

Chapter Five:

SUBURBAN RESISTANCE

St.Kilda's move to Moorabbin was one of three changes of home ground by V.F.L. clubs that came into effect in season 1965. It represented not only a bold challenge by a League club to an exploitative ground manager but also a break from the convention of localised home grounds that had been all but universal for over forty years. During this period, the convention had helped to reinforce territorial understandings of community among supporters of V.F.L. clubs. Even as these understandings were being undermined by changing post-World War 2 demographics, the territorialism inherent in the home ground tradition continued to exert a residual influence. The departure from Junction Oval would redefine the nature of St.Kilda's football community without destroying it. Moorabbin would become the rallying point for a new regional St.Kilda identity. Three decades later its passing as a match day venue would be mourned with the same sense of loss with which traditionalists lamented the Junction Oval exodus.

The St.Kilda administration's 1964 decision was driven by the possibility of a perceived economic benefit. Although ultimately supported by the membership, officials alienated and angered a significant minority within the club by placing rational business considerations ahead of long-standing tradition. That the administration was held accountable to the membership at all was symptomatic of a dominant democratic ethos evident in the

relationship between football administrators and the public at this time. By the end of the century this ethos would become an anachronism to be circumvented whenever necessary by club boards or League commissioners driven by more pressing economic imperatives than those confronting the St.Kilda Football Club committee in 1964. St.Kilda members gave retrospective support to their committee's economically driven agenda at a time when turnstile sufficiency allowed the football consumer to at least appear to hold sway.

The move undermined the V.F.A.'s perception that it held territorial sovereignty in Melbourne's outer suburbs. League football's popularity, in comparison to that of the V.F.A. alternative, made St.Kilda's aggressive approach feasible and seemed to set the precedent for further takeovers. It appeared that the market would decide the issue and, at this time, the football public's control of the market was such that it could easily be mistaken for ownership of the Game. Only minority groups, like St.Kilda traditionalists and disaffected supporters of the betrayed Moorabbin Football Club had moved from denial to anger.

Predictions that the St.Kilda move would inspire other clubs to follow suit were quickly vindicated when Phonse Tobin's club, North Melbourne, decided to leave its famous gasometer ground in Arden Street for the City Oval at Coburg. Not only was North invading V.F.A. territory, but it was also encroaching on an area in which its V.F.L. neighbour, Carlton, held strong support. The move would be short-lived, unlike the St.Kilda move and the other relocation of 1965, Richmond's move to the neighbouring M.C.G. The Tigers

were merely changing their home match venue while retaining their Punt Road headquarters for training and administration. North and St.Kilda, on the other hand, were relocating their entire operations.

The agreement between North Melbourne Football Club and Coburg City Council, announced early in November 1964, was prompted by a rationale similar to that behind the St.Kilda-Moorabbin venture. The council, seeing an opportunity to convert its best sporting facility from a financial burden into an income-producing asset, instigated negotiations with the football club during the winter of 1964. As an Association venue, the City Oval had returned only £1,300 to the City coffers over the previous five years, during which time the council had spent £15,000 on ground improvements. The council offered the League club a forty-year deal in which the City would provide £80,000 for ground development, in return for an annual rental of £4,000. The Moorabbin deal had been for £100,000 over 75 years at £5,000 annual rental.¹

As in St.Kilda's case, North Melbourne's action was given rank-and-file assent. The importance of both these ventures to an analysis of the interplay between League football administrators and club supporters is perhaps best illustrated in the dynamics of the relationships between these clubs and the V.F.A. clubs affected in each instance. The League's encroachment into V.F.A. territory evinced a similar dynamic to that illustrated in the more recent encroachment of the corporate sector into the domain of the barracker. As victims of V.F.L. expansion in the 1960s, the Coburg and Moorabbin football clubs and the V.F.A. itself are comparable to non-corporate supporters in

more recent times, displaying many of the characteristics of Kübler-Ross's five stages in their responses.

As at Moorabbin, the local V.F.A. club would be banished from its home, the Coburg Council offering it the hopelessly undeveloped Morris Reserve at Pascoe Vale South as consolation. The Coburg Football Club was predictably unimpressed. Secretary, Noel Brady said:

We have represented Coburg in senior football for 39 years, but have been treated shabbily and pushed to a ground no better than a backyard.²

Cr.J.P.Esslemont was sympathetic to the club's plight. He suggested that it could possibly be necessary to spend in the vicinity of £40,000 to bring the Morris Reserve up to V.F.A. standard and that the Coburg Football Club may have to be reimbursed for money it had spent on the City Oval.³ The Liberal M.L.A. for Essendon, Mr.K.H.Wheeler, denounced Morris Reserve as a 'pretty paltry' replacement for City Oval and suggested residents in this 'quiet select area' would find regular disruption to their privacy on Sunday afternoons unacceptable.⁴ Wheeler had read the mood correctly. Under the pressure of complaints from both the Coburg Football Club and local residents in

¹ Sun, 3 November 1964, p.34.

² Sun, 5 November 1964, p.66.

³ Sun, 3 November 1964, p.34.

⁴ Coburg Courier, 10 November 1964, p.6.

Pascoe Vale South, Coburg Council withdrew the offer of Morris Reserve on 16 November.⁵

The council's decision to allow North Melbourne to use the City Oval had been far from unanimous, coming only after heated discussion. Mayor, Cr.A.W.Sanger, reminded Council that under the provisions of the Local Government Act, the agreement could not be signed until a formal call for tenders had been advertised.⁶ If Council's acceptance of the proposed agreement with North Melbourne indicated that any call for tenders would be regarded as a mere formality, the wording of the advertisement was plainly ludicrous and prompted noisy scenes in Council chambers on 16 November. The advertisement had stipulated that the ground must be used for Australian Rules football 'within the framework of the Victorian Football League'. The threat of legal action from the V.F.A. and the Coburg Football Club prompted Council to agree to call fresh tenders without this blatantly discriminatory stipulation.⁷

A week earlier the Coburg Football Club had presented a petition signed by 1,100 people, asking for a referendum to decide occupancy of the City Oval. The V.F.A. had also applied to the council for a deputation to be heard to discuss the matter. The Association's approach included the dire warning that the Coburg Football Club could suffer the same fate as Moorabbin if it were not provided with a ground of suitable standard.⁸ This belligerence was puzzling given the club's strident opposition to the North-Coburg deal and its non-involvement in any of the

⁵ Coburg Courier, 17 November 1964. P.14.

