'), the endorser of the massive Crown Casino complex on Southbank and the ringmaster of 'big events' in Melbourne, particularly the controversial Formula One Grand Prix at Albert Park. He saw Docklands as part of his city and state economic revitalisation strategy.<sup>28</sup> Old railyards and port space, now supplanted by container wharves, might make Melburnians rediscover the waterfront of the port as they had rediscovered the Yarra in an earlier café and leisure shopping development, Southbank. This parcel by parcel development — lacking a grand urban design masterplan — was having difficulties. The Studio City film studios and leisure park project collapsed in early 2000, failing to attract investors. Several universities had withdrawn from the proposed Technology Park, a Mirvac apartment development by the water had been placed on hold and the Grollo company's proposal for the world's tallest building had not got off the ground. Only the centrepiece, or at least the magnet, Docklands Stadium opposite the city, had been built, while the Channel Seven studios were under construction. The new AFL headquarters offered another small sign of progress.<sup>29</sup>

The Victorian building boom of the 1990s, like the Olympics boom in Sydney, was a kind of neo-Keynesian economic stimulus although the developers were often predominantly private. In the corporate state of Victoria, private developers often had the legislative, as well as public, support, of their friend Jeff Kennett. The government contracted to place restrictions on competitors (roads were compulsorily narrowed to force drivers onto the City Link tollways) and local pokie venues, such as the Geelong FC's 'Cats Casino', had to give up the word casino in their name to ensure the success of the Crown monopoly.

At Docklands, Mr Graeme Samuel was the central figure. The former merchant banker had acquired a reputation as an *eminence grise* in Victorian public and business life as a member of government and cultural, as well as corporate, boards. Prominent in the Liberal Party, he was appointed by the Kennett government as a board member of the Docklands Authority and the governing body of the Olympic Park sports complex near the MCG. He was also on the boards of the AFL and the Australian Opera, where he was said to have masterminded the rationalisation of the Victorian State Opera into the larger company, which became Opera Australia. In the mid-1990s Graeme Samuel recommended that, instead of redeveloping Olympic Park as a major, if secondary, stadium for the Commonwealth Games and for other sports (rugby league and union, soccer) a Docklands stadium should be built.<sup>30</sup>

Docklands stadium was, however, a private development. Its owners included the builder Baulderstone Hornibrook, Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, publishers of Melbourne's leading tabloid daily and most popular football paper, the *Herald-*

*Sun*, the Seven Network, which had the television rights to AFL football, and was about to bid for them again for the future.<sup>31</sup> The \$460 million stadium would eventually become the property of the AFL, as long as it made the large payment noted earlier.

In the era of contemporary capitalism, as services were becoming as important as products, other factors were central to the Colonial development. One was the financial arrangements by which the initial capital was raised, ideally minimising tax. The federal government had ended some of the earlier tax concessions for infrastructure bonds which had made City Link in practice a charge on the federal taxpayer (the Victorian government inaccurately proclaimed that the tollway hadn't cost a cent of Victorians' taxes — except for the tolls). However, the complex capital investment tax situation always had potential benefits for those who invested in the project. A major financial player behind the scenes was the Hastings Funds Management Group of the former Boston Consulting Group manager, Carlton premiership captain and West Australian Rhodes Scholar, Mike Fitzpatrick. Although his initial political links were to the Labor Party, he had worked closely with the Kennett government over the corporatisation and then privatisation of electricity and gas utilities. Here, the Melbourne football and business connections came together. They did so again in Nationwide Venue Management, the Spotless group company which had the 25 year contract for management and catering at the stadium. The chairman of directors, and a major owner of Spotless was Ron Evans, also chairman of the AFL, as critics remarked endlessly over those troubled months of 2000. The theme, similar to their discussions of Graeme Samuel's role, was one of underlying, perceived or potential conflict of interest.

