



Abbott building a team to win the political test

THERE is something mesmerising - even hypnotic - about watching cricket. Not much happens. But there is always the prospect that it might. And if it does, you wouldn't want to miss it.

The game has a rhythm all its own. The bowler comes in from one end until it is "over" to the next bowler who comes in from the other end. The batsman goes in until he is out. And when they are all out, the others are all in. If everything is the way it should be, then the Australians keep winning.

The first day of the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne attracted a world record crowd. Huge crowds came for the subsequent days - all to watch a match in a series that has already been decided. Australians love winners.

And it is not just the sporting venues that have been pulling the crowds. The television ratings have been huge.

Cricket is truly our national game. The states are divided in their loyalties to different football codes. Other sports such as swimming and rowing can unite the nation for a spell, but for mass appeal, cricket dominates the summer. And it has spawned an industry of writers and commentators and after-dinner speakers who live off the game and nourish the legend.

I've been to several cricket lunches this summer. They were jolly affairs with speakers who were sometimes hilarious. The jokes don't change much but they are frequently attributed to different people. Sometimes the wisecrack is attributed to Max Walker, sometimes Merv Hughes, and sometimes Glenn McGrath ... but who cares as long as it's funny? Something happened on a cricket field somewhere to someone on some occasion.

Off the field, people who are wittier and more clever than the on-field gladiators have embellished these stories and polished and recounted them to the amusement of generations on many continents.

I've come across the same in politics. Various witticisms can be attributed to Bob Menzies, Jim Killen, Joh Bjelke-Petersen. It doesn't matter that they never spoke them. It would have been funny if they had said them, so it is funny to hear the stories retold. The point is not the history but the entertainment of it all.

If politicians were funny then television ratings for parliamentary Question Time would be a lot higher than they are. There hasn't been a moment of wit in that place for a long time. Narcissists and stern feminists are not a recipe for sit-com.

Nevertheless there are people who religiously watch Question Time. I put it down to the lack of good psychiatric services in the community.

I used to have a constituent who would ring my office every day at the end of Question Time and give me a score on my performance. She marked it out of 10 and would carefully explain why she had deducted points. As the years passed my averages declined, just like an ageing cricketer trying to find form.

I have never decided whether cricket is a game for the individual or the team. If you are looking for wickets then you need fieldsmen to take catches. The fielding team as a whole needs to keep batsmen under pressure on scoring and run-outs. But cricket also turns on magnificent individual performances, like Mitchell Johnson taking seven wickets for 40 in the Adelaide Test or Michael Clarke's latest century. In truth the individual efforts lift the team.

A strong team has a mix of individuals with strong skills in their respective areas. Strong governments are like that, too. They are led by a captain who lets his players get out and show their skills. As long as they are playing for the team they should be given their head. No captain can bat, bowl, keep wicket and carry the drinks. That is what a team is for.

In the world of politics, we call it a cabinet.

In cricket there are endless arguments about whether bowlers or batsmen win matches. In politics, there are endless arguments about whether oppositions win elections or if governments lose them.

I can't settle that question. But I do know one thing: The government is batting - they are in. And the opposition is bowling - they have to get them out. To do that they need a few strike bowlers.

What Bill Shorten needs is a Mitchell Johnson: Someone who can keep the government on its toes for the well-pitched ball, yet send down enough hostile deliveries to have them ducking and weaving.

The shadow treasurer, Chris Bowen, rather fancies himself for the task. But his previous ministerial career has been disaster, first in immigration and then an ill-fated spell as the (real) treasurer. He needs to learn about line and length. A little bit of humility about his previous form and a little bit of respect for his opponents would serve him well.

As captain, Tony Abbott still needs a Dave Warner who can crack a big innings or a Brad Haddin who can step up to the crease and deliver when the top order has fallen over.

Joe Hockey and Mathias Cormann come to mind but there are other accomplished performers, such as Julie Bishop, Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton, looking to build big careers. The best teams bat down the order. Abbott would do well to nurture his young talent, including those that are not yet in the first XI.

This game is going for a while. Sooner or later the bowlers are going to get into their stride. Someone will play a poor stroke. Something always happens in cricket.