⁶ Coburg Courier, 3 November 1964, p.6.

⁷ Coburg Courier, 17 November 1964, p.1 (cont. p4).

negotiations bringing it about. It is possibly best interpreted as an act of bargaining aimed at shaming the Council into changing its mind, all the while in complete denial of the plain fact that the V.F.A. club itself would be the victim of any sanctions imposed by the Association. There was no quarrel, at this stage, between the Coburg Football Club and the V.F.A. and yet the latter chose to spite the former as punishment for the council's treachery. Rather than seek an amicable ground-sharing arrangement, the Association opted for a sabre-rattling exercise that, within a month, would drive the Coburg Football Club into amalgamation with North.

The club's petition for a referendum was discredited in the chamber by Cr.Cox who claimed to have investigated the *bona-fides* of some of the signatories and found them wanting after receiving advice that the petition had been signed largely by high school students. Both the petition for a referendum and the V.F.A.'s request for a deputation to be heard were rejected by the council, five votes to four.⁹

The issue also prompted lively discussion at V.F.L. headquarters, Harrison House, where delegates from both the A.N.F.C. and the Carlton Football Club strongly condemned North's move, albeit for different reasons. As an arbiter of fair play in relations between the various controlling bodies of Australian Rules football, the A.N.F.C. regarded the infiltration by a V.F.L. club into the domain of a V.F.A. club as a case of the strong overpowering the weak. Tobin sought to deflect the blame for this imperialism away from

⁸ Sun, 10 November 1964, p.55.

⁹ Ibid.

his club by stressing the pro-active nature of the council's role in instigating the deal. If the Coburg Council found League football a more attractive proposition into which to channel its capital than the much less popular Association alternative, Tobin argued that North could scarcely be blamed for accepting the council's offer.¹⁰

Carlton delegate, C.Davey, expressed concern that North Melbourne's move was an 'intrusion into a Carlton stronghold'. While Moorabbin had been *terra nullius* as far as the V.F.L. clubs were concerned prior to the St.Kilda takeover, Coburg was already accounted for. Davey pointed out that three-quarters of the Coburg area, including the City Oval itself, was part of Carlton's player recruitment district. The same area accounted for 18% of the Carlton Football Club's membership. The move would also have a detrimental effect on the Northern Junior Combined Football Association, sponsored jointly by the Carlton and Coburg football clubs.¹¹

Former North Melbourne player and later club president, Allen Aylett, defended his club's action in an article in the Sporting Globe. He argued that the move was necessary to ensure the club's survival. Attendances at Arden Street were suffering as a result of poor public transport facilities. Despite the oval's close proximity to the city the nearest public transport was more than half a mile from the ground. The Coburg ground, on the other hand, was well served by trams, trains and buses. He claimed also that the ground was physically closer to the homes of 80% of

¹⁰ Sun, 5 November 1964, p.66.

¹¹ Ibid.

the club's members than the Arden Street ground.¹² North Melbourne itself had a declining population, of which the under 15 component made up 23.9%, compared to the Melbourne metropolitan average of 27.4%.¹³ With few public open spaces other than Royal Park, which required the crossing of the very busy Flemington Road to reach,¹⁴ the area was not conducive to the affluent family-oriented lifestyle available in areas more distant from the city centre. A feature of the area was the large number of boarding and rooming houses, making North Melbourne particularly accommodating to single men.¹⁵

The £80,000 that the council was making available for ground improvements would ensure that the new League venue would provide amenities far superior to those at the old oval. However, Aylett's strongest selling point for the new ground was the ground management deal that the council had offered to North. At Arden Street in 1964, the ground manager, the Melbourne City Council, had collected approximately £8,000 in revenue from football levies, catering and T.V. rights, monies that would, in future, go to the Kangaroos. After allowing for the £4,000 rental to be paid to the Coburg Council, the club could expect to be roughly £4,000 *per annum* better off.¹⁶

Aylett's article also carried a message for those concerned with North's invasion of V.F.A. territory. He suggested that, as ground manager, North would be willing to make the Coburg ground available to the Coburg Football Club for home matches on Sundays if

¹² Sporting Globe, 11 November 1964, p.20.

¹³ Troy, *op.cit.*, pp.27-28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹⁶ Sporting Globe, 11 November 1964, p.20.

the V.F.A. were willing to cooperate. He blamed the 'lack of clear thinking on the part of the V.F.A.' for Moorabbin's suspension, which he felt could be avoided in the case of the Coburg club if the Association were to adopt a more cooperative attitude.¹⁷ In reply to Carlton's complaints, Aylett chose to justify his club's actions in terms of inter-club rivalry.

Carlton claim that we're moving in to their area. This may be so but to remain at North would mean extinction and I don't reckon Carlton would do a darn thing about it.¹⁸

The V.F.A. was not about to change its attitude to the League's encroachment into its domain. In a Supreme Court writ, the Association claimed that the Coburg Council had exceeded its powers in leasing the ground to North. With the circularity of Orwellian *double-think*, the V.F.A. argued that, by virtue of its long-term use of the ground, the Coburg Football Club was entitled to occupancy¹⁹ or, at least, six months' notice prior to the termination of its occupancy.²⁰ If sustained, this claim would have ruled out any possibility of North Melbourne taking over the ground in time for the beginning of the 1965 season. The Council argued that the V.F.A.'s action was 'vexatious and an abuse of the Court', based as it was on the proposition that the Coburg Football Club had a tenancy. Council argued that, as an unincorporated body, the Coburg Football Club had no standing in law.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Coburg Courier, 8 December 1964, p.19.