The media companies, News Limited and Channel 7, let off the balloons of corporate and populist hype heralding the opening of the stadium. Special supplements in the *Herald-Sun* and an advertorial one hour documentary on Channel 7 told the good news of the 'world class', 'state of the art', or even futuristic, stadium.<sup>32</sup> The popular former Melbourne footballer and Brownlow medallist, Jim Stynes, was employed as an 'Ambassador' for Colonial, and linked clubs such as Essendon appeared to encourage their staff and players to say good things about Colonial over the coming months; certainly coach Kevin Sheedy and the Channel 7-contracted star player James Hird usually looked on the bright side. The journalists and editors at the *Herald-Sun* appeared to provide a sympathetic coverage at first. However when, as it might seem to the outsider, the dogs were finally unmuzzled and unleashed as the problems worsened, they attacked the subject with amazing vigour. 'Turfed Out!' read front page headlines in the newspaper as reports inside documented the catalogue of woe which was the new stadium. World class spin had turned to global disaster, as if the stadium was the subject of one of the world's greatest disasters programs on television.<sup>33</sup> Except, Channel 7, which had a Thursday night football show, *The Game*, partly sponsored by Colonial, kept the faith and remained 'your good news channel'. Media reports suggested that a similar ideology of 'positivity' had been prescribed by the station's bosses, or even by major owner Kerry Stokes, regarding the Sydney 2000 Olympics, in which the station had invested so much money.<sup>34</sup> While SOCOG became a joke, as the John Clarke ABC satire *The Games* anticipated folly after folly, Channel 7 told the good news of the torch and the progress towards the opening ceremony.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, regarding Colonial, when the Australian Rugby Union authorities approved the turf for an international against South Africa in July, the 7 Sport news story was 'Thumbs up for Colonial' rather than a report of another narrow escape.

The AFL was also implicated in the problems facing Colonial due to over-scheduling of matches at the ground before the grass had time to grow and an excess of night matches (including Thursday, Sunday and Monday nights) in March. In an initial technical apology, the AFL blamed others: the compression of the season due to the Olympics and the playing of Olympic soccer at the MCG; and the Kennett government's requirement, or last request, that no AFL match in Melbourne clash with its favourite big event, the Grand Prix. The sceptics were not appeased. The scheduling of the maximum number of matches at Colonial and the minimum number allowable under existing agreements at the MCG, even when this meant no traditional Saturday afternoon matches in Melbourne, was part of the AFL's contribution to revenue maximisation. Others argued that the night matches were designed not for spectators but to maximise Channel 7's ratings. One unsubstantiated view was that the AFL was using a European soccer model, whereby empty grounds didn't matter if television ratings were adequate. Arguably, operating returns for the ground were more important than anything else. For this reason — as well as the matter of a depreciated and aged ground — the AFL was able to buy a \$460 million stadium for an initial investment of less than 1/15th of the original cost.<sup>36</sup>

However, revenue returns to the clubs were grossly inadequate. Newspaper headlines declared 'Clubs in revolt at stadium finances' with reports of clubs facing losses of up to \$100,000 from matches at the arena.<sup>37</sup>

The critics seemed to agree, that in the short term at least, and perhaps even fundamentally, Colonial was 'rooted'. But, if so, where did the roots of the problem lie? The idea of a multi-purpose sports and entertainment stadium complex was a contemporary capitalist idea of sportainment and consumer culture. Also touted as a nightclub, dinner and meeting venue and a car-park on the edge of the city, it promised lucrative returns to its investors as well as to the tenant AFL clubs. However, in the first six months after its early delivery, the Colonial child was not healthy. Law suits were suggested: from Michael Gudinski, music entrepreneur and St Kilda board member (who also had historic links to Rupert Murdoch, to whom he had eventually sold Mushroom Records), regarding the limited development of the nightclub<sup>38</sup>; and from Medallion Club members who felt that they had received less than they had been promised. A court case did ensue as Stadiums Operations Limited (SOL), the owners of the stadium, under Ian Collins, their chief executive (and, until a few months ago, AFL Player Operations manager), sued Nationwide Venue Management (NVM) over its performance in running the stadium. An out-of-court settlement was reached whereby, after a compensation sum of around \$20-25 million was paid, NVM gave up its 25 year contract to manage the stadium.<sup>39</sup> This terminated one of the many conflicts of interest accusations, involving NVM as part of AFL chairman Ron Evans' Spotless group.

