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Classroom topics

Classroom ideas - 1981 Springbok tour

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### ‘Politics and sport don’t mix’

In South Africa before 1948 the white minority enjoyed a privileged position, reinforced by a number of laws and practices that ensured there was extensive segregation of the races. When Daniel Malan’s Nationalist Party came to power that year, this separation was intensified with a policy known as ‘apartheid’ (‘apartness’ in Afrikaans) that aimed to strictly divide the races.

These policies and attitudes created obvious problems for New Zealand rugby, given the prominence of Māori in the sport. When the 1921 Springboks defeated New Zealand Maoris at Napier, a South African journalist described in a cable sent back to South Africa his shock and disappointment at seeing white spectators cheering for the Māori team:

BAD ENOUGH HAVING TO PLAY OFFICIALLY DESIGNATED NEW ZEALAND NATIVES, BUT SPECTACLE THOUSANDS EUROPEANS FRANTICALLY CHEERING ON BAND OF COLOURED MEN TO DEFEAT MEMBERS OF OWN RACE WAS TOO MUCH FOR SPRINGBOKS WHO FRANKLY DISGUSTED.

Touring South Africa with its entrenched segregation was also problematic. The New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) chose not to select Māori for tours to South Africa until 1970. In 1928 this meant leaving players like the legendary George Nēpia behind. Before the All Blacks toured the republic in 1960 there were calls of ‘No Maoris – No Tour’, and 150,000 New Zealanders signed a petition against sending a race-based team, but the tour went ahead. Prime Minister Keith Holyoake’s statement that ‘in this country we are one people’ was translated into practice when a proposed 1967 tour to South Africa was cancelled.

In 1968 the United Nations called for a sporting boycott as one way of putting pressure on the South African government. As rugby and cricket were the two main sports for white South Africans, the spotlight was bound to fall on New Zealand. When the All Blacks toured in 1970 they sent a multiracial team, not as a result of international pressure softening South African resolve, but because the South African government allowed Māori to travel as ‘honorary

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For some this was the last straw. Those opposed to contact with South Africa attacked the NZRFU for allowing Māori players to be demeaned, and they argued that by continuing contact, New Zealand was condoning apartheid. Moreover, by allowing Māori players to be treated in this way, we were allowing South African racial attitudes to infect our own society. Others, including many players, stressed that sport and politics should remain separate. Some, perhaps naively, argued that rugby contact with a multiracial country like New Zealand could promote change for the better in South Africa.

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'Politics and sport', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1981-springbok-tour/politics-and-sport>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 4-Feb-2020