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Greenwashing an Olympic-Sized Toxic Dump

by Dr. Sharon Beder

When the Olympic Games begin in the year 2000, you can expect to see them hyped as the "greenest" summer Olympics of all time. But a massive toxic waste dump will lie underneath the fine landscaping of the Olympic site. It will be covered by a meter of dirt and a mountain of public relations.

The Olympic Games will be held at Homebush Bay in Sydney, Australia. Homebush Bay is a former industrial site and armaments depot which was previously subjected to years of unregulated waste dumping. In recent years asbestos-contaminated waste and chemicals including dioxins and pesticides have been found there, along with arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, mercury and zinc. It is the worst toxic waste dump in Australia, and the bay into which the waste leaches is so contaminated that there is a fishing ban. The sediments in the bay have concentrations of dioxin that make it one of the world's worst dioxin hot spots. The dioxin is largely the result of waste from a Union Carbide factory which manufactured the notorious herbicide Agent Orange there during the Vietnam war.

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Flack Attack

During the reign of Catherine the Great in Russia, one of her closest advisors was field marshal Grigori Potemkin, who used numerous wiles to build her image. When she toured the countryside with foreign dignitaries, he arranged to have fake villages built in advance of her visits so as to create an illusion of prosperity. Since that time, the term "Potemkin village" has become a metaphor for things that look elaborate and impressive but in actual fact lack substance.

Today, the public relations industry has become adept at creating its own Potemkin villages, such as the supposed "green showcase" that Olympics promoters in Australia are building atop a toxic waste site.

The effort to create a "green Olympics" arose in response to activist criticisms of environmental damage caused by past Olympics games. "The black list includes vast gashes opened up in forests for various

events, walls erected for bob runs and the imposing stature of ski jumps, to cite just a few examples," admitted a 1993 publication of the International Olympic Committee. The following year, a committee involved with the games in Norway warned that "Confrontations with environmental interest groups and an antagonized local public will increase unless steps are taken to implement a pro-active environmental strategy."

It was activism that prompted Olympics organizers to even *consider* addressing environmental concerns. By contrast, the strategy of collaboration that environmental groups adopted in Australia enabled Olympics organizers to go ahead with their plans while ultimately escaping their environmental obligations.

The lesson we can learn from this sorry fiasco is that activists should not allow themselves to be led into helping society construct more Potemkin villages. The world does not need more facades. We need *real* progress, and real activism in order to attain it.

What is impressive, in PR terms, is the way this massive toxic waste site has been transformed into a “green showcase,” thanks in large part to the endorsement of Greenpeace and other key environmentalists.

BASHING BEIJING

Part of the story of Sydney’s PR campaign to win the 2000 Olympics has only recently come to light, through investigations into the scandal over Salt Lake City’s bribery of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) which is responsible for selecting between competing cities’ bids. In a major report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Gerard Ryle and Gary Hughes revealed a plan by key Australian businessmen and government officials to discredit a bid by Beijing, which was then thought to be the front-runner.

Sydney’s secret public relations strategy was developed by businessmen representing industries which stood to benefit financially if the Olympics bid succeeded. They included the managing director of Lend Lease (one of Australia’s largest construction companies), the managing director of Optus (the country’s second largest telecommunications company), and a corporate lawyer and close adviser to media mogul Kerry Packer. In December 1992, these individuals met with New South Wales Premier John Fahey to discuss how China’s human rights record could be used to damage its bid, and also how to deflect expected criticism of Sydney’s bid from the news media, Aborigines, environmentalists and trade unionists. The group agreed to hire a public relations strategist to help them.

An unofficial committee, named after businessman Ross Turnbull who had organized the meeting, continued working together and steering the bid from behind the scenes. Three international members were added to the committee including James Wolfensohn, the Australian-born president of the World Bank. The “Beijing strategy” was put together by the Turnbull committee with the help of Gabrielle Melville, a former BHP public relations strategist, and Sir Tim Bell, former head of Saatchi and Saatchi advertising company in Australia, and adviser to Margaret Thatcher (which earned him a knighthood).

The Beijing strategy involved covertly funding a human rights group to campaign against China’s human rights abuses in the lead up to the Games decision. The campaign was to be based in Europe or the United States to divert suspicion from Australia. A book was to be published on the same topic, and “an eminent international identity” would be paid to have his name on the book. A story would also be “planted” in the *London Times*



Construction of a leachate drain for waste at Homebush Bay. (photo by Sharon Beder)

newspaper. Sydney Games officials claim that this plan was never implemented, but in the months leading up to the bid decision in 1993 there was a US-based human rights campaign that damaged Beijing’s bid.