Colonial was arguably a product of the culture of Jeff Kennett's Victoria, a corporate state culture which combined a right wing free market model with government legislative support and the understanding that the people could be educated as to the virtues of any policy or organisational rearrangement. Kennett's Victoria was, like the man himself, flash, aggressive and with a lot of front. It also relied on new financial mechanisms (federal infrastructure bonds and other tax concessions) and old traditions of local mafias, if not nepotism and corruption. Its focus was on big projects and big events, particularly in Melbourne, which would lead to its final and unexpected demise at the hands of country voters in the 1999

election. The monstrous casino which takes up half of the south bank of the Yarra between Princes Bridge and Spencer St Bridge was evidence of the excess. Its owners and principals, Liberal Party treasurer Ron Walker and Lloyd Williams, were mates of the Premier who was a guest at their black tie opening as he also appeared at the Grand Prix ball, organised by Ron Walker through the Grand Prix Corporation. This 'big event', which was meant to 'put Victoria on the map', but also attracted younger male voters to the Kennett government, was subsidised by taxpayers' payments to the organising company of Formula One chief, Bernie Ecclestone. Ron Walker also ran the Melbourne Major Events corporation which brought big events to Melbourne, including conventions and the 2006 Commonwealth Games. Although the Crown casino was seen as a licence to print money, having won Victoria's sole casino licence, after the local bidders were able to put in a second tender bettering that of the American Sheraton company, it had done poorly in its shareholder returns. The Asian economic crisis kept some big gamblers away, many Victorians saw the large pokies area as a glorified Leagues club and its global food and drink themed entertainment franchises, the American-oriented All Star Sports Café and the Planet Hollywood nightclub, had less sheen than expected.<sup>40</sup>

The general principle was corporate private entrepreneurs given free rein with government support. This offered a neo-Keynesian stimulus to the economy, although one not quite as big as the turning of Sydney into a construction site for the Olympics, with consequent decreases in unemployment. Dressed up in New Right free enterprise clothes, the government backed private proposals with restrictive legislation, limiting competition, whether in gambling or driving. While it seemed that City Link had a licence to print money, the take-up of e-tags in the northern suburbs was initially poor. It was declared again and again that drivers had to be educated to use an e-tag. Day travel was at a higher price and even higher was payment for travel after the event. Any motorists who were required to pay before 12.00 on the day after travel had to go to a City Link service centre and pay a higher price for a day pass; day passes were not available from post offices for those who had, by choice or inadvertence (eg, newly arrived interstate visitors), not prepaid for their travel.<sup>41</sup>

Similar principles would apply at Colonial. The average punter would be given little choice: less matches at the MCG, sometimes no match on a Saturday afternoon — and, according to SOL CEO Jacques Merkus 'spoilt' football fans had to be 'taught and educated' to accept the cultural change; they had to learn to pre-book, pre-pay and pre-collect their tickets for matches at Colonial.<sup>42</sup> Except, that as drivers dodged the tollways, particularly for non-peak travel, football fans could make other 'free market' choices as consumers. They could go to the MCG when matches were played, watch VFL or local suburban football, or listen to games on the radio; or to go to another sport, go shopping or do the garden. After all, they could satisfy their appetites with the almost excessive telecasts of matches from Friday to Sunday, or even Thursday to Monday.

Kennett culture fused authoritarian leadership, corporate capitalism involving local business networks and international companies, federal tax laws and free enterprise ideology with social and cultural coercion. It seemed 'un-Victorian' to not be 'On the Move' as the number plates loudly trumpeted. It was weak and unmasculine not to support the Grand Prix and wowserish, or negative, to criticise the casino. 'Education' was often a form of social-cultural coercion. But, sometimes, the market prevailed, and footy fans or gamblers spent their entertainment dollar somewhere else.<sup>43</sup>

The new government-business projects and the AFL's commitment to stadium development were influenced by global patterns and, in the case of the Grand Prix, global markets. The entrepreneurially built corporate stadium with tiered ticketing prices was also the model at Sydney's Olympic venue, Stadium Australia.<sup>44</sup> John Bale has written about the rise of the modern capitalist stadium as the cathedral of today.<sup>45</sup> Naming rights on a 'for sale' basis have become common in Australia (Lang Park in Brisbane became Suncorp Stadium, Kardinia Park in Geelong became Shell Stadium, the royally inclined Princes Park of Carlton was transformed into Optus Oval), and in New Zealand, as well as elsewhere in the developed world.<sup>46</sup> Stadiums have often been associated with inner city redevelopment, for example the new Colorado Rockies baseball stadium in Denver. These ventures have been characterised by the values of entrepreneurial capitalism in an era of consumerism. They have a strong local business and cultural component rather than being just post-modern or transnational products of the globalising imperatives of multinational companies symbolically associated with the Davos World Economic Forums. Most significantly, they bring together local, state, national and international social, political and economic forces. They also engender popular and populist opposition, critiques of sporting, government and business elites.<sup>47</sup> Despite the certitudes of the globalisers and those who would educate the average citizen or consumer, or those of their populist opponents, the result of the 'game' is not guaranteed for either side.

