

Surely there's more to life – and sport – than Olympic gold medals

(by Saul Eslake, Program Director, Grattan Institute; originally published in the Melbourne Age 'Business Day' section, 26th November 2009)

The Report of the Independent Sports Panel chaired by David Crawford, which was released last week, raises some important questions not only about the funding of sport but also, indirectly, about how Australians see ourselves as a people and the images we seek to convey about ourselves to the rest of the world.

It's perhaps worth emphasizing that the Crawford Report did not recommend that government funding for sport be reduced. On the contrary, it says that 'the Australian Government's identified direct sport budget does not appear large at present (at around \$200 million per year)' and that 'there is a strong case for increased Australian Government funding of sport'.

What the Crawford Report does do is question whether the funding which Australian governments do provide for sport should continue to be as skewed towards the pursuit of Olympic medals as it has been over the past three decades.

The Crawford Report argues that 'the bias towards funding Olympic sports leads to outcomes that make little strategic sense for Australia'. It casts doubt on the wisdom of spending the additional \$109 million per annum sought by the Australian Olympic and Paralympic Committees to sustain Australia's position as a 'Top Five' medal count nation. In what some members of these Committees must have regarded as tantamount to heresy, the Crawford Report 'does not believe that the medal count is an appropriate measure of Australian performance or that 'Top Five' is a sensible target'.

Instead it said that 'if another \$100 million per year is [to be] invested in sport it would be better directed to other priorities'. Among those 'other priorities' which the Crawford Report identifies are community sporting infrastructure, supporting volunteers (such as the coaches, officials and 'the helpers who arrive at the ground early to mark out the lines on the oval') at clubs and associations, and targeted programs aimed at groups whose participation in sport and recreation is well below the national average.

Personally, I have long thought that there is something unpleasantly evocative of the former Soviet Union, or some of its satellites (especially East Germany) about the way in which some Australians regard our standing in the quadrennial Olympic medal tally as proof of the superiority of 'our' way of life. So it came as no surprise to me to see people who do see Olympic success in those terms characterizing the Crawford Report as 'un-Australian', in much the same way as those who had the courage to question aspects of life under Communist regimes as 'anti-Soviet'. One almost wonders whether some of these people secretly think that Mr Crawford and his co-panellists should be required to contemplate their 'un-Australianness' in a labour camp, or a psychiatric hospital, as was usually the fate of those found guilty of being 'anti-Soviet' under Stalin or Brezhnev.

At the risk of being labelled 'un-Australian' myself, I don't particularly care how many medals Australia wins at the Olympic Games. I wasn't ashamed or embarrassed for my country that we failed to win any gold medals at the Montreal Olympics in 1976, or that we won fewer medals in total than New Zealand.

Nor did I regard our fourth placing at the Sydney or Athens Games as tangible proof that we were somehow 'better' as a nation than we had been in 1976, or than lower-ranked countries were in 2000 or 2004.

I didn't feel that we'd somehow gone backwards as nation because we came fifth in the overall medal tally at last year's Beijing Olympics. And if the Brits are willing to spend whatever it takes to stay in front of us at the next Olympic Games in London in 2012, despite having a budget deficit of nearly 10% of GDP and net public debt approaching 90% of GDP, then surely that's their problem rather than ours.

That doesn't mean that I'm not interested in sport, or that I don't respect and admire the achievements of Australian sportspeople. I admire and respect the achievements of anyone who attains some measure of recognition and success through a combination of talent and perseverance. I don't begrudge the use of some taxpayers' money for the training of talented sportspeople – although (unlike the Crawford Report) I think that those who subsequently achieve financial rewards which they would not have without that training should be required to make a HECS-style contribution to its cost, just as is expected of those whose taxpayer-funded education enables them to achieve financial success in other areas.

Trade Minister Simon Crean – so far the only Minister to have expressed an opinion on the matter – says that 'Australia's prowess in sport is a fundamental part of the Australian brand' and that we should therefore continue to seek to 'punch above our weight' in Olympic competition. One might have thought the Trade Minister would be more concerned that we 'punch below our weight' in the (rather more important) competition to sell things around the world. According to the World Trade Organization's latest annual compilation of international trade statistics, published three weeks ago, Australia ranked only 23rd in the international export standings in 2008, ten places below our ranking in terms of GDP.

The Australian 'brand' would surely be a more compelling proposition – and, I'd argue, Australia would be a better place – if we extended the same respect and recognition that we accord so readily to successful sportspeople to those among us who attain success in other areas, such as the arts, science, community service and business, and if we put the same effort into identifying and nurturing people with the potential to succeed in these areas as we have long done into identifying and nurturing potential Olympic medallists. And yet it says something about our priorities as a nation that sport is probably about the only context in which the word 'elite' is not a pejorative.

By all means let the government spend more on sport and recreation – but as the Crawford Report urges, let it be in ways that tangibly improve the lives of a majority of Australians, rather than catering to a narrow, jingoistic and in some respects self-interested view of what is important to Australia as a nation.

(Saul Eslake is a program director at the Grattan Institute. The views expressed here are his own).