SELLING SYDNEY

A veil of secrecy was wrapped around the strategizing for the Sydney bid by establishing a private company, called Sydney Olympics 2000 Bid Limited (SOBL), to oversee the bidding process. As a private company, SOBL was exempt from Freedom of Information requests, thus protecting it from having to disclose its internal reports and documents. SOBL’s articles of association ensured that information was tightly controlled so that very few people had access to documents, and photocopies were prohibited.

Secrecy was further enhanced through various arrangements with the media. A Communications Commission was formed to be in charge of public relations strategies, chaired by the managing director of the Clemengers advertising agency. Other members of the commission included the national director of advertising for Australian Consolidated Press, the media director of the state Premier’s office and the general manager of marketing for the Ampol oil company.

A remarkable admission of the media’s complicity in the bidding process came in February 1999 from Bruce Baird, a former government minister for New South Wales who was responsible for the bidding process. Baird claimed that he had obtained the agreement of three major media executives not to run stories about the

wining, dining and other blandishments offered to IOC officials.

The three executives named by Baird were Kerry Packer (owner of Consolidated Press Holdings), Ken Cowley (chief executive of Murdoch's News Ltd.), and John Alexander (then editor-in-chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald*). All three have vehemently denied Baird's claims, describing them as "absolute bullshit" and "rubbish," and Baird has subsequently recanted.

What is known, however, is that Packer, Cowley and Alexander all accepted invitations to sit on the SOBL committee. All of the Australian commercial television channels, the three main media companies, and a number of radio stations were involved in supporting the bid, either through being on bid committees or through direct sponsorship of the bid. At the time that the bidding was underway, *Herald* journalist Mark Coultan stated that "Journalists who write stories which might be seen as critical are reminded of their bosses' support and told that their stories would be used against Sydney by other cities."

The *Sydney Morning Herald* also editorialized in support of the Sydney bid, and SOBL financed the fare of a *Herald* journalist to Monaco to report on the bid deliberations. Another *Herald* journalist, Sam North, was assigned to report on the Olympics and wrote a succession of favorable stories, several of which appeared in advertising supplements funded by Olympic sponsors. News Ltd's *Telegraph Mirror* also gave unwavering good PR to the bid.

GREENPEACE BUYS IN

As the bidding and selection process for the 2000 Olympics got underway, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) made it clear that it wanted to have a "green" Olympics. IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch said the IOC's primary concern would be to ensure the environment is respected and that this would be taken into account in the final vote on site selection. For Australia, therefore, it was critical to present itself as "green" despite the toxic waste buried at Homebush Bay.

The co-optation of Greenpeace Australia was a key factor in the success of this campaign. Greenpeace has campaigned against hazardous landfill dumps for many years, so its support for the Homebush Bay Olympic site helped reassure a public that might otherwise be concerned about the site's toxic history.

To win over Greenpeace, SOBL invited them to draw up environmental guidelines for construction and operation of the Olympic facilities. The proposed design of the Olympic Athletes' Village was developed by a consortium of architects including a firm commissioned by Greenpeace Australia. On paper, the design looked impressive. It provided for use of solar technology and solar designs, state-of-the-art energy generation, and waste water recycling systems.

For Greenpeace, participation in developing a showcase Olympic village offered another benefit: the opportunity to transform its own image. Instead of simply sounding the alarm on environmental problems as it had

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done for the previous 20 years, the “new Greenpeace” would be seen as promoting solutions.

Greenpeace involvement in the Sydney bid soon went beyond simply offering ideas, as it became a vocal supporter. Karla Bell, Cities and Coasts Campaigner for Greenpeace Australia, made a statement supporting the environmental merits of the full bid when the IOC visited Sydney early in 1993. Her statement did not mention the problem of land contamination. She made an obvious impression on the IOC, whose report in July of that year “noted with much satisfaction the great emphasis being placed on environmental protection in all aspects of the bidding process and the attention being paid to working closely with environmental protection groups such as Greenpeace.”

Support also came from Paul Gilding, the head at the time of Greenpeace International who previously had headed Greenpeace Australia. “The Olympic village provides a prototype of future environmentally friendly development not only for Australia, but for cities all around the world,” Gilding stated in a March 1993 news release.

SOBL hired Karla Bell and Kate Short (now Kate Hughes) of the Sydney Total Environment Centre (TEC) to draw up environmental guidelines for the Games. Short was a prominent Sydney environmentalist who had a long history of campaigning on toxic issues, particularly pesticides. The guidelines drawn up by Bell and Short advocated the use of recyclable and recycled building materials, the use of plantation timber as opposed to forest timber, and tickets printed on “recycled post consumer waste paper.” Short and other environmentalists and consultants were also appointed to a special environmental task force advising SOBL.