In the millennial year 2000 in Melbourne traditional football was only one of several old orders which had departed. The gung ho egotism and radicalism of the Kennett era had gone. So too had the suburban AFL stadium at Waverley, despite a heritage challenge which is unlikely to succeed. One last suburban ground remained, Optus Oval at Princes Park, which the AFL wanted to give up, except its agreement with Carlton had several years to run. No longer was it possible for most football-goers to 'catch a tram to their favourite ground', in the words of the Greg Champion song, unless that meant the tram from the city to Jolimont for the MCG. And at Colonial, scene of many catastrophes and good and bad football matches, it wasn't even possible to have a kick in the park outside at half-time or on the tattered turf after the match.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps that was the final blow to traditional football in the era of sportainment and consumer capitalism. Or perhaps, as Colonial abandoned its all ticket policy, the people's team might rise from the bottom of the ladder and win some important matches.

**‘Colonial’ Catastrophe: Football Spectatorship and Local Business / Political Culture in a ‘Globalising’ Era**  
**Stephen Alomes**

- 1 As late as March 2000, (*Welcome to Docklands* newsletter, n.d.) the seating capacity was given as 54,000 (p 2), with more in non-Australian Football mode. The *Herald-Sun* supplement in early 2000 on Colonial gave its capacity as 52,660; this was later reduced, given seats without clear sightlines to the ground. However, rare sell-out crowds were no higher than 45,000 (Essendon vs Western Bulldogs, 28 July 2000), for another reason — members in various categories who did not come.
- 2 A paradox remarked on by international visitors and some republicans was the unfortunate imperialist connotations of the name, ‘colonial’ in an era of debate over relations between settlers/invaders and indigenous Australians. Other observers noted a different paradox related to the name. That was that a stadium marketed with 21st century ‘state of the hype’ PR spin carried a name from another era and seemed to introduce inefficiencies which would have been more understandable in the first decades of white settlement and invasion of the continent, than after 200 years of economic and institutional and economic development.
- 3 This was the approach of *Australians: A Bicentennial History*, a major 1988 publishing project.
- 4 *Colonial News*, however, trumpeted the positives of the concert. The finishing of the stadium had been delayed by industrial action. Even when finished, it was less complete than expected in fundamental respects. It could not obtain a safety certificate for moving the roof when occupied by spectators and on one occasion heavy bolts fell from the roof, endangering workers; the roof also developed hairline cracks.
- 5 This paper only addresses some dimensions of spectatorship, leaving open Colonial’s claim that spectators would be closer to the play and the critics’ view that it is an atmosphere-less concrete stadium and Australian traditions of support, for example June Senyard’s pioneering work on Australian football barrackers as spectators, see ‘The Barracker and the Spectator’, *JAS*, no 62, 1999, pp 46-55.
- 6 Given the Commonwealth Bank’s successful takeover wags joked about ‘Which Stadium?’
- 7 Malcolm Blight had an entirely different analysis, seeing the ground as encouraging wider skilful ball-carrying play, aided by the calmer conditions when the roof was closed. *Age*, 25 February 2000.
- 8 It was reported that often injured Western Bulldogs ruckman Scott Wynd wondered if playing regularly on Colonial’s hard surface had truncated his career. ABC 3LO, football discussion, 21 July 2000.
- 9 *Age*, 18 May 2000.
- 10 3MMM, 4 June 2000 (Geelong vs Western Bulldogs)
- 11 ‘Death tag a Seven sin’, *Herald-Sun*, 17 June 2000, p 36.
- 12 *Age*, 22 May 2000
- 13 The historical study addresses its history and character, the paper by the sports history heritage consultants, Roy Hay, Marnie Haig-Muir and Peter Mewett, ‘A social history of Waverley Park’, unpublished paper, Deakin University, 2000.
- 14 Earlier matches had drawn only a few thousand spectators.
- 15 Dwayne Russell, ABC 3LO, June 2000. Ticketmaster denied it was at fault, suggesting that delays for club members came from problems with their databases: ‘Ticketmaster diverts blame’, *Age*, 27 April 2000. A similar experience of telephone queuing was had by *Sunday Age* reporter, John Elder, over two days in trying to contact the general telephone inquiry line of another new institution, City Link, 30 April 2000. Perhaps the Colonial experience of long queues had also helped bring the word back into the language.
- 16 Some wags joked that the old BASS or Best Available Seating System of Ticketmaster’s predecessor, when it was government owned, had been replaced by WORST, Worst Options for Rotten Seat Tickets.
- 17 These are pre-GST figures. Post-GST, I was quoted general admission at \$18.98 (including booking fee + \$5.50 telephone booking fee) or offered a gold seat at \$45.00 when I made a

