

By Brian Martin

Ten reasons to oppose all Olympic Games

There are lots of reasons to oppose Olympic Games — not just the 1996 or 2000 games, but all of them. A brief outline is given here. The points summarise ideas analysed in far more depth in various studies. Unfortunately, critical analyses of the Olympics receive virtually no attention compared to the massive governmental and commercial promotion.

No criticism is intended here of athletes and their supporters. Nor do I claim that there is no value at all in Olympic Games. Rather, my argument is that there are such big problems that it would be better to abolish them altogether.

1. Nationalism. The games are an arena for power politics. The 1936 Berlin Games were used by the Nazi regime to bolster its prestige. The US government led a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games to protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet government led a boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Games largely as a pay-back.

The usual rhetoric is that sports and politics don't mix, but the Olympics have been political from the beginning. Politics is involved in decisions about hosting the games and about which countries participate. Boycotts are used to exert political pressure. It is precisely because sports seem to be neutral that it is so effective to use them for political purposes.

Governments, seeking the prestige of Olympic victories, organise the training of elite athletes. Athletes can't participate if their country doesn't. Competition between athletes is turned into competition between states. Victories by individuals and teams are treated as national victories, symbolised by flags and anthems. Media coverage is often biased towards the country's own athletes, reflecting and reinforcing nationalism.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC), a highly undemocratic organisation of representatives from member countries, is a vehicle for international political struggle. Hosting the games is seen as promoting national prestige.

2. Commercialism. Corporate interests penetrate the Olympics through sponsorship of the games themselves and sponsorship and use of athletes for commercial purposes. The media foster the games as a giant spectacle, promoting commercialisation.

Visible athletes can cash in on lucrative endorsements. Sporting success becomes a means of selling products, gold medals a way for athletes and commercial sponsors to make money. Commercialism and nationalism have gradually turned the Olympics into an enterprise only for full-time athletes, professionals in reality if not in name.

The Olympics have become big business mainly through television. The games are a marketer's dream for reaching a global audience.

Through massive TV revenues, the IOC has become a major commercial enterprise itself, operating like a transnational corporation. Its decisions are increasingly dictated by money flows.

3. Competition. The games are exclusively competitive. Most competitors are ultimately losers. The focus is on a few top winners, whereas there are far more who struggle for years only to fail, sometimes due to bad luck or the machinations of sporting bodies.

Competition with high stakes — Olympic medals — means that the aim becomes victory at all costs. The pressure to win encourages illicit drug use, secrecy in training techniques, attempts at psychological manipulation of opponents and training and competing while injured.

Forms of physical activity that are more participatory and cooperative are marginalised. Sport can be satisfying and beneficial, both physically and mentally, for nearly everyone in



Olympic hopeful Cathy Freeman. The games foster a culture of celebrity that focuses on stars at the expense of non-elite participants.

the community, but this can occur only when the primary goal is participation, not victory in competition. The obsession with Olympic success undermines cooperative, participatory sport.

4. Male domination. From the beginning, the games have always had many more men than women as participants, coaches and officials. Female athletes have received less funding and have fewer sports in which to compete. Many national Olympic committees have no women members and send no women to the games.

The events included in the games are mostly ones that give men an advantage, notably sports emphasising strength and speed. For example, most running and swimming events are over in a matter of seconds or minutes. Women are already much closer if not superior to men in ultra-endurance events, such as marathon swimming, but shorter events predominate in the Olympics.

Similarly, events emphasising precision and skill rather than strength would give women a better chance. Instead, women are expected to adapt to male sports.

Male domination in the Olympic movement reflects and reinforces the predominance of

men in the sports that receive the greatest attention in most countries.

5. Racism. The games were set up by European elites and built on western sports. Through the worldwide publicity for the Olympics and the competition for national glory, more and more of these sports have been adopted in countries where they had no popular following.

The IOC is dominated by western perspectives on sport and appears to take no notice of non-western styles and traditions.

6. Violence. Many sports, such as boxing, archery and the javelin, are modelled on skills for war. A number of sports involve violence themselves, including ostensibly "non-contact" sports such as basketball. The intense competition and partisanship linked to sports often cause spectators to become aggressive. On a number of occasions, sporting events have been the triggers for actual wars.

The Olympics were set up to foster peace and harmony. Instead, they have provided another arena for the continuation of violence between individuals and between states. The awarding of the 1896 games to Athens stimulated Greek nationalism, leading to a war with Turkey in 1897. The Olympic movement is powerless to turn its original goal into reality.

