What Price for World Class?



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Why are millions of dollars being doled out for just a sniff at the Olympic Games when some Canadians have no food or shelter?

During the pre-Olympic scandal era, before any decisions were made by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as to who would host the Olympic Games almost a decade from now, the bidding teams from Toronto and Vancouver-Whistler prepared to spend in excess of $50 million. For groups opposed to hosting the Olympic Games, such as Toronto's Bread Not Circuses, it becomes a question of who will benefit, who will pay, and why are millions of dollars being doled out for just a sniff at the Olympic Games when some Canadians have no food or shelter? The first line of defense is a 'trickle-down' argument: Canadians will benefit from the international prestige, the local and national pride, and the economic spin-offs. Cities will benefit, the bidding committees suggest, from a legacy of facilities, a boost in tourism, and from becoming 'world class'. But how could Canadians possibly forget the financial debacle of Montreal? Or Mayor Jean Drapeau's boast that the "Games could no more have a deficit than a man could have a baby"? Perhaps the more recent positive association with 1988 lingers in the Canadian psyche, tweaked whenever a foreign winter Games site is in trouble and the city of Calgary rallies to offer its services.



In spite (or maybe because) of the political roller coaster that is the Olympic Games — the scandals, the unbridled commercialism, the drug-taking-Canadians of all ilks are still fascinated by them. Community groups and corporations are still willing to risk spending large sums of money and hundreds of volunteer hours for no guaranteed return, just a slim chance to host, and when it comes to hosting hallmark events, neither money nor social conscience seems to be an issue for organizers and city boosters.

Canada's participation in the Olympic Games goes back one hundred years; top Canadian runners, who attended universities in the U.S., participated in the Paris Olympics of 1900 under the American flag. Recently, hundreds of thousands of Canadians tuned in during the middle of the night to watch the Canadian men's hockey team play at the Nagano Olympics. International sport competition has always been part of Canadian foreign policy and an important aspect of Canadian identity. Indeed, the Olympic Games, particularly the winter hockey tournaments, have played a significant role in Canada's sporting reputation: so much so, in fact, that a national sport system was established to improve Canada's international performance, and hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to support elite sport programs and the hosting of sport festivals since the 1970s. With recent government cutbacks to health care, education, and welfare, can such spending be justified? Does Canada need more elite sport facilities?

There are few Canadian cities structurally capable of hosting a summer Olympic Games. The Olympics are so massive that only Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver could meet the IOC minimum requirements for bidding cities. How many bobsleigh and luge tracks, 90 metre ski jumps, and speed skating ovals does Canada need? It is a reasonable argument that Quebec City derives no benefits from the Calgary facilities and that other 'non-Olympic' cities wish to reap the benefits of government funded

facilities. Winnipeg, for example, is in its final stages of preparation to host the Pan American Games this year, and London is beginning to prepare for the Canada Games of 2001. Part of the justification for these bids is that some of the facilities will be used by local citizens, for tourism, and for future national and world competitions. Studies have shown, however, that the economic spin-offs and tourism that stem from such events, particularly the Olympics, tend to fall off significantly when they are finished. Many of the large summer Olympic facilities, moreover, such as stadiums and velodromes, are not used by average citizens or tourists. Calgarians receive some benefits from the Games facilities, and some are available for tourists, but for the most part they are used by elite athletes. Would it not make more sense to upgrade the Calgary facilities, if hosting the winter Games is a good thing for Canadians? The appeal for boosters and local organizers, however, goes far beyond facilities and tourism.

Changing the Olympic schedule from every four years to every two has essentially doubled the coverage of events, news, and issues in the popular press. The lucrative, exclusive corporate sponsorship programs and the revenues from television have provided the IOC with financing well beyond the imaginations of even the sport leaders of the 1980s. The IOC and the Olympic caravan is reaching more and more people around the world every year. In spite of boycotts, massacres, political blunders, scandals, shifts to explicit professionalism, and a glamorous program that borders at times along the ridiculous, people are still tuning in to the Games and corporations are paying millions to be official Olympic sponsors. If anything, the competition among cities around the globe to host the Games has increased. The so-called Olympic Movement has always appeared to draw strength, at least in terms of public visibility, from every crisis. The recent Salt Lake City scandal has done more to enhance the notoriety of Olympic leaders than to raise questions about the Games themselves. Bidding city organizers in Osaka, Beijing, and Toronto are waiting anxiously for the IOC to inform them of the next step in the bidding process.

The claim from Toronto is that no public money will be spent on the Games. Even if tax rates, access to land, and housing remain unaffected somehow, the fact is that millions of dollars which could be used to provide basic needs for Torontonians will be spent on elite sport and entertainment. Accessible, practical recreation and sport facilities for families and all citizens would undoubtedly serve the greater population. True, business requires a tangible return on its 'investments', but well-conceived corporate donations and private funding could go a long way to solving some of Toronto's social problems. Why have there not been movements of such creative magnitude and volunteer participation to provide basic necessities for people, before entertainment and spectacle are even considered? It seems that in a socially just society, a right to a decent quality of life, including daily access to recreation and physical activity, would define a 'world class' city much better than hosting the Olympic Games. ■

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