- telephone inquiry on 26 July 2000 regarding the 30 July 2000 Kangaroos vs Collingwood match. No middle range seats were offered. Access One Membership (advertised as ‘The Best Value Footy Membership Around’) offers ‘free admission to AFL games’, reciprocal rights to the MCC Members’ Reserve and a ‘Members’ Bar’ plus ‘priority access to major events’. In the post-GST era it cost \$55 a month (that is \$660) plus a \$165 joining fee. Its particular appeal is ‘premium seating on the centre wing, Level 2’.
- 18 *Colonial Stadium News*, no 3, May 2000, p 1. Even, after several months of despair and difficulty, the PR tone was hyperbolic and unstinting in its enthusiasm. Having waited in queues on occasions I have also heard the term ‘Stuff Up Stadium’.
  - 19 One view was that this stemmed not just from the corporate colours of Colonial but from the colour-tastes of its Essendon-supporting architect, Daryl Jackson. The stadium also has several shades of green, with no footballing connotations.
  - 20 *One Hundred Years of Australian Football*, Ringwood, Victoria, Viking, 1996, p 252. Unfortunately, it was built in a rain-belt and to some fans and commentators it was actually ‘Arctic Park’ or ‘Siberia Park’.
  - 21 The end of this ‘noise pollution’ was enthusiastically endorsed by the floor, when Caroline Wilson called for a return to reserves or other lead-up matches instead, at a discussion on ‘The Future of Football’ sponsored by the *Age*, at Dallas Brooks Hall on Tuesday 25 July 2000.
  - 22 Elliott’s populist style appealed to the audiences of TV football shows such as *The Game* and *The Footy Show*, who had little awareness of his own declared priority of ‘what’s good for Carlton’ rather than the interests, and survival, of other struggling clubs in the AFL.
  - 23 ‘Revealed: MCG’s legal bombshell’, *Australian*, 9 June 2000; *Herald-Sun*, 9 June 2000.
  - 24 *Age*, 16 June 2000. Ex-Premier and MCG Trust member John Cain was an even stronger defender of the MCG and critic of the AFL.
  - 25 In a different view, the AFL’s focus on ‘the game’ rather than ‘the place’ as important suggested an incorporated sporting body with post-modern conceptions of entertainment, or ‘sportainment’, rather than a traditional view of sport. On sportainment see S Alomes, ‘A Special Small Event: Local, National and Global Challenges to Traditional, Sport, Entertainment and Culture in a New Zealand Small Town’, *Cultures of the Commonwealth*, 6, Spring 2000, pp 51-65.
  - 26 *Age*, 4 March 2000.
  - 27 See ‘Docklands: lacking in substance’, *Metro News*, 16 February 2000; ‘Destination Docklands’, *RoyalAuto*, March 2000; *Welcome to Docklands*, newsletter, n.d., 2000.
  - 28 Transurban sponsored the first Kennett government Formula Grand Prix when no suitable sponsor could be found.
  - 29 Significantly, the AFL gave up its leased space in the Great Southern Stand at the MCG for its new Docklands location.
  - 30 ‘Footy gets a new home by the docks’, *Sunday Age*, 23 May 1997.
  - 31 Other owners included: Colonial (10 per cent), Hastings Funds Management (20 per cent), Permanent Trustee, Citipower, Spotless Group, National Australian Financial Management Group and Queensland Investment Corporation. Ticketmaster, the American-owned ticketing company, had the rights to sell tickets to the all-ticket stadium and also had the ticketing contract for the MCG. *Age*, 13 June 2000.
  - 32 ‘Colonial Stadium: your ultimate guide to our new sports and entertainment arena’, *Herald-Sun*, p 32, n.d., 2000. Headlines included ‘Super stadium’, ‘Nowhere is grass greener’ and ‘Tickets please’, all of which would come to haunt it. On 10 March 2000 the *Herald-Sun* front page read ‘Super Bowl’. The *Age* also ran a supplement. Soon, in populist contrast, it would advertise itself as ‘not the AFL official newspaper’.
  - 33 Other front page headlines included ‘What can go wrong next?’, after a power outage during a match, *Sunday Herald-Sun*, 30 April 2000, p 1; ‘Dirty Weekend’, *Sunday Age Sport*, 11 June 2000, p 1.
  - 34 In both cases Kerry Stokes denied issuing such directives.
  - 35 SOCOG — Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games. Despite popular anger at Kevan Gosper’s daughter Sophie being the first Australian to carry the torch in Greece (at 11 she was also too young to carry it in Australia), regarding controversial IOC member Phil Coles carrying it on Bondi Beach, and distaste regarding the number of celebratory and commercial sponsor torch-runners, the torch would be a popular success, perhaps the one thing which challenged general cynicism regarding the Games.

