

COMBAT SPORTS BILL 2008

Bill introduced on motion by Mr Kevin Greene.

Agreement in Principle

Mr KEVIN GREENE (Oatley—Minister for Gaming and Racing, and Minister for Sport and Recreation) [4.47 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The Combat Sports Bill 2008 will establish a broader regulatory coverage of combat sports and will create a Combat Sports Authority to replace the existing Boxing Authority of New South Wales. The definition of "combat sports" used in the new Act will extend the existing regulatory coverage of boxing, kickboxing and wrestling to include a range of other sports that have risen to prominence since the existing Boxing and Wrestling Control Act 1986 was introduced. These include sports with names such as Muay Thai, mixed martial arts and cage fighting. The advent of these sports, while they might not be to everyone's taste, has required a response to ensure that competitors are not exposed to unnecessary risk. Some of these sports have vague and ad hoc sets of rules, which present some concerns regarding the governance of the sports and any discipline that their associations exercise over the conduct of their contests.

A significant change under the new legislation is the removal of the exclusion of women from competing in amateur and professional boxing and kickboxing in New South Wales. We also are increasing significantly the penalties applying to the conduct of illegal contests, that is, those operating without permits. At present, some combat sports simply are not named in the existing legislation and, accordingly, cannot be regulated to ensure the maximum safety possible for the competitors. In 1986 the Wran Government introduced the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act, in the process establishing a new approach to the regulation of those sports.

This approach was aimed at addressing a number of significant issues at that time. To address the health and safety needs of competitors, the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act 1986 established the New South Wales Boxing Authority, with responsibilities including supervising the sport to ensure that boxers were properly medically supervised, both at contests and during intervening periods; that all matches had a doctor in attendance; and that promoters, managers, trainers, seconds and others were included within the coverage of the Act as registered industry participants.

The principles established in the Boxing and Wrestling Control Act 1986 will continue in the new Act. The seven members of the Boxing Authority have managed the sport of professional boxing very effectively. As part of their role, they attend the promotions, check the fitting of the gloves and ensure that all activities relating to the preparation of the boxers, including supervision of activities in the change rooms, are managed properly. By capturing a range of other sports within the legislation, the New South Wales Government will ensure that those same safety standards are maintained across the combat sports industry.

The sport of boxing includes as its primary activity the directing of blows to the head of the opponent. Consequently, this State has had a policy for more than a decade that children younger than 14 years cannot take part in competitive boxing matches. This policy reflects medical advice relating to the development of the brain in young people and the need to protect young competitors. There has been disquiet among some members of the boxing industry regarding this policy. My predecessors in the Sport and Recreation portfolio and I, as well as other Ministers and successive Premiers, have had representations made to us to remove the policy. I can state today that this policy will continue, and that appropriate age rules will be applied to other combat sports in involve significant impacts to the head.

Another issue, which has been contentious at times, concerns the participation of women as competitors in boxing and kickboxing. In 1986 it was a matter of general public agreement that it was not appropriate for women to compete in these sports. Times have moved on and this position is seen as discriminatory and inconsistent with community attitudes and government policy generally. The Government has had to consider the issues that would arise if we continued to exclude women from the opportunity to compete in boxing and kickboxing. As women are already competing in some of the sports that will fall within the purview of this legislation, it is appropriate to remove all of the gender-based exclusions.

Recent events have highlighted the need for effective management of crowds at contests and for rules of conduct for the entourages that increasingly accompany competitors to the venues for combat sports. The Boxing Authority of New South Wales is currently considering those issues and the new authority, in partnership with the New South Wales Police Force and the Department of Arts, Sport and Recreation, will have to address those issues as one of its first tasks. Through the changes outlined in this legislation, the Combat Sports Authority will have increased powers in addressing a range of breaches. The new authority may refer matters for prosecution where an offender is unregistered. It may also impose penalties on any registered combatants or industry participants who fail to fulfil their obligations to conduct themselves in a professional manner.

For some people currently involved in combat sports the new legislation will represent a change in the way they operate. Previously, in some combat sports there was no legislative requirement for registration, no insistence on proper matching of opponents, no need to ensure the attendance of a doctor at all promotions and no clear understanding of the responsibilities of officials and other participants at contests. This is not to say that the promoters of combat sports events have been operating irresponsibly, but they have previously operated outside the regulatory system and this must be addressed. The Department of the Arts, Sport and Recreation has initiated discussions with industry representatives to advise them of the regulatory requirements and assist them with the transition.

This process will continue over the next 12 months. Those involved in combat sports will be required to register from the beginning of the 2010 calendar year. In the meantime, participants in the industry will be able to work towards fulfilling the requirement for first-aid training, to negotiate with medical practitioners to provide the necessary supervision at contests, and to develop a sound working relationship with the Combat Sports Authority. A feature of this legislation is the permanent registration of combat sport combatants and participants—a matter that has been a longstanding concern of the Boxing Authority. This registration system will operate in a similar way to the system that operates under the greyhound racing legislation to ensure that no loopholes can be found by unscrupulous characters attempting to operate outside the system.

I express my appreciation to past and present members of the Boxing Authority of New South Wales for their professionalism and dedication to managing the sport. I hope that they will seek to continue their involvement in the new regulatory system. I can assure them that we will need their expertise as it develops. Boxing is still the largest combat sport in Australia in terms of numbers of registered combatants, frequency and geographic distribution of contests. New South Wales has the most boxing contests—nearly half the national total per annum.

Our approach will continue to include ensuring the attendance of at least one authority official at each boxing contest. When female combatants are involved, female officials will also be required. Following passage of the legislation, the new Combat Sports Authority will be established with nine members—an additional two over the number currently on the Boxing Authority. The membership of the authority will include at least two members drawn from combat sports outside the realm of boxing and, for the first time, will including female members.

I now turn to some of the transitional arrangements associated with these changes. The authority will continue to receive administrative support from the Department of the Arts, Sport

and Recreation. Following passage of the legislation, the department will initiate recruitment and accreditation of officials, initially through seeking expressions of interest. The Combat Sports Regulation will be developed, and will list those sports to be subject to the regulatory system, including sports for which there is currently no government regulation, such as Muay Thai, cage fighting, extreme fighting, mixed martial arts and others.

For women currently involved in any form of combat sports it removes a restriction on their activity, and they may then choose to compete in boxing or kickboxing. Women who reside in New South Wales who currently travel interstate to compete in boxing and kickboxing will be able to register and compete in their home State. Women new to the industry will have a wider range of options to choose from than is currently available. An anomaly will be removed from the combat sports industry: women are currently prevented from competing in boxing and kickboxing in New South Wales, although no government regulation currently applies to their competing in other combat sports.

Some combat sports will be subject to government regulation where none previously existed. Greater scrutiny will be applied to the conduct of those sports, the requirements for supervision of medical issues and the conduct of promotions generally. Female officials will be identified, accredited and trained as necessary. More facilities suitable for women will be required, and only suitably equipped venues will be permitted to stage events that include female combatants. Some issues are expected to arise relating to the conduct of events, including the attire to be worn by women. This will be managed by including requirements consistent with international practice in the conditions of permits applying to such events.

Amendments to the legislation will address a longstanding policy issue for which a number of organisations including Womensport, Recreation New South Wales and individuals, including the former Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner and State members of Parliament have lobbied. This is important legislation that will bring New South Wales into line with the rest of the States and Territories. I commend the bill to the House.