On 4 December, Justice Adam ruled in favour of the council.²¹

The prospect of a long legal appeal process eroded much of the Coburg Football Club's determination to retain its ground. Depression was forestalled by the emergence of a reluctant pro-North faction willing to bargain. It was headed by club president, Jack Beyer, who saw a merger with North as the only realistic option. An apathetic response by local sporting clubs to a meeting called by the football club to discuss its position had convinced Beyer that the local community was 'just not interested in the welfare of the Coburg Football Club'. The League product simply had more appeal to the market. If Coburg could not beat the V.F.L., it would have to join it. Peaceful coexistence in the context of a ground-sharing arrangement was not an option because the V.F.A. did not share Beyer's spirit of resignation.²² Bargaining, at least with the V.F.L., was not on the agenda of an Association blinded by denial and intoxicated by 67 years of anger.

At an emergency meeting between the Coburg committee and the V.F.A. executive on 6 December, V.F.A. president, A.Gillan, warned Coburg that amalgamation would mean the annihilation of the club. A meeting had been planned, two days hence, at which representatives from North and Coburg would discuss the possibility of a merger. Gillan vehemently urged the committee to boycott the discussions, adding the ultimately toothless threat of a V.F.A. suspension against any Coburg committeeman who accepted a

²⁰ Sun, 19 November 1964, p.62.

²¹ Coburg Courier, 8 December 1964, p.19.

²² Sun, 3 December 1964, p.66.

position on the North Melbourne committee.²³ It was clear that the V.F.A.'s determination to carry the torch for community football was matched only by its steadfast refusal to accept the reality of its own powerlessness.

Despite Gillan's admonition, Coburg not only attended the meeting but entered into a merger agreement with North Melbourne after a heated four-hour discussion, with the Coburg committee split into pro-North and anti-North factions. The agreement provided immediate places for two Coburg representatives on the North committee, with the promise of three more pending the acceptance of constitutional changes creating these positions at the forthcoming annual general meeting of the North Melbourne Football Club. In addition there would be three Coburg representatives on the ground control committee, four more on the committee to run the reserves side and positions on the social committee for any member of the existing Coburg committee still without a portfolio. The merged club would recognise Coburg life membership and would preserve and maintain Coburg's honour boards in the clubrooms. All Coburg players would be invited to pre-season training and Coburg training staff would be given the opportunity to join the training staff at the new North Melbourne club.²⁴

At North Melbourne's annual general meeting, held on 16 December, a resolution endorsing the move to Coburg was supported by about 90% of the 250 members present. The constitutional amendment creating three new places on the committee was passed,

²³ Sun, 7 December 1964, p.48.

²⁴ Sun, 9 December 1964, p.64 (cont. p.63).

notwithstanding the objections of E. Walsh who expressed concern that North Melbourne was being 'taken over by a broken down and busted Association club'. Gillan's warning to Coburg equating amalgamation with 'annihilation' would have rung ominously true to any Coburg eavesdropper who happened to hear North president, Jack Adams's response to Walsh's concerns. Adams assured the gathering that the new committeemen would be appointed by the present North committee and each would, in turn, have to retire and face an election over the next three years. He concluded:

I don't think there is any chance of North being swamped by Coburg people ... Instead we are swamping them.²⁵

As had been the case at Moorabbin, the move of a V.F.L. club into Coburg territory produced a strong groundswell of local resentment. The pro-North factions in both the council and the V.F.A. club had predominated by the barest margins. That the losers in the Coburg struggle were ultimately able, unlike their Moorabbin counterparts, to regroup and regain their lost territory was due to a wisdom in hindsight that the Moorabbin experience had given them. As the pleadings of Moorabbin vice-president and delegate, Jim Nixon, against suspension of his club by the V.F.A. indicated, there was a significant anti-St.Kilda faction at the Moorabbin Football Club. Had this group been as strident in proclaiming its opposition to the V.F.L.'s imperialism as the anti-

North group at Coburg was, it may have received the same support from the V.F.A. that enabled the substantial minority at Coburg to keep the club alive while North Melbourne's suburban experiment ran its ill-fated course. North's hold over the Coburg Council was considerably more precarious than the pro-V.F.L. sentiment at Moorabbin, possibly because the outcome of the St.Kilda-Moorabbin identity issue had provided strong evidence in support of Gillan's 'annihilation' theory. In Coburg the waters were further muddied by Carlton's well-established popularity in the area. It would not take much to swing the democratic balance back in favour of the Coburg V.F.A. club if only it could survive in the interim.

In mid-December the V.F.A. moved to mobilise the anti-merger forces at Coburg by inviting all Coburg committee members and players opposed to the merger to meet with the V.F.A. executive. The ten committeemen and life-members, along with fourteen players who responded formed a committee to challenge the constitutionality of the club's decision to merge with North and to apply for the lease of the Coburg ground. The council had decided to call fresh tenders to avoid the threat of legal action.²⁶

Jack Beyer, in turn, challenged the constitutionality of this breakaway Coburg committee. His claims provoked the V.F.A. to make good its earlier threat to suspend any Coburg committeemen who accepted positions on the North Melbourne committee. This suspension included Beyer himself, along with vice-president, J.Brophy, secretary, N.S.Brady, Assistant Secretary, J.Betson and committee member,

²⁵ Sun, 17 December 1964, p.59.

²⁶ Sun, 18 December 1964, p.51.

