

### **3.15 Sports mega-event legacies: from the beneficial to the destructive**

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Sports mega-events, most notably the Olympic Games, have generated legacies that range from beneficial to destructive. Potentially positive outcomes include short-term boosts to tourism and local economies, and improved sporting facilities and infrastructure. Although negative financial, social and environmental impacts are widespread and thoroughly documented, they are overshadowed by the Olympic industry's 'feel-good' mythology and mainstream media's pro-Olympic bias. An understanding of exaggerated and misleading legacy promises related to recent Olympics will help to inform future 'resistance' efforts.

#### **Olympic principles and promises**

In common usage, a 'legacy' is a benefit handed down by one's predecessors. In the context of the Olympic industry,<sup>2</sup> the term includes the post-Olympic boost to civic pride and world-class city status, as well as improvements to infrastructure and sporting facilities. Since Olympic organisers' accounting methods usually exclude capital spending, however, it is misleading to present construction projects as a legacy.<sup>3</sup> New infrastructure and sporting facilities concentrated in one urban area, but heavily subsidised with public money from all citizens in the host state/province and country, do not constitute an Olympic windfall. They are, in effect, a cash purchase made on behalf of taxpayers by elected representatives, who are frequently pressured by the government in power to vote in a non-partisan manner on Olympic spending. Even at the bid stage, opposition or critique by local politicians is rare, although, in 2014, in what may prove to be an emerging trend, Munich, Oslo and St Moritz all withdrew their bids for the 2022 Winter Olympics following negative referendum results and concerns

about mounting costs.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in Boston, the US bid city for the 2024 Olympics, community opposition has forced organisers to agree to a referendum on the bid in 2016.<sup>5</sup>

The internal structure of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), bid committees and organising committees is characterised by a critical lack of accountability and transparency, while the myth that sport is, or should be, apolitical silences critics.<sup>6</sup> The popular call to ‘keep politics out of the Olympics’ belies the fact that they are by definition political: they involve politicians and significant amounts of public money. By officially recognising a country’s Olympic committee and welcoming it to the Olympic fold, the IOC has long had significant political power on the world stage, in effect ‘conferring political recognition although [it] had no formal diplomatic status’.<sup>7</sup>

The IOC, a self-appointed, self-perpetuating body, views its members as representatives *to*, not representatives *of*, their home countries.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to imagine any other international body that could function in this way, although one researcher has suggested parallels with the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup> Given the pseudo-religious mythology surrounding *Olympism*, the Olympic *spirit* and the Olympic *Movement*, as well as the IOC’s self-defined status as the ‘supreme authority on world sport’, the analogy is fitting.

Following the bribery and corruption scandals of 1998/1999, linked to the bid for the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City, Utah, the IOC has claimed to have introduced significant reforms.<sup>10</sup>

However, since that time there have been at least two examples in the public domain of questionable arrangements relating to the bid process, one involving two prime ministers, Tony Blair and Silvio Berlusconi,<sup>11</sup> and the other Vancouver bid committee chair John Furlong and Russian oligarch Yury Luzhkov.<sup>12</sup> Blair described a private visit in 2004 to his ‘friend’ Berlusconi, who subsequently assured him that the Italian IOC members would support London’s 2012 bid. In Furlong’s case, during the

2003 bid process for the 2010 Olympics, he promised to give Luzhkov Vancouver's campaign strategy to aid Russia's 2014 bid, in exchange for Russian votes for Vancouver's 2010 bid. The fact that Blair and Furlong both disclosed details of these events in their published memoirs reflects a sense of entitlement and immunity that is common in Olympic decision-making circles. For its part, the IOC sided with Furlong's assertion that the deal was neither illegal nor unethical. After a superficial investigation, it claimed that those involved were not bound by the IOC's code of conduct – despite the fact that the code clearly governs bid committee members – and dismissed the matter.<sup>13</sup>

The single goal of a bid committee is to win the right to host the games, and generating support through promises in its bids of affordable housing, sporting facilities and infrastructure makes the bid more appealing to the tax-paying public. Regardless of social and environmental impact assessments, community consultations, and government involvement, the organising committee is under no direct obligation to that public. In fact, in the case of Sydney 2000, the organizing committee protected itself from Freedom of Information requests by using private sub-contractors who were by definition non-government bodies.<sup>14</sup> Oversight of Olympic preparations lies in the hands of a coordination commission appointed by the IOC, whose chief concern is timely completion of Olympic-related construction. At the local level, public order bylaws, municipal development applications and social/environmental impact assessments are frequently fast-tracked, and, in these scenarios, the rights of homeless people and tenants are disregarded, low-income housing is gentrified and environmental damage is incurred.<sup>15</sup>

The IOC introduced the principle of environmentally sustainable development (ESD) as a requirement for Olympic host cities in 1991, but this policy is, at best, of the 'light green' or 'greenwashing' variety – appearing environmentally sustainable while not threatening corporate profit. In the case of the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympics, for example, two rare and protected woodlands were demolished to

construct a cycling track, while, in preparations for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games, an endangered ecosystem was destroyed to make way for Olympic highway construction.<sup>16</sup>

By 2014, when the official IOC strategic plan, Agenda 2020, was introduced, ESD requirements were diluted when the document encouraged the use of temporary or demountable facilities ‘where no long-term legacy need exists or can be justified’ – a move that, ironically, also eroded bid boosters’ legacy promises. As the same document also requires ‘state-of-the-art’ facilities, it seems unlikely that a temporary building would suffice.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, one of the criteria for evaluation bids refers to pre-existing facilities, which obviously cannot be considered ‘state-of-the-art’ if they are standing when the bid is prepared, seven years before the event. On a more positive note, Agenda 2020 managed to include some changes that made the bid process less expensive and cumbersome. However, in the face of diminished interest in hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics – with only two bid cities in the running by the end of 2014 – the motive for these changes may have been self-interest.