Some environmentalists, however, remained skeptical. The TEC distanced itself from Short’s involvement, and TEC director Jeff Angel argued that the Sydney Olympic bid was ignoring significant environmental problems. “The state of Sydney’s environment has been misrepresented to a serious degree,” he said. “For example, the [New South Wales] Premier in his Introduction to the Bid’s Fact Sheets describes the Games as occurring in a pollution-free environment. The bid document asserts Sydney’s waste system can cope, when in fact we have a waste crisis.” Environmentalists were also concerned about the diversion of revenue into extravagant sports facilities and the loss of valued local ecosystems.

Environmentalists were particularly angry when they discovered that the official Bid Document to the IOC claimed support from various environmental groups

PLEMENT • SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT • SPECIAL

SYDNEY 2000

Sydney's Olympic Village plan wins support from Greenpeace



Planning for Sydney's Olympic Village makes the project a world first, according to the environmental group Greenpeace.

The Village, to be built at Sydney Olympic Park, 14 kilometres from the city centre, will house 15,000 athletes and officials in a development comprising townhouses and apartments, shops, entertainment areas, recreation facilities and community services.

Greenpeace Cities and Coasts campaigner Karla Bell gave the Olympic Village a ringing endorsement because it incorporated environmental principles promoted by Greenpeace.

"There has been solar housing before, there has been medium-density housing before, there have been attempts at water conservation before," Ms Bell said.

"The nobody has attempted to pull together all aspects of ecologically sustainable development in a single project before and that makes the Sydney Olympic Village a world first."

This brochure, published by the Australian Olympic bidders, highlighted the bid's endorsement from Greenpeace.

including the Australian Conservation Foundation, the New South Wales Nature Conservation Council and the TEC. Although individuals affiliated with those organizations had joined the bid committee’s environmental task force, the groups themselves emphatically denied their support and the statement had to be retracted.

Notwithstanding these misgivings, the issue of toxic contamination of the site was not openly discussed prior to the Olympic decision. This was clearly because of the inaccessibility of relevant information and the successful co-optation of key environmentalists who reassured others that the site was being cleaned up properly.

In private communications at the time of the bidding process, Greenpeace Australia toxics campaigner Robert Cartmel told me that “there is every likelihood that the remediation measures being undertaken at Homebush Bay won’t measure up.” He said that this was “an area that would be considered to be a Superfund site in the US.” He warned that “when it comes to leakage of toxic materials, it is not a question of *if*, it is a question of *when*. There is no such thing as a safe landfill.” Yet Cartmel was unwilling to publicly criticize Greenpeace’s involvement in the Olympics bidding process.

FROM RHETORIC TO REALITY

The promised measures, particularly the village design and the environmental guidelines, were heralded as a major environmental breakthrough in urban design. "No other event at the beginning of the 21st Century will have a greater impact on protecting the environment than the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney," stated a SOBL news release. New South Wales minister Bruce Baird said that Sydney's Olympics would be an environmental showpiece to the rest of the world and a model for other cities to follow in future games. Ros Kelly, the Federal Minister for Environment, Sport and Territories, also put out a news release arguing that "a vote by the international community for Sydney will be a vote for the environment."

"The Olympic village provides a prototype of future environmentally friendly development not only for Australia, but for cities all around the world."
—Greenpeace leader Paul Gilding, March 1993

Once the bid was won, however, the government's lack of genuine commitment to a green Olympics became apparent. It discarded the winning village design, the one that was supposed to be a showcase of green technology. The consortium of architects that had designed the village, including the Greenpeace-commissioned architects, complained of being "absolutely shafted." Within a year, Greenpeace was forced to denounce the government's failure to keep to the environmental guidelines written by Short and Bell.

Cost considerations also led the planners to quietly shelve another environmental showcase, the Olympic Pavilion and Visitors Center. The original design had envisioned a center made of recycled materials with natural ventilation.

PLASTIC RULES

In 1994, Paul Gilding resigned as head of Greenpeace International and went into business for himself as an environmental consultant. One of his clients was Lend Lease/Mirvac, the same company that had participated in behind-the-scenes strategizing to win the Sydney bid. Lend Lease was hired to draw up a new plan for the Athletes' Village.