J.E.Jones.²⁷ As committeemen of the newly merged V.F.L. club they were no longer subject to V.F.A. rules anyway, but the suspensions not only served as a gesture of censure but also as a device for the removal of the pro-North influence from what remained of the Coburg Football Club. Whether, at this stage, the residual 'Coburg' was an actual club or merely a concept dwelling in the hearts of V.F.A. traditionalists is subject to the debate over the constitutionality, firstly, of the North-Coburg merger and, secondly, of the new breakaway 'Coburg' committee. In any case, the concept of a Coburg football club, separate from North Melbourne, was kept alive by the V.F.A. executive and a group of Coburg loyalists.

On Monday 11 January 1965 Coburg Council accepted North's tender for the use of City Oval but insisted that the lease not be signed until it had been given the opportunity to examine possible amendments to the agreement. At issue, in particular, was the length of the lease. Cr.G.A.James insisted that his colleagues were virtually giving the oval away for 40 years. He also expressed misgivings about the ground manager's role being given to North. He argued that the proposed £4,000 rental would be inadequate to meet the interest on the £80,000 loan for ground improvements and doubted North's ability to meet even this modest commitment, given the club's precarious financial position.²⁸ Pending consideration of amendments,

²⁷ Sun, 24 December 1964, p.27.

²⁸ Coburg Courier, 12 January 1965, p.1 (cont p9).

Council granted North day-to-day use of the ground for £10 per day.²⁹

Meanwhile the future of the Coburg Football Club rested on the whim of the V.F.A. In early January a meeting of about 140 rank-and-file members of the former club declared its opposition to the merger of Coburg with North Melbourne and supported the V.F.A. in its suspension of the 5 pro-North committeemen.³⁰ North Melbourne Football Club secretary, Leo Schemnitz, offered the explanation that North had deliberately avoided involving the Coburg Football Club in its original negotiations with Council to protect the club from the V.F.A.³¹ Taken at face value, this would appear to be another example of the attitude of enlightened sovereignty that the V.F.L. and its constituent clubs were inclined to adopt when dealing with people or organisations in a strategically weaker position than themselves. It was on par with the paternalistic attitude of the St.Kilda Football Club to its own members over the Moorabbin venture and the V.F.L.'s evangelical mission to take football to Melbourne's demographic heart. Read more cynically, the statement could be seen as a sham designed to hide the League club's callous disregard for the victims of its imperialism. With local opinion only marginally in its favour, North needed to be seen to make the right noises regarding the fate of the local V.F.A. club. Taken either way, the statement by Schemnitz would have done little to enhance relations between the V.F.L. and the V.F.A. When the V.F.A. voted, on 4 February, to allow the Coburg Football

²⁹ Coburg Courier, 2 February 1965, p.5.

³⁰ Coburg Courier, 12 January 1965, p.9.

³¹ Coburg Courier, 2 February 1965, p.5.

Club to remain in the Association, it did so on the basis that the club would relocate to another established V.F.A. venue rather than share the City Oval with the V.F.L. club.³²

Although the pro-North faction held the numbers in Coburg Council, repeated instances of disorder in Council chambers during the long period of debate over the matter suggested that North's newly won tenure would not be a peaceful one. Suggestions that the move would be a financial imposition on Council were the basis of vitriolic exchanges between Coburg's civic representatives. The move had strong support from local business identities, among them Jack Scanlon, a former secretary of the Coburg Football Club.³³ The V.F.L. could not approve the relocation until negotiations between North and the council were complete. Rowdy public galleries forced Council to discuss the matter in committee behind closed doors. On 15 March, the council-in-committee arrived at what it regarded as a compromise agreement under which North Melbourne's lease would be granted for seven years instead of 40.³⁴ The new deal was finally passed by Council and signed at the end of March. It required North to pay rental of £2,000 for the first year, a further £5,500 in 1966 and £5,900 for the remainder of the lease. In addition, Council was to receive a further £2,500 a year for the whole 7 years in return for ground improvements. Council would be required to spend £75,000 on a grandstand prior to the 1966 season and another £25,000 before the start of the 1967

³² Coburg Courier, 9 February 1965, p.7.

³³ Coburg Courier, 23 February 1965, p.1. More examples of local business support are on p5.

³⁴ Coburg Courier, 16 March 1965, p.1.

season.³⁵ Ground management was in the hands of a group of seven trustees, comprised of the Mayor of Coburg, three councillors and three representatives from the North Melbourne Football Club.³⁶

As expected, the V.F.L. gave its approval for the use of the Coburg ground in time for the start of the 1965 season. The new venue received a baptism of water on 21 April, when the new home side went down by 10 points to South Melbourne in a 'scrambly slogging battle' played in atrocious conditions.³⁷ The crowd of 13,774 compared favourably to the 11,773 that attended the North-South fixture at Arden Street in Round 9 the previous year, both in raw terms and as a percentage of the average attendance at matches on the day. Both matches were played as part of split rounds. On the day in question in 1964, 129,344 people attended three matches, the North-South crowd accounting for only 27.3% of the average crowd of 43,115. Poor weather on the day of North's debut at Coburg kept crowds at the three matches down to 73,289. North's crowd represented 56.4% of the day's average of 24,430.³⁸

In the meantime the V.F.A. chose to maintain its rage. In March it refused the Sandringham Football Club permission to play a trial match against St.Kilda and announced that its suspension of the five former Coburg officials would continue until such time as they appeared before the V.F.A. board to answer charges of 'conduct prejudicial to the interests of

³⁵ Coburg Courier, 30 March 1965, p.1.

³⁶ Sun, 30 March 1965, p.51.

³⁷ Sporting Globe, 21 April 1965, p.2.

³⁸ Raw crowd figures taken from Bartrop, Paul R., Scores, crowds and records: statistics on the Victorian Football League since 1945, History Project Incorporated, University of N.S.W., 1984.

the Association'.³⁹ To its credit, however, the Association did not allow its attitude to the miscreants to affect its relationship with the Coburg loyalists. The club, which had temporarily ceased to exist, was reborn with the support of the V.F.A. and the Port Melbourne Council who reached an agreement with Coburg to allow it to play home matches at Port Melbourne in 1965. Although the club's on-field performances suffered during this period of exile, a more substantial revival was at hand. For the conquerors, victory would not prove to be as sweet as first imagined. The encouraging public response to North's debut at Coburg proved to be the exception rather than the rule. The average attendance at North Melbourne home matches at Coburg in 1965 was 12,909, a significant drop from the 16,733 average attendance at Arden Street the previous season.