### **Legacies: unplanned and undelivered**

Given the critical lack of transparency and accountability relating to Olympic bids, preparations and outcomes, it is not surprising that many planned or promised legacies fail to materialise. Vancouver’s 2010 bid committee redefined ‘legacy’ by creating an organisation called 2010 Legacies Now in 2000, three years before the bid was submitted, with the goal of ‘leveraging’ the Olympics into ‘local, tangible legacies’ in hundreds of communities in the province.<sup>18</sup> In reality, as investigative journalist Bob Mackin reported in 2013, there were numerous broken promises. These related to the failure to develop affordable housing, the gentrification of the low-income Downtown Eastside, the use of public money to subsidise the high operating costs of the curling centre, speed skating oval, sliding centre and athletes’ village, and the dramatic leap in the province’s public debt between 2001 and 2011.<sup>19</sup>

Legacy rhetoric claims that hosting the Olympics will inspire young and old across the host country to become more physically active; that increased rates of sporting participation will flow from the new facilities and opportunities; that the television spectacle of sports played on ‘home field’ will spark interest; and that the influence of Olympic ‘role models’ will promote young people’s participation. London’s 2012 bid promised ‘to inspire a new sporting generation to play sport’, but allocated only 1.5 per cent of its budget to a programme called Places People Play.<sup>20</sup> England received the full 1.5 per cent (£135 million, or some US\$215 million), while Scotland, which had contributed £150 million (about US\$239 million) to staging the games, received none, as did Wales and Northern Ireland.<sup>21</sup> An extensive 2008 Australian government survey covering the post-Olympic period from 2001 to 2008 found that the biggest increases were in non-organised, non-Olympic sports, as well as in aerobics and fitness, while participation in Olympic sports did not grow.<sup>22</sup> These and similar findings point to the difference between Olympic sports, many of which are elitist, expensive and unpopular, and non-Olympic sports, such as cricket, netball and the various codes of football, as well as aerobics and fitness activities, that attract mass participation. Hence, existing recreational interests and priorities will largely determine if an Olympic facility will become a valued legacy or a white elephant. Furthermore, some Olympic venues – ski jumps and sliding centres, for example – can be used safely only by high-performance athletes. Olympic stadiums, constructed with public money, are often turned over to professional sports teams, while maintenance fees for underused facilities continue to demand government subsidies.<sup>23</sup>

In 2008 the state government of New South Wales fast-tracked legislation to convert the central boulevard at the Sydney Olympic site into a car-racing circuit, destroying hundreds of trees in the process, and generating noise, crowds and the risk of toxic spills.<sup>24</sup> Following a similarly problematic conversion, Sochi hosted the Formula One Grand Prix a few months after the 2014 Winter Olympics.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, on the issue of ‘repurposing’, in 2015 Sochi’s regional government approved some US\$46 million to have the stadium roof removed for the 2018 football World Cup.<sup>26</sup> Other Sochi ‘repurposing’ projects included converting the speed skating arena into an exhibition centre and tennis academy, dismantling the temporary freestyle skiing venue and using the curling centre as a concert venue – all projects that fail to meet the IOC’s environmental principles and Sochi’s legacy promises.<sup>27</sup>

## Steps towards anti-corruption principles

Since the 1980s anti-Olympic and Olympic watchdog groups in bid and host cities have had some successes in raising public awareness of the financial, social and environmental costs of hosting the Games, as well as identifying the lack of accountability and transparency in relation to public spending for construction and the post-Olympic maintenance of often underused facilities. The biggest challenge facing Olympic resisters is the mythology that surrounds all things Olympic. With seemingly limitless funds for propaganda, the Olympic industry has successfully perpetuated the myths of the ‘pure Olympic athlete’ and ‘pure Olympic sport’ – both serving as a smokescreen for the ‘underestimated costs and overestimated benefits’ that characterise Olympic legacy rhetoric.<sup>28</sup> Thorough documentation of the factual evidence, obtained, for example, through freedom-of-information channels, is a key first step in challenging the hyperbole and holding elected representatives accountable.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Olympic industry’ is used to emphasise the profit motive and the involvement of corporate sponsors, broadcast rights holders, developers, resort and hotel owners, and other business stakeholders. See, for example, Helen Lenskyj, *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The omission of capital spending was identified as early as September 2000, at the time of the Sydney Olympics: *The Globe and Mail* (‘Report on Business’) (Canada), ‘Summer Olympic red alert, September 2000, 25–32.