The new village design, unveiled in 1995, was touted as environmental because it used solar technology, even



"Remediation" of toxic wastes underway prior to construction of the Olympic grounds. (photo by Sharon Beder)

though more than half the houses were temporary structures, designed to be taken down later. Worse yet, from the perspective of Greenpeace, the plans called for the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) as a building material.

Greenpeace has campaigned internationally against the use of PVCs, and the environmental guidelines which it helped draft for the Sydney Olympic games had called for "minimizing and ideally avoiding the use of chlorine-based products (organochlorines) such as PCB, PVC and chlorinated bleached paper." The Olympic Coordination Authority's decision to abandon this commitment came in the wake of a deliberate public relations campaign by the plastics and chemical industry.

In 1995, Andrew Byrne of the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed how Australia's Plastics and Chemical Industries Association (PACIA) was financing a campaign to undermine commitments to a PVC-free Games. PACIA was concerned that making the Village a PVC-free showpiece would add momentum to the Greenpeace campaign against organochlorines—a reasonable fear, since that was precisely the point behind the original environmental recommendations.

Using contributions from member companies, the PACIA launched a PVC Defense Action Fund for the purpose of bringing pro-PVC experts from Europe to brief key government officials. Other tactics detailed in a document obtained by Byrne included enlarging its Olympic lobbying program, developing a "credibility file" on Greenpeace and promoting the benefits of

PVC on the internet. PVC manufacturer James Hardie even became a member of the Olympic Village planning consortium.

TOXIC LEAKS

The government continued with its own PR activities, offering guided tours of the Olympic site to the public and announcing a major tree planting effort coordinated by “Greener Sydney 2000” committee which would provide “a unique opportunity to involve the whole community in the 2000 Olympics.” A landscaping project for the site was heralded as greening the site, even though the toxic waste remained untreated beneath (see accompanying story).

As evidence of toxic contamination of the site filtered out, environmentalists involved in the Olympics bidding began to change their stories. In 1995, a major television current affairs program featured Greenpeace and Kate Short criticizing the cover-up of the site’s toxic contamination (which they had known about all along but had previously refrained from mentioning).

In subsequent years Greenpeace staged two actions to highlight dioxin contamination in the vicinity of the Olympic site. “Our investigations show that not only is the ‘Green Games’ concept rapidly becoming a cynical farce, but that the presence of high levels of dioxin at Homebush Bay presents a real environmental and health threat,” stated one Greenpeace news release. David Richmond, the head of the Olympic Coordination Authority (OCA), responded by accusing green groups who highlighted toxic contamination of the Games site as doing “damage to Australia.”

A number of revelations about dioxin on the Homebush site posed another public relations crisis for the OCA in 1997. Colin Grant, OCA’s executive director of planning, environment and policy, publicly stated that the site did not contain any 2,3,7,8 TCDD (the most toxic form of dioxin). After this statement was proven false, the OCA was forced to “unreservedly” apologize for the “mistake.”

DAMAGE CONTROL

Hired by OCA as an “environmental special advisor,” Kate Short organized a series of forums in 1998 on “Dioxin and Beyond: Enhancing Remediation Strategies at Homebush.” In reality, the forums were carefully-staged public relations events aimed at creating the appearance of public consultation without the openness that true public involvement would require. Attendance was by invitation only, and the forums primarily showcased speakers dwelling on good news about the remediation.

Following the forum series, in what seemed like an attempt to give the forums a veneer of having been a real consultation, the Australian government announced that a further \$11.6 million would be spent for an “Enhanced Remediation Program” which would consist of validation, monitoring and “education and community development” involving school children, but no further treatment of the wastes.

“The ‘Green Games’ concept is rapidly becoming a cynical farce.”

—Greenpeace Australia, 1995

As the pressure has mounted for public disclosure of documents relevant to the Sydney bid, the Games promoters have turned again to using the cover of a private company in order to maintain secrecy, claiming that its financial documents belong to internal auditors who are a private firm and therefore exempt from Freedom of Information rules.

Although involvement in the Olympic Games has been an environmental embarrassment, it has also been a gold mine of opportunities for the individuals who supported the Sydney bid. The *Sydney Morning Herald* is now a “Team Millennium Partner” for the Games and has established a unit to “maximize the associated commercial opportunities.”

Karla Bell and Paul Gilding have both left Greenpeace to become consultants to companies seeking contracts to construct Olympic facilities. Both have also participated as paid consultants in preparing Stockholm’s bid for the 2004 Olympics.

By contrast, Robert Cartmel, the Greenpeace campaigner whose misgivings kept him from joining in the campaign to greenwash Homebush Bay, has since been squeezed out of his job. n

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