Notes to pp 216–218

- 36 Like City Link, which would be owned by the taxpayer after several decades, it was built on the BOOT system: the owners would Build, Own, Operate and then Transfer back the ground, in this case to the AFL.
- 37 *Australian*, 19 June 2000. The club noted here was the Western Bulldogs. Running costs were said to have fallen from \$80,000 to \$60,000 a match after the venue managers were changed, according to AFL CEO Wayne Jackson, ABC 3LO Football, 29 July 2000. The stadium's owners did not now expect to receive the anticipated 15 per cent return in the first year and plans to list on the stock exchange were put on hold. *Age*, 13 June 2000.
- 38 Gudinski and player manager Ricky Nixon were partners in this underdeveloped venture, *Age*, 15 June 2000.
- 39 'Turfed Out', *Herald-Sun*, 28 June 2000, pp 1-2.
- 40 The casino was eventually bought by Kerry Packer for a smaller sum than might have once been expected. It was, however, one of the most visited entertainment complexes in the state, by locals and visitors alike. The American and international sports stars who provided its main images were eventually reduced in number while Australian sports stars were increased.
- 41 The electronic ticketing system for privatised public transport also had many difficulties, including technical failures and public resistance to its requirements of customers. Perhaps a new principle had been established for an electronic era: 'the system is always right, the customer must adjust'.
- 42 'AFL fans spoil: Docklands chief', *Age*, 7 October 1999.
- 43 See Brian Costar and Nicholas Economou, eds, *The Kennett Revolution*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 1999, particularly Graham Little, 'Celebrity leadership'. Like many state politics the book is otherwise limited on the era's use of political drama, in Kennett's case big events such as the Grand Prix.
- 44 See Alan Patching, *Stadium: The Project Director's Diary*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999. Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, Stade de France in Paris (which hosted rugby and soccer World Cups) were other examples. The AFL expended over \$1.4 billion in stadium upgrading in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane and in Stadium Australia during the 1990s. *AFL Annual Report*, 1999, Melbourne, 1999, p 46.
- 45 John Bale, *Sport, Space and the City*; London, Routledge, 1993; John Bale and Olof Moen (eds), *The Stadium and the City*, Keele, Keele University Press, 1995.
- 46 For example, Lancaster Park in Christchurch was renamed Jade Stadium in 1998 after a computing company bought the rights.
- 47 Pauline Hanson's One Nation, the election of rural independents and the defeat of the Kennett government in Victoria, and criticism of SOCOG were amongst the many expressions of populist resentment at an Australia increasingly divided between haves and have nots.
- 48 There was no park outside, only concrete. Signs on the screens informed patrons that a fine of up to \$5,000 was the penalty for going onto the ground after a match.