7. Celebrity. The games foster a culture of celebrity that focuses on stars at the expense of non-elite participants. Yet the combination of specialist events plus a premium on winning means that Olympic athletes are often not suitable role models. They may develop certain skills and strengths at the expense of overall good health, compete at the expense of other commitments or value personal success more than competing fairly or helping others. This is a symptom of an elite competition in which victors are glamorised by the media.

8. Technological intensification. Olympic-level competitions are increasingly a struggle between applications of advanced science and technology to equipment, training, psychology, and drugs (legal and illegal). In cycling, for example, victory goes as much to the swiftest bike as to the best cyclist. Bodies are treated like machines, as means to the goal of winning.

Sophisticated scientific and technological interventions mean that individuals and countries without the most advanced facilities are handicapped, creating another dimension to the racism built into the Olympics. Steps could be taken to overcome this, for example by assigning standard equipment to competitors randomly, but this would not serve the interests of governments with a technological edge.

9. Spectatorship. Watching the Olympics serves to integrate spectators into the dominant value system of competitive striving for success. Under the guise of enjoying entertainment and supporting one's favourite team or athlete, spectators are inculcated with the assumptions that life is a competition, that the rules are fair, that most of the rewards go to the winners and that losers have only themselves to blame.

These ideas are convenient for keeping workers on the usual treadmill. It is because of the similarities between competitive sport and business that sporting metaphors ("the level playing field", "scoring") are so prevalent in non-sporting arenas.

10. Government repression. Olympic Games are sites of reduced civil liberties. Because of the vast audience and huge symbolic value of the Olympics, various groups try to make their case through disrupting the games, necessitating special laws and special policing to prevent disruption. Terrorists used the 1972 Munich Olympics as a stage. As the stakes become greater, so does the control over the opportunity to dissent.

Strategies for change

A. Reform the games. Various ideas have been presented to eliminate some of the problems. One is a permanent site such as Athens. This would remove the politics of site selection. Another is to have multiple sites for the games, so that the burden (financial and symbolic) on a single city would be reduced.

Yet another is to have athletes represent only themselves and not represent countries. They could wear common uniforms. Team sports could be eliminated. This would reduce nationalist identification. These and other such ideas are good, but they are opposed by commercial and national interests and are unlikely to be introduced by the IOC, dominated as it is by these interests.

B. Political struggle. Another approach is to accept the games as they are but to use them as a place for waging various campaigns. At the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, black sprinters on the victory stand gave a black power salute, with tremendous symbolic impact.

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Don't look now, but is that a black hole?

By Allen Myers

It's an article of faith in the new federal Coalition government that it inherited a "black hole" budget deficit of \$8 billion from its Labor predecessor. This alleged black hole immediately became the justification for sweeping cutbacks.

The metaphor for the supposed deficit has an appropriateness which John Howard's speech writers probably weren't thinking of when they settled on the phrase. Black holes are invisible, and the \$8 billion deficit, if not completely invisible, has a certain now-you-see-it-now-you-don't quality.

To anyone who is sceptical about the 1996-97 underlying deficit black hole, the government responds that the figure has been calculated by the Treasury. This is true, but it is a further reason for scepticism, not confidence. The very same Treasury, prior to the federal elections, calculated the budget bottom line, not as a deficit, but as a surplus of around \$4 billion.

It is important to remember that all these figures are only *predictions*, not realities. Projected government income and expenditures will vary, among other things, according to the assumptions made about what will be happening in the economy.

This is what shadow treasurer Gareth Evans was referring to in an April 25 speech when he said, "Overwhelmingly, the predicted blow-out in the underlying deficit — 90% of it, in fact — is due simply to a revision of official estimates of growth, jobs growth and inflation".

In short, what we have here is a neat illustration of how to lie with statistics. The former Labor government told the Treasury to calculate a surplus, which suited Labor's political purposes at the time. The incoming Coalition told the Treasury to calculate a whopping



deficit, which suits its political goal of savaging the public service and social welfare.

The Treasury is more or less obligated by law, constitution and custom to do as the government tells it. But nobody is obligated to believe the Treasury.

Of course, there are political or credibility limits

on fudging the figures: at some point, there will be a reality to which the prediction is compared.

It is also true that a prediction about the budget may need to be changed because better — or at least newer — information has been received about the likely state of the economy. This is partly what is involved in the swing from a \$4 billion surplus to an \$8 billion deficit: Treasury economists now think that earlier forecasts for the 1996-97 economy were too optimistic.