Comparison of raw crowd figures from one season to another can be misleading for a number of reasons. If success attracts support, the use of attendance figures to gauge the relative popularity of the two venues will be prone to distortion by changes in the club's on-field fortunes. North Melbourne, however, was a consistently unsuccessful club during the period in question. While its 1965 season was less successful than its previous year in terms of matches won, five out of 18 in 1965 compared to eight out of 18 in 1964, the club finished only one position lower on the premiership table, ninth in 1965 compared to eighth. It is difficult to determine the extent to which these differences in fortune would have affected the crowd figures. Declining attendances toward the end of the 1965 season suggest the possibility that the club's

³⁹ Sun, 6 March 1965, p.55.

hopeless position in relation to the final four may have had some bearing on the poor crowds. It is to be expected that unsuccessful clubs would pull bigger crowds early in a season before the hopelessness of their cause became apparent to their supporters. This factor, in addition to a curiosity or novelty motive could explain the relatively good attendance at the first Coburg match. North's home attendances became progressively less flattering as the season progressed.

Another pitfall in the use of raw crowd figures as a method of comparison is the effect of such extraneous imponderables as weather, public transport strikes or alternative attractions on any given day. It is also to be expected that a match played as part of a split round would attract a number of neutral spectators whose usual club of choice was not playing that day.

Perhaps the most important factor of all, in considering a club's attendances at different matches, was the popularity of the opposing club. The crowd of 13,774 at North's round one home match against South Melbourne was considerably less, in raw terms, than the 21,626 at the round ten home fixture against Collingwood. Allowing for the huge popularity of Collingwood in comparison to that of South, however, the attendance at the South match would have been more encouraging, from North's point of view, than the crowd at the Collingwood game.

In determining the popularity of North's move to Coburg, it would be possible to make a very strong case against the popularity of the Coburg ground if the decline in attendances apparent in the raw figures were reinforced by statistics which, after making

allowances for the extraneous imponderables previously mentioned, showed a similar downward trend. One such approach would be to take the crowd at each 1965 home match individually and compare it to the crowd at the corresponding fixture, i.e. the home match against the same club, at Arden Street in 1964. As well as considering the raw crowd figure in each case, it would be possible to consider a relative crowd figure indexed against the average crowd at V.F.L. matches played on the same day and expressed as a percentage of that average. This would, to a large extent at least, allow a comparison free from the distortions caused by such things as weather, split rounds, alternative attractions or transport strikes. In this case only seven such comparisons would be possible because the 18 round season allowed each club only nine home matches per season. In 1964 North Melbourne did not play home matches against Geelong or Richmond. The following year neither Footscray nor Hawthorn were assigned matches at Coburg. North's home matches against the other seven clubs, however, can be considered, with other relevant factors specific to each individual case, such as the relative fortunes of the particular opposition club in each of the two seasons in question, taken into consideration. Such specific circumstances may extenuate the findings, thereby weakening the case to some extent. On the other hand, the observed trend may be seen to have occurred in spite of a specific circumstance. In this instance the case would be further vindicated.

After the opening match against South Melbourne, the next match allowing a comparison was the round six match against St.Kilda. The two sides had met at Arden Street in round eight of the 1964 season, drawing a

crowd of 19,620, which equated to 85.1% of the average crowd for the day. The 1965 clash at Coburg attracted only 13,291, or 54.6% of the day's average. Despite the fact that St.Kilda was *en route* to the most successful season in the club's history to that time, the crowd figure at Coburg was significantly lower in both raw and absolute terms. The case against Coburg was further strengthened by the figures for the round eight clash with the eventual premier, Essendon, which attracted a crowd of only 12,828, or 52.9% of the day's average. In 1964, a year in which the consistently successful Essendon club also played in the finals, the figures had been 15,878 and 94.4% respectively.

In round ten North Melbourne met Collingwood, a club that also made the finals in both seasons under consideration. This time the raw figures showed a slight increase, 21,626 in 1965 compared to 21,096 the previous year. When converted to relative terms, however, the trend was again downward. The indexed figure for Coburg was 85.9% compared to 101.1% at Arden Street. Supporters of the Coburg move could take little or no comfort from these figures.

The Coburg ground was not only proving to be unpopular with the public, but it was not helping North's fortunes on the field either. When the club finally broke through for its first home win for the season, in round 13 against the reigning premier, Melbourne, it did so in front of a paltry 8,312, only 40.9% of the day's average. In round two the previous year the two clubs pulled 15,914 to Arden Street, or 58.7%. It is possible, however, that the dramatic sacking of champion Demons coach, Norm Smith, on the eve of the match may have adversely affected the

attendance. For this reason no conclusion in relation to the Coburg-Arden Street issue should be drawn here.

If ever a match should have drawn a packed house to the Coburg ground it was the round 15 clash between North and Carlton but, despite the fixture's potential as a great local 'derby', the match attracted only 11,474, or 66.0% of the day's average crowd. In round 12 the previous year, the corresponding match at Arden Street had pulled 16,020 or 79.7%. The fall occurred despite the fact that Carlton, after a dismal season in 1964, was undergoing a revival under new coach, Ron Barassi, whose controversial departure from the Demons during the summer of 1964-65 had created intense public interest in the Blues' fortunes.

The following week the Kangaroos played host to the consistently unsuccessful Fitzroy in the last of the matches that enabled a close comparison of crowds at Coburg and Arden Street. In this match the raw crowd figure increased slightly from 7,584 in round 17 the previous year to 7,738. However, the relative crowd figure showed a decrease from 38.0% to 31.7%.

