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The efficacy of government sport participation policies: Lessons from Australia

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Australia has long been considered a 'sporting nation' that is obsessed with watching and consuming sport, as well as participating (Cashman 1995), yet the actual level of participation by Australians in formal organized sport, as well as the lack of consistent effective government policy in this area, is somewhat surprising given Australia's success in elite sport competitions such as the Olympic Games in recent decades. The purpose of this paper is to review sport participation rates and trends in Australia, to describe the nature of federal government intervention in matters related to sport participation, and finally, to analyze the efficacy of government sport policies designed to influence the nature and extent of Australians' participation in sport. In doing so it illustrates several policy deficiencies that are directly comparable to many European countries with similar community club-based sport systems.

In an assessment of the efficacy of federal government policy efforts to increase participation levels in sport and physical activity we make several observations. The most reliable data show that while the level of regular participation in all forms of physical activity has increased between 2001 and 2008, the increase is almost entirely explained by an increase in participation in non-organised activities and participation in organised activities has remained relatively unchanged over the same period. Australians participate far more in non-organised physical activity than club-based physical activity and sport and have been drifting toward this form of participation in increasing numbers over the last decade, but the overall level of participation in any form of physical activity is far too low.

Second, we note that the ASC (2006b: 7) has stated that the three essential elements to delivering increasing participation rates in organised sport are the return of sport and structured physical activity opportunities in all Australian schools; making sport relevant, accessible and available to young people and their lifestyles in the twenty-first century; and crossing the traditional boundaries and structures of sport to embrace innovative approaches to delivery.

Our third observation is that the location of sport within the machinery of government to date has hampered the development of a consistent effective policy on sport participation. The placement of sport within the health and ageing portfolio by the current Rudd Labor government firmly positions sport as part of an overall health agenda for the first time.

The fourth observation we can make is that federal government policy has shifted from an emphasis on building spaces and facilities (community facility program), to mass media campaigns (Life. Be In It), to an emphasis on school-based programs (Aussie Sports, AACP, and an inquiry into PE and sport in schools), to club-based programs (TSPG), and an integrated approach via Active Australia. The majority of these have targeted school-aged children rather

than adults and most have only lasted 3 to 4 years before being curtailed or discontinued altogether. While some of this can be attributed to changes of government, it also suggests a rather short term approach to addressing what appear to be fundamental issues of providing adequate and appropriate PE to all children, the nature of how sport is provided to Australians and how the Australian sport system is structured.

Allied to this is our final observation - the continuing tension between elite and participation funding has resulted in elite sport consistently receiving a far greater portion of federal government funding than community sport. Together, these observations lead us to conclude that the various policies enacted to address participation levels in organised sport and other forms of physical activity in Australia have been unsuccessful, especially in comparison to elite sport achievement and outcomes for Australian sport over the last three decades. While Australians are keen sport watchers, they do not exhibit the same enthusiasm for active participation in organised sport, or indeed other forms of physical activity. Addressing this imbalance will require a comprehensive policy that attacks the recurring issues of providing an adequate amount of appropriately designed PE curriculum to all children, reconfiguring the nature of the sport experience on offer to Australians of all ages and developing an efficient and effective structure for the Australian sport delivery system.