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian (UK), ‘Oslo withdrawal from Winter Olympics bidding is missed opportunity – IOC’, 2 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2014/oct/02/oslo-withdrawal-winter-olympics-2022-ioc>.

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- <sup>5</sup> The Boston Globe (US) 'With referendum, Boston residents to have say on 2024 Olympics', 24 March 2015, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/03/24/boston-calls-for-statewide-referendum-olympic-plans/KVjS0zU1jRjexUa3ElstfM/story.html>
- <sup>6</sup> Helen Lenskyj, Olympic power, Olympic politics: behind the scenes. In A. Bairner and Gyoza Molnar, Eds., *The Politics of the Olympics* (London: Routledge, 2010), 15-26.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 28.
- <sup>8</sup> See the IOC Member List and description on the IOC website, available at <http://www.olympic.org/ioc-members-list> (accessed 26 May 2015).
- <sup>9</sup> Saul Fridman, 'Conflict of Interest, Accountability and Corporate Governance: The Case of the IOC and SOCOG', *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, vol. 22 (1999), [www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UNSWLJ/1999/28.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UNSWLJ/1999/28.html).
- <sup>10</sup> The Guardian (UK), 'Bribes scandal forces Olympics shake-up', 29 January 1999, <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/1999/jan/25/olympic-bribes-scandal-investigation>.
- <sup>11</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (Toronto: Knopf, 2010), p. 546.
- <sup>12</sup> John Furlong, with Gary Mason, *Patriot Hearts: Inside the Olympics that Changed a Country* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2011), pp. 46–47; NPR (US), 'IOC scrutinizes Vancouver Olympics bidding deal', 24 February 2011, [www.npr.org/2011/02/24/134015260/ioc-scrutinizes-vancouver-olympics-bidding-deal](http://www.npr.org/2011/02/24/134015260/ioc-scrutinizes-vancouver-olympics-bidding-deal).
- <sup>13</sup> ESPN (US), 'IOC clears John Furlong', 12 March 2011, <http://sports.espn.go.com/oly/news/story?id=6209719>.
- <sup>14</sup> See Helen Lenskyj, *The Best Olympics Ever? Social Impacts of Sydney 2000* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002). 26-8.
- <sup>15</sup> Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), *Fair Play for Housing Rights: Mega-Events, Olympic Games and Housing Rights* (Geneva: COHRE, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> Helen Lenskyj, *Best Olympics Ever*, p. 160; Helen Lenskyj, *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic Power and Propaganda* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), p. 62.
- <sup>17</sup> International Olympic Committee, 'Olympic Agenda 2020: 20+20 Recommendations', December 2014, [www.olympic.org/Documents/Olympic\\_Agenda\\_2020/Olympic\\_Agenda\\_2020-20-20\\_Recommendations-ENG.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/Documents/Olympic_Agenda_2020/Olympic_Agenda_2020-20-20_Recommendations-ENG.pdf).
- <sup>18</sup> See the 2010 Legacies Now website: <http://2010andbeyond.ca>.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Tyee* (Canada), 'Ten legacies of the Vancouver Olympics', 2 July 2013, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/07/02/Vancouver-Olympics-Legacies>.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Independent* (UK), 'The last word: London's legacy is a big fat myth', 26 June 2011, [www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/the-last-word-londons-legacy-is-a-big-fat-myth-2303005.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/the-last-word-londons-legacy-is-a-big-fat-myth-2303005.html).
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Australian Sports Commission and Department of Health and Ageing, *Participation in Exercise, Physical Activity and Sport: Annual Report 2007–2008* (Canberra: Australian Sports Commission, 2008), p. 18.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, Mackin, *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), 'Tree felling for V8 Supercars gets black flag', 31 July 2009.
- <sup>25</sup> *CNN News* (US) 'Sochi's formula for the future: 'Fantasy' becomes reality', 22 February 2014, [www.edition.cnn.com/2014/02/21/sport/sochi-formula-one-winter-olympics-ecclestone-tilke-f1/index.html](http://www.edition.cnn.com/2014/02/21/sport/sochi-formula-one-winter-olympics-ecclestone-tilke-f1/index.html)
- <sup>26</sup> *Moscow Times* (Russia), 'Russia to spend \$50 million taking roof off Sochi Olympic stadium', 20 January 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article.php?id=514657>.
- <sup>27</sup> Architecture of the Games blog, 'Sochi 2014; One year on', 24 February 2015, <http://architectureofthegames.net/2014-sochi/sochi-2014-one-year-on/>; Nemstov (Moscow), 'Зимняя Олимпиада в субтропиках: коррупция и произвол', 7 June 2013, <http://www.nemtsov.ru/old.phtml?id=718790>. For a full discussion of Sochi 2014 Olympics, see Helen Lenskyj, *Sexual Diversity and the Sochi 2014 Olympics* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- <sup>28</sup> David Whitson and John Horne, Underestimated costs and overestimated benefits? Comparing the outcomes of sports mega-events in Canada and Japan. In J. Horne and W. Manzenreiter, Eds., *Sports Mega-Events* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 73-89.