16. Leisure: recreation or the pursuit of beauty?

Let us look at the future of leisure, recreation and physical education. Let us seriously question what we pretty well take for granted.

Over the past fifty years, since World War I, we in Australia have evolved a great complex of organizations, social expectations and cultural practices to cope with our leisure time. Some of the organizations were for all practical purposes social institutions e.g. the Surf Life Saving clubs, cricket, football, bowls, tennis, yachting and the R.S.L. clubs. And not least, our pubs and betting shops. Social expectations were so strong that failure to participate in these organized forms of recreation was counted as a sign of doubtful moral character. For those who could not participate there was special dispensation if they showed themselves to be keen interested followers of a major sport. Culturally the ‘week-end break’ was as much a fact of Australian life as night and day. Even in our highest educational institutions there seemed to be no thought given to the fact that work could be done over week-ends. Sometime during Friday afternoons the Australian minds switched off thoughts of work and entered another world.

Two features appeared to give this pattern great strength and flexibility. Compulsory school sports and an endless round of competitive sporting activities for children, indoctrinated the young into a love of sport or, at least, a healthy respect for its ultimate value to individual and society. The cultural dispensation to the spectator, follower, the barracker, gave the society flexibility which permitted those who could not afford to participate or were otherwise disabled to share the illusion of all being in it; in the great Australian classless dream.

We will return to this pattern but let us first ask a question. Is it likely that the next 25 years will be just a further development and extension of this pattern of leisure usage? If so, then the deep roots of this pattern give us a very firm basis on which to build. If not then this strength may well be our greatest weakness; the source of our worst mistakes in the future. Putting the question as bluntly as this seems to beg for the negative answer; of course
not! But need it? It could be that the trends we are seeing toward more leisure time and greater affluence would simply see more people moving from 'the pub-betting-shop, television' pole to the middle class pole of active participation. Even this shift would have its interesting sides. We think it likely that the overwhelming role of sport in defining our ideas of how to use our leisure time arose from the times when week-ends and public holidays were too short or the people were too impoverished to do anything significant with them. With a shorter and less exhausting working week we do not think that people will be filled with the same urgency to make the week-end count by participating in or following the sports. With longer annual leave, that they are financially able to use, people are more likely to think of ways of using their leisure times other than by attending or participating in sports. If they follow the middle class example they will move away from the mass oriented large team sports toward tennis, squash, golf, yachting and the multitude of more individualized sporting activities that can be more easily geared to one's own time table and matched to one's own abilities and requirements. As annual holidays become a serious proposition, thoughts will turn away from sport per se to forms of recreation that serve family needs. Caravans, small boats, off-road vehicles and holiday homes would continue to multiply.

Thus even the least surprising future for leisure in Australia will confront us with problems that we have not previously had to face. 'Will confront us' is a bit too optimistic. We think we are already confronted with some of these new problems. The multiplicity of new sports like water skiing, parachute jumping, gliding etc. is not a problem. We have ample experience with writing constitutions for bodies to govern such sports, control their membership, train and classify skill levels and organize competitive events. Our problems lie with how to gracefully run down sports that have had their heyday and avoid the artificial respiration now being provided by professionalized players and TV contracts for organized sporting events.

Our problems are at least three fold:

1. How to gracefully run down sports that have had their heyday.
2. How to provide facilities that will enable people to pursue the multitude of more individualized pursuits.
3. How to accommodate the rapidly growing pressure on our natural resources for leisure; the beaches, waterways, forests and parklands.

The first problem will only slowly be solved. As we mentioned earlier, some