There was no doubt by now that the move to Coburg had failed to attract increased patronage. On raw figures alone, Arden Street had been more popular in four out of the seven games. Using the more appropriate measure of the popularity of the two grounds, the indexed percentage, the score was six to one in favour of Arden Street, the only exception being the opening match with its obvious novelty appeal. While the South Melbourne match was an obvious 'win' for Coburg, from both the raw and the relative points of view, the St.Kilda, Essendon and Carlton crowds all came out even more decisively in favour of Arden Street. Conflicting messages between raw and

relative figures at the Collingwood and Fitzroy matches make these games inconclusive for the purposes of comparison. Apologists for Coburg could argue that the extenuating circumstances surrounding the Melbourne match would justify the negation of the otherwise obvious pro-Arden Street message coming from the figures on the North Melbourne versus Melbourne fixture. A final verdict that ruled three votes to one in favour of Arden Street, with three votes indecisive, would be conservative but not unreasonable. If anything, this verdict would be affected by a pro-Coburg bias. While a short-term fall in attendances was perhaps to be expected as part of the process of re-establishing in a new area, the overwhelming extent of the drop in the crowds at the St.Kilda, Essendon and Carlton matches suggested a strong supporter backlash against the move.

A similar analysis of St.Kilda home crowds over the period in question produces a much less decisive conclusion. The largest crowd to attend Moorabbin in 1965 was the 51,370 in the opening round. This excellent attendance, more than 11,000 in excess of the next highest, was most likely the result of a combination of the novelty appeal of the new venue and the fact that the Saints' opponent was Collingwood. The figure cannot be used for comparison because the Magpies did not play at Junction Oval in 1964.

The first match enabling a comparison, the St.Kilda-Footscray fixture in round four, was a decisive win for Junction Oval, which attracted 33,600 in round two of the 1964 season. This was 123.9% of the day's average crowd. At Moorabbin the two sides attracted only 14,454 or 87.1%. At the following week's home fixture against Essendon, the Saints drew

39,965 to Moorabbin, 8,865 more than the previous year, but less in relative terms (144.6% at Moorabbin compared to 149.8% at Junction Oval). Given the conflicting evidence in these figures, this is probably best interpreted as an indecisive result. The round seven figures, 18,670 (74.9%) for the match against Fitzroy were not as good as the Junction Oval's 20,900 (91.6%), clearly another victory for Junction Oval, while the St.Kilda-Hawthorn figures for round ten were indecisive. Moorabbin drew more spectators, 20,010 as opposed to 18,600, but a lesser percentage of the day's average crowd, 79.5% against 110.6%. Moorabbin's most impressive comparative figures came in the round 11 St.Kilda-Carlton clash and the round 14 St.Kilda-Richmond fixture. The Carlton match pulled 35,784, over 10,000 more than the previous year. The relative figure was an impressive 165.6% compared to 91.4%. The encounter with the Tigers drew 34,076 (160.2%), well up on the 16,700 (67.1%) at Junction Oval. In between these two examples, the only other comparable fixture, the St.Kilda-South Melbourne match produced conflicting figures, a slightly lower crowd in raw terms but slightly higher in relative terms.

Unlike the North Melbourne figures, which provided a fairly convincing argument against the public's acceptance of the Coburg ground, the St.Kilda crowd figures for the 1964 and 1965 seasons were inconclusive as a measure of the relative popularity of the Moorabbin ground compared to Junction Oval. A simple comparison of raw figures at the seven comparable fixtures comes out four to three in favour of Moorabbin. Comparison of relative figures, however, favours Junction Oval by four to three. In three of

the seven fixtures a comparison of the raw and relative figures produced conflicting messages. If these cases were deemed inconclusive the result would be a two-all draw between the two venues.

At the same time as the football public was voting with its feet against what was looking very much like North's mistake in moving to Coburg, the tide of local opinion in Coburg was beginning to turn back in favour of the V.F.A. club. This was reflected in a change in the composition of Coburg Council as a result of the August election. North Melbourne had secured its seven-year lease in March by seven votes to five but only four pro-North councillors survived the election.⁴⁰

With two-thirds of the council offside North was beginning to feel unwelcome. No progress had been made on the promised new grandstand and the new council, although bound by the agreement, seemed unwilling to do anything about it.⁴¹ It could afford to ignore its obligations because it was obvious that things were not working out for North at its new home. North wanted to leave as much as the council wanted it to leave. The seven-year lease was falling apart due to mutual dissatisfaction.

On 28 September in the Mayor's Room at the Coburg Municipal Offices, Coburg Football Club, North Melbourne Football Club and Coburg Council representatives held a 'round table' conference at which they agreed to terminate the occupancy agreement.⁴² The move to Coburg had cost the club 1,100

⁴⁰ Sporting Globe, 1 September 1965, p.24.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Dowling, Gerard P., The North story, Melbourne,

members.⁴³ On the same evening, a reform group of North Melbourne supporters, unhappy with the situation at Coburg but unaware of the 'round table' conference, met to discuss plans for exerting pressure on the Melbourne City Council to secure a better deal for the Kangaroos at their old ground. The mood also put pressure on the club's hybrid committee, itself a visible reminder of the now discredited merger, to save its own skin by supporting the move back to Arden Street.⁴⁴

Gerard P. Dowling, in his club history, the North story, suggested that Melbourne City Council needed the Kangaroos back at Arden Street as much as the club needed to return. Only V.F.L. football could provide worthwhile financial revenue from the ground.⁴⁵ On 27 October, a meeting of North Melbourne football and cricket representatives and the Melbourne City Council's Parks and Gardens Committee unanimously agreed that it was 'favourably disposed' to drawing up an agreement for the club to return. All that was needed was the approval of North Melbourne members at the upcoming annual general meeting.⁴⁶

Significant dissenters among the North hierarchy were vice-president, Phonse Tobin, and long-standing committeeman, Laurie English, who saw a return to Arden Street as retrograde. Tobin lamented the fact that while Collingwood was able to send its players to Japan for an end-of-season trip, North could not afford to send its team 'up ... the Maribyrnong'. He felt that going back to the old ground would ensure

Hawthorn Press, 1973, p.204.

