

The social, environmental and democratic impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games

2010 Olympics Should Stand for More

The Olympic ideal of friendly international competition between athletes who excel in their respective sports is a positive goal. The Council of Canadians understands and appreciates the pleasure and enjoyment so many around the world share in the spectacle and achievements of the Olympic Games. However, with less than half a year until the Games begin, we are gravely concerned by the increasing evidence that these worthy aspects are being overwhelmed, if not totally supplanted, by an “Olympic industry” focused on real estate development and massive corporate marketing opportunities. One that is founded and based in undemocratic and unaccountable national and international structures, and implicated in numerous corruption scandals that undermine everything a truly noble Olympic movement should stand for.

The February 2010 Olympic Games, which will be held in Vancouver and Whistler, B.C., will leave a negative legacy that is contrary to the goals set forward during the application and approval process to host the games. There is now no doubt that the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) and its affiliated partners will fail to meet their commitments with regard to the environment, social programs and fiscal accountability.

Here are some of the social, environmental and democratic impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games:

Indigenous Land and Title

The Olympics are being hosted in a province that has largely unceded territory, and in a country where colonization continues to be imposed on indigenous communities. Beyond the historic injustices for First Nations that the Canadian government often tries to ignore – recently exemplified by Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s assertion that “Canada has no history of colonization” – we continue to see injustices against indigenous communities today. The Canadian Government was one of the few countries to vote against the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Government of British Columbia attempted to secure title to unceded land to attract investment during the 2010 Games. Art Manuel, from the Indigenous Network on Economies and



Trade, identified the introduction of the Reconciliation and Recognition Act as “a major public-relations campaign in the lead-up to the 2010 Winter Olympics so the government can pretend it is dealing with indigenous issues.” The Act, while claiming to recognize aboriginal title and rights, in reality asked indigenous communities to recognize crown title. However, the significance of the Act must also be understood in economics terms. Manuel explains that “the economic uncertainty that

B.C. has been experiencing by not resolving the indigenous land question should not be underestimated. Since the judicial recognition of aboriginal title, the province has had to report it as a contingent liability in the B.C. financial statements every year.”

Since Vancouver was chosen to host the 2010 Olympics, developers have pitched \$5 billion worth of resort building plans. First Nations, meanwhile, continue to use blockades against resort expansion on territories that communities are protecting for traditional and sustainable use. Indigenous title and rights are also barriers to many major industrial projects such as pipelines to carry tar sands crude to the Pacific coast and mining projects that will use lakes as acid tailings ponds. Many of the Olympic sponsors have a vested interest in obtaining access to lands throughout the province for industrial development, and the Recognition Act mirrors these international neo-liberal interests to open up the resources and markets through regional trade agreements. Within the host communities of Vancouver and Whistler the Olympics Games act as a catalyst for these policies and projects. The international trade agendas are confronted internationally at G8, G20, IMF and WTO summits.

Public Debt and Bailouts

In the midst of the economic crisis, we have seen numerous examples of governments using public funds to bailout Olympic projects. The most glaring example is the Olympic Village. The City of Vancouver changed the city charter – by requesting an emergency sitting of the B.C. legislature – in order to borrow \$458 million to complete the Olympic Village. The charter change allowed the city to bypass the normal public approval process.

The new Vancouver Convention Centre cost the public \$900 million – an increase of more than \$400 million over the original cost. There are also numerous firms that are securing lucrative contracts for security systems, private security, construction, and as suppliers for the Games. Finally, in October 2009, the public was informed that as much as \$30 million in bonuses would be offered to staff of the Vancouver Organizing Committee just to retain their services – the language used to provide the bonuses mimics the justifications for bonuses provided to Wall Street executives after enormous bailouts in the U.S. following the 2008 economic crisis.

The Olympics serve as a classic example of modern neo-liberal policies that promote privatization, profits, and the creation of public debt that inevitably lead to social services cuts.

Housing Crisis and Social Services

The urgent need for social housing in Vancouver, apparent before the bid, was followed by a speculative real estate boom that has displaced thousands, particularly those in low-income neighbourhoods. From 2003 to 2008, the city's homeless population increased from 600 to 3,000. While little social housing has been provided, the City of Vancouver has further criminalized the homeless by introducing the Safe Streets Act in 2004. The act targets people for "aggressive pan-handling" and has resulted in mass arrests by the Vancouver Police Department in the downtown eastside. Neighborhood agencies view the Act as a shameful attempt by the city to "clean-up" the streets before the world arrives for the Games in 2010.

After the 2009 budget announcement B.C. residents were told of further cuts to vital social services due to a \$3 billion provincial deficit and the Olympics Games' estimated \$6 billion price tag. The province has announced that student grants and bursaries and arts programs will face cuts, 450 surgeries will be cancelled during the Games, and one-third of available operating rooms will be closed. There are suggested wage freezes for public employees, and up to 1,400 of them will be seconded for up to six months to work on the Games.

The Security Apparatus

The security apparatus that is being constructed for the Games is notorious not only for the costs that are being publicly funded, but also for the violations of fundamental civil liberties that are associated with it. So far we have learned that:

- The original \$175 million security budget has ballooned to approximately \$1 billion and costs could continue to rise.
- More than 15,000 police, military, and security officers are expected to be involved in security operations.
- U.S. and Canadian forces are involved in joint military exercises under the Canadian North American Aerospace Defense Command.
- \$2.6 million is being used to install at least 900 closed-circuit cameras in public spaces surrounding venues that will likely remain in place after the Games.
- A growing number of Olympic critics have been followed and questioned by members of the Vancouver Integrated Security Unit (VISU) in public spaces, at their homes, outside their workplaces and in Indigenous communities in B.C.
- VISU will not rule out the use of agent provocateurs similar to those that were exposed during the 2007 Montebello protests against the Security and Prosperity Partnership.
- Bill 13, the Miscellaneous Statutes Amendment Act, has been introduced to allow municipal officials in Vancouver, Whistler and Richmond, B.C. to seize "unauthorized" or anti-Olympic signs. The Act allows police to seek \$10,000 in fines or six months jail time for "violators."

There is no doubt that the Olympics and the ideals of peace, sports and goodwill that they stand for, is something Canadians support. But a time of economic crisis when federal, provincial and municipal governments should focus on public projects that create a lasting positive social and economic foundation, the 2010 Games appear set to leave a legacy of social and environmental devastation and massive debt that will hobble our ability to make positive change and respond to the serious challenges facing communities across the province and the country.

The Olympics should stand for more.

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