

1981 Springbok tour

Page 4 – Stopping the 1973 tour

(MCH, 2020fff)

From the mid-1960s New Zealand–South African rugby contact was central to South Africa's attempts to maintain international sporting contact. Those opposed to apartheid believed that isolating South African sport would increase the prospect of real change. In July 1969 HART (Halt All Racist Tours) was founded by University of Auckland students with the specific aim of opposing sporting contact with South Africa. With a Springbok tour to New Zealand scheduled for 1973, the issue was to become increasingly politicised.

In the run-up to the 1972 election, Norman Kirk, the Labour opposition leader, promised not to interfere with the tour. After winning the election, he attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade the NZRFU to withdraw its invitation to the Springboks while at the same time attempting to negotiate with anti-tour activists and groups. His advice from the police was that that if the tour went ahead it would 'engender the greatest eruption of violence this country has ever known.' As if to warn him of the potential for civil unrest, a grandstand at Papakura was burnt down on 9 April 1973. Kirk's mind had already been made up. Days earlier he had written to the NZRFU informing them that the government saw 'no alternative, pending selection on a genuine merit basis, to a postponement of the tour'. Aware of the likely fall-out from this decision – there was strong public support for the tour – Kirk conceded that he would be 'failing in his duty' if he didn't 'accept the criticism and do what [he] believed to be right ... the Government was elected to govern'.

The decision to 'postpone' the tour was also influenced by the fact that Christchurch was hosting the 1974 Commonwealth Games, which black African nations were likely boycott if the tour proceeded. Critics of the decision believed that not only had Kirk performed a policy back-flip, he had bowed to threats from 'rent-a-mob' activists. Those who believed that 'sport and politics don't mix' (referred to by activist Tim Shadbolt as KEEPOOS – Keep Politics out of Sport) never forgave him.

There is no doubt the decision hurt Labour at the general election in 1975. While National had itself cancelled an earlier tour in 1967, what appeared to hurt Labour the most was its original pledge not to interfere. National's new leader Robert Muldoon declared that the cancellation of the tour was 'one issue on which people will change their vote'. He maintained that a National government would welcome a Springbok team to New Zealand, 'even if there were threats of violence and civil strife'. Muldoon's confidence seemed to be confirmed by National's landslide victory. Events in 1976 and 1981 perhaps vindicated Kirk's decision.

Share this item

HOW TO CITE THIS PAGE

'Stopping the 1973 tour', URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/1981-springbok-tour/1973-springbok-tour>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 4-Feb-2020

Classroom topics

Classroom ideas - 1981 Springbok tour

Related content

We have 1 event in history, 34 biographies, 20 articles, related to 1981 Springbok tour.

1960
P.152



updated 3rd edition etc.