⁴³ Sun, 2 December 1965, p.66.

⁴⁴ Sporting Globe, 22 September 1965, p.24.

⁴⁵ Dowling, op.cit., pp.204-205.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.205.

that the club would remain locked into a cycle of poverty.⁴⁷ Despite the North committee's agreement with Melbourne City Council, Tobin and English entered into unauthorised negotiations to relocate the club to Junction Oval. Keen to lure League football back to its ground, the St.Kilda Cricket Club was offering a package more generous than the one that had driven the Saints into suburbia.⁴⁸

Confident that the new St.Kilda deal would receive rank-and-file assent, Tobin arranged an unofficial referendum. He sent out 1,100 circulars to members asking them to choose between Arden Street and the Junction Oval and arranged to have the votes counted on air during H.S.V.7's World of Sport program on 28 November, the Sunday prior to the club's annual general meeting.⁴⁹ The poll, which resulted in a vote of 453 to 182 in favour of Junction Oval, proved to be no more than a futile exercise in populism.⁵⁰ It was declared 'doomed' by the Sporting Globe even before the votes had been counted. Any move by a V.F.L. club to a new ground would require League approval. This was unlikely because the 1966 season's fixtures had already been arranged with North Melbourne and South Melbourne home matches clashing on four occasions. Programming matches at Lakeside and Junction Oval on the same day was unacceptable because of the likelihood of severe traffic congestion in the area.⁵¹

Another reason, perhaps, why Tobin's supporters would have been entitled to feel pessimistic was linked to the nature of football club democracy. The

⁴⁷ Sun, 2 December 1965, p.66.

⁴⁸ Sporting Globe, 24 November 1965, p.20.

⁴⁹ Sporting Globe, 27 November 1965, p.1.

⁵⁰ Sporting Globe, 1 December 1965, p.20.

⁵¹ Sporting Globe, 27 November 1965, p.1.

North committee's decision to return to Arden Street was to be put to the members at the annual general meeting but such meetings are rarely conducted in strict accordance with democratic procedures. The meeting gave its assent to the move back to Arden Street, leading to the resignations of Tobin and English. Tobin later claimed that the meeting had been 'stacked' with numerous non-members of the club and that some voters at the back of the hall had put up both hands instead of one when the vote was taken. He also claimed that important correspondence relating to the issue had not been permitted to be read.⁵² A ruling clique that set a meeting's agenda with an astute control of the floor could often ensure the endorsement of its policies under conditions such as these.

A North move to St.Kilda at this time would have also flown in the face of the V.F.L.'s quest for independence from cricket authorities. By the mid-1960s the League had become obsessed with the Waverley project. The development of football's own stadium would enable the V.F.L. to thumb its nose at the custodians of the summer game. It was this prevailing anti-cricket attitude that made the eventual decision to allow Richmond to move to the M.C.G. a little puzzling.

The Tigers had previously considered moves to Oakleigh and Moorabbin and had indicated that they were not averse to the prospect of being a Waverley tenant, but such considerations do not appear to have been prompted by poor relations with the Richmond Cricket Club. A dispute prior to the 1963 season over the use of the Punt Road ground for practice football

⁵² Sporting Globe, 8 December 1965, p.1.

matches during the cricket finals had eventually been resolved in an amicable compromise.⁵³ Indeed Richmond's desire to accommodate its cricket fraternity was, if anything, an obstacle to the ultimately successful campaign to move the Tigers' home matches across the park.

Brian Hansen, in his club history, Tigerland, attributed Richmond's decision in favour of the M.C.G. to a desire to develop a style of play that would be suitable for finals.⁵⁴ If this was the case, the club's success over the next decade certainly vindicated its decision. Another strong argument advanced in favour of the move to the M.C.G. was the possibility of Richmond attracting the 'floating' supporter, the person who would rather watch a game in comfort than follow one particular team from one wet, windswept, over-crowded suburban ground to another.⁵⁵ Whether by virtue of Richmond's improved on-field fortunes or because of the effect of floating supporters, total attendances at Richmond matches soared from 174,540 in 1964 to 321,237 in 1965.⁵⁶

A comparison of crowds at Richmond's home games at the M.C.G. in 1965 with those at comparable matches at Punt Road in 1964 comes out overwhelmingly in favour of the new venue. All seven comparable M.C.G. fixtures - against St.Kilda (round three), Hawthorn (round five), North Melbourne (round seven), Fitzroy (round eight), South Melbourne (round 11), Collingwood (round 13) and Essendon (round 15) produced significantly higher crowds, in both raw and relative terms, than the corresponding matches at Punt Road in

⁵³ Sporting Globe, 30 March 1963, p.8.

⁵⁴ Hansen, op.cit., p.122.

⁵⁵ Sporting Globe, 4 July 1964, p.9.

1964. Crowds at the Hawthorn and North Melbourne matches more than doubled, in raw terms, and the St.Kilda crowd almost trebled. The most impressive relative figures were produced by the Collingwood match (277.4% compared to 150.1% at Punt Road) and the Essendon match (184.2% compared to 100.7%). While this unambiguous endorsement of the M.C.G. may have been affected by Richmond's improved form, the overwhelming weight of these figures suggested that this was much more than the fair-weather emergence of fickle fans from the proverbial woodwork.