Even after allowing for such factors, however, there is more than a little evidence of the government cooking the books on the famous black hole.

In the April 30 *Financial Review*, Brian Toohy pointed to a number of inconsistencies in the Treasury's March 12 statement, which accompanied the \$8 billion deficit claim. One was an apparently unexplained drop in jobs growth. While Treasury forecast economic growth as being a constant 3.25% in the current year, 1996-97 and 1997-98, it predicted jobs growth to be 3% this year, only 1.5% next year and 2% in 1997-98.

These figures would imply rising unemployment and hence smaller government revenue and increased government expenditures. A good part of the projected deficit would vanish if jobs growth were projected as remaining proportional to economic growth.

As for any remaining real deficit, it could be eliminated very quickly in either or both of two ways. One would be to eliminate handouts to business. Even the *Financial Review* (April 26) admits that there is more than a little room for this: "Business enjoys nearly \$7 billion a year in assistance from the Commonwealth, much of it directed at industry giants. Why, for example, should BHP enjoy nearly \$90 million in diesel fuel relief?"

The other way to eliminate the deficit is to tax the rich. Over 13 years, the Labor government systematically reduced the taxes paid by corporations and the wealthy. But the Howard government has no intention of reversing that: the idea that the rich should pay their share seems to have vanished into a black hole. ■

When courses meet the market, students lose

By Mark Bahnisch and Sacha Blumen

BRISBANE — At least one department has been closed at the University of Queensland; it has completely disappeared, though nary a word has been heard from our student union.

The Russian Department has been "amalgamated" with the German Department. This means that students will find it impossible to complete any Russian course.

Now why would the Russian Department be closed? Is it because it was several millions of dollars in debt to the university (as several other departments are alleged to be)? Or is it that the Russian Department does not fit into the money-making aims of the university administration, led by the new vice-chancellor, John Hay? Hay has reportedly gone to all university departments and services and told them to cut up to 50% of their costs. This means that many university staff will be sacked, and subjects and services will be reduced to a shadow of their former selves.

The Classics and Ancient History Department has recently been reviewed. A very persistent rumour is that this department too will be completely abolished. The university has generously proposed, however, that students

will be able to study ancient history by watching videotaped lectures mailed up from the University of Sydney.

As well, the head of the Physics Department has recently told students about the suggested abolition of that department because it does not fit in with the economic rationalist approach.

The vice-chancellor has been pushing cost cutting so that the university can be a "world class academic institution". In reality it only wants to make UQ into a training institution for economically viable courses.

If your course is not medicine, commerce or engineering, will it be axed soon? So far, the university has shown no qualms in abolishing academic departments that fail to make money. The university now treats education as a commodity. Subjects are not treated as important in their own right, but rather are subject to market choice. What this means is that if a department does not attract enough students, it isn't worthwhile for the university to offer its courses.

Education is not a commodity, it is a right. Subjects should not be offered according to the prejudices of the vice-chancellor.

Traditionally, universities have been sites of independent thought and research. Now the traditional liberal values of "light and learning" are to be sacrificed to the market. How many departments will be slaughtered on the altar of John Howard's economic rationalist agenda? ■

Ten reasons to oppose the Olympics

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Generally, though, this strategy is not very fruitful. It requires enormous efforts to become an Olympic athlete, yet opportunities to make political gestures are quite limited. The games do not provide a "level playing field" for political uses; governments and corporations have the greatest opportunities for using the games for their own purposes.

C. Challenge the games. One approach is just to ignore the games. This sounds simple but can be quite significant if one's relatives or friends expect enthusiasm for the Olympic spectacle.

Another approach is to actively oppose the games, for example by writing letters, circulating leaflets, holding protests, producing satires, boycotting commercial sponsors. This has the advantage of going beyond individual criticism. It would be hard to see quick

results, though, given the global forces promoting the games.

A third approach is to promote alternative games. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were workers' games which avoided much of the nationalism and upper-class bias of the Olympics. The problem with this strategy is that any games that become a real alternative are likely to be caught up in the same sorts of problems, such as commercialism, competition and spectatorship.

A fourth approach is to promote cooperative games (games that are actually fun) and other alternatives for the psychosocial functions of sport. Some forms of drama and role play may accomplish this. Much more investigation, including practical testing, is needed into functional alternatives to competitive sport. Presently, though, far more money and effort are devoted to the bio-mechanics of swimming, improved tennis rackets and designer drugs for athletes than to cooperative games. ■