League approval for the move came slowly. The Richmond cricket and football clubs were reported in October 1964 to have reached an agreement with the M.C.C.⁵⁷ Although this was enthusiastically endorsed at the club's annual general meeting in December,⁵⁸ the move did not receive the V.F.L.'s sanction until early March 1965, and then only after some modifications.⁵⁹ The League's objections were two-fold. Richmond had negotiated a ten-year lease. It had been reported in the press that some senior V.F.L. officials were keen to have Richmond as a tenant at Waverley, which would be opened long before that agreement had expired.⁶⁰ Subsequently the League adopted a policy of rostering selected home matches of all clubs to the new stadium, but in 1964-65 there was still a strong desire among some at Harrison House to find a permanent tenant or tenants. There were also objections to the provision

⁵⁶ Hansen, op.cit., p.123.

⁵⁷ Sporting Globe, 31 October 1964, p.11.

⁵⁸ Sun, 3 December 1964, p.66.

⁵⁹ Sun, 4 March 1965, p.56.

⁶⁰ Sporting Globe, 31 October 1964, p.11.

that entitled Richmond Cricket Club members and ladies to attend matches for £1 per season.⁶¹

V.F.L. club delegates were reported to be divided over the issue. Although Eric McCutchan refused to give details of the final vote in favour of Richmond's move, the Sun reported that Hawthorn, Carlton, St.Kilda and Footscray were opposed and that North was undecided.⁶² After lengthy discussion the delegates accepted a compromise which reduced the duration of the lease to three years and provided for a payment of £150 to be paid to all visiting clubs as compensation for the rights of Richmond Cricket Club members to attend.⁶³

The Melbourne Football Club, in particular, was scathing in its denunciation of those clubs that had opposed Richmond's move. An article included in a program sold at a practice match on 13 March asserted that this opposition had been 'based on antagonism and prejudice - attributes that have no place in sporting administration'. It argued that a visiting club playing Richmond at the M.C.G. could expect significantly more in gate revenue than it would receive if the match were played at Punt Road.⁶⁴ In the Sporting Globe, Ian McDonald reported that he knew of three M.C.C. members who were concerned at the V.F.L.'s antagonism and did not wish to be seen to 'take advantage' of Richmond's playing at the M.C.G. They had each sent Graeme Richmond a cheque for £3 for Richmond football membership even though their M.C.C.

⁶¹ Sporting Globe, 24 February 1965, p.20.

⁶² Sun, 3 March 1965, p.56.

⁶³ Sun, 4 March 1965, p.56.

⁶⁴ Article reported in Sporting Globe, 17 March 1965, p.20.

memberships would have entitled them to free admission anyway.⁶⁵

Notwithstanding the parochial objections of particular clubs, Richmond's change of venue from Punt Road to the M.C.G. received overwhelming support from the press, the public and even the State Government. Premier, Henry Bolte, felt that it was a 'tragedy' that the M.C.G. should stand vacant every second week. He appealed to the 'good sense' of the League delegates in urging them to rule in Richmond's favour.⁶⁶ John Rice of the Sporting Globe urged the League to put the interests of the paying public to the fore in its decision. He argued that the M.C.G. would give Richmond supporters better value for their money in the form of comfort and amenities not provided at Punt Road.⁶⁷

The Richmond relocation caused none of the community trauma associated with the moves of St.Kilda and North Melbourne. This was partly because no dislocation of an existing tenant was involved. The Melbourne Football Club was happy to share the ground with its neighbour. There was none of the subterfuge of the St.Kilda-Moorabbin 'amalgamation' and none of the factionalism that plagued Coburg. There was also no significant geographical move away from an existing base and, as Richmond club stalwart, Des Rowe, pointed out, there was no identity crisis associated with the Tigers' move. Like the Punt Road ground, the new venue was within the boundaries of the City of Melbourne.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Sporting Globe, 17 March 1965, p.20.

⁶⁶ Sporting Globe, 3 March 1965, p.24.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Although a growing outer suburban population, coupled with a decline in the population of old inner-city and inner-suburban areas was typical of most cities in the developed world after World War 2, the tendency was partially offset in Melbourne by the inflow of migrants into cheap inner-suburban housing. Richmond was one of the areas in which this occurred.⁶⁹ Rowe argued that the move could only strengthen ties with the local community by providing the sort of comfortable accommodation likely to attract new supporters from among this new potential local constituency.⁷⁰

Where the Richmond outcome proved satisfactory for all concerned, the other two relocations produced winners and losers. At Moorabbin and temporarily at Coburg, advocates of a localised notion of community were left feeling defeated. The majority of the supporters of the two League clubs involved, however, had moved beyond such territorialism and would, if anything, have felt empowered in the understanding that their vote, whether at the turnstile or at the A.G.M., was exerting a decisive influence over club policy. That the agenda was being set by despots who considered themselves enlightened may have escaped their notice because, on the surface at least, football belonged to the People.

Anger belonged not to the barracker but to a demonstrably irrational, unreasonable and unrealistic V.F.A. Its losing battle made it a useful 'model victim' for the historian. Its reaction, and the all-powerful V.F.L.'s attitude to it, was setting a

⁶⁹ Dingle, 'People and places ...' in Davison, Dingle and O'Hanlon (eds), op.cit., pp.30-32.

⁷⁰ Sporting Globe, 3 March 1965, p.24.

pattern that would be repeated in later decades in the barracker's similarly losing battle with a more corporatised A.F.L. The modern barracker would enjoy minor triumphs, like the defeat of the Hawthorn-Melbourne merger in 1996, just as the V.F.A. reversed its fortunes in the battle for Coburg. The momentum, then as at the turn of the century, however, was with economics rather than populism, democracy or tradition. In 1965 the strategic site happened to be the turnstile, controlled to a large extent by the barracker. As its economic importance diminished so too did the influence of the barracker.

Even then, evidence existed that might have served as a warning against complacency and denial in the populist camp. Changing demographics and new cultural influences in Melbourne had created an environment in which the League could no longer take the turnstile for granted. At finals time, however, the demand for football was so great that the League could afford to alienate a significant section of its clientele and still be sure of filling the M.C.G. to capacity. Final's ticket distribution represented a site of even greater strategic importance than the turnstile. It was here that the League's real sovereignty over the Game was already being asserted.