A public display of nationalism

Sydney Olympic organisers dump international youth band

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According to its organisers and sponsors, the Olympic Games embody the spirit of international fraternity and goodwill between nations. Lip-service to this rhetoric, however was unceremoniously thrown aside last June 24, when the Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (SOCOG), in a very public display of Australian nationalism, voted to dump a long-planned 2,000-member international youth marching band from participating in the opening ceremony. The band, consisting of 1,300 American, 200 Japanese and 500 Australian students, was to have performed a seven-minute routine as part of the three-hour opening ceremony.

Olympics Minister, Michael Knight, claimed SOCOG's decision was taken because of "very strong public opposition to the proposal" for an international marching band. In fact, it was made in response to a short and somewhat hysterical campaign orchestrated by a section of the Australian news media and right-wing radio talk show hosts.

The proposal to bring together an international band was made by the opening ceremony chief organiser Ric Birch in April 1998. It was endorsed at that time by SOCOG. Birch wanted an experienced and lively group of young people able to perform difficult and exacting routines.

Auditions were held in Australian schools and highly skilled marching band members selected from the US and Japan. After practising in their separate countries, all band members were due to come together two weeks before the opening ceremony for final joint rehearsals in the Australian country town of Bathurst. Naturally, the largest number of marchers was drawn from the US, where there is a long tradition of school marching bands.

After SOCOG issued official invitations in August last year to band directors and students in the US and Japan, the band members began raising money to attend. Some US students changed schools in order to join the band, others purchased new instruments, raised loans or took up part time work in order to pay the $5,400 required for their Australian fares and accommodation. Strenuous rehearsals, including memorising 60 national anthems and complex marching patterns began immediately.

The campaign to scrap this unique project began in earnest on June 19 when the *Sydney Morning Herald* publicised the protests of a local band, the Golden Kangaroos which had been excluded from auditioning because it was not a school band. The *SMH* claimed that SOCOG organisers were ignoring local Australian talent. This was taken up and given an anti-American spin by right-wing radio talk show hosts—Alan Jones and John Laws in particular. Pop singer Johnny Farnham and John McAuliffe, federal secretary of the Musicians Union, also joined in. McAuliffe said the international marching band was an attempt “to impose American culture on the Sydney Olympics. Mr Birch is hijacking our Olympics.”

When Birch, with 20 years experience producing international events including the Olympic opening ceremonies in Los Angeles and Barcelona, initially threatened to quit over the SOCOG decision, he was vilified by the talk show hosts. Olympics Minister Michael Knight is reported to have threatened Birch with legal action if he resigned and a member of the New South Wales state parliament demanded that a special investigation be conducted.

Opposition to SOCOG's stand was immediate, and not just from American and Japanese students, band leaders, teachers and parents, but from local community leaders in Bathurst and Australian participants who had been selected to join the international band. Angry letters to Australian newspapers as well as irate calls to radio stations denounced the SOCOG decision and asked why radio hosts were dictating changes to the opening ceremony.

An American teacher angrily wrote that SOCOG's actions were in “poor taste and bad international relations” and added that the Olympics were a “worldwide event and should depict a worldwide culture”. She said she would

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boycott the Sydney Games and would urge all her Internet contacts to do the same.

An Australian letter writer admitted: “I was one of the critics of the large number of overseas bands participating in the opening ceremony of the Olympics. However, at that stage there was no mention that these young musicians had been invited nine months ago and had been saving and practising since then. To cancel now is a disgrace and SOCOG (which seems to make blunder after blunder) must find something similar to the original concept or make Australia the laughing stock of the world.”

But these and other calls for the Sydney Olympics organisers to reverse the decision were met with even greater contempt and arrogance.

On July 2 Prime Minister John Howard weighed in declaring that SOCOG had made "the right decision" and that the marching band "should be Australian". SOCOG member and Olympics village mayor Graham Richardson, a former Keating Labor government minister now employed by media magnate Kerry Packer (who has substantial financial interest in the Sydney Olympics) insisted that SOCOG would not budge over the decision.

"If you don't like it, if you don't find it acceptable ... then go ahead and sue us. We'll give you nothing. [The kids] won't be appearing anywhere," Richardson, who has his own radio program, declared.

Insult was added to injury when SOCOG, in an attempt to extricate itself from contractual obligations, offered to the American and Japanese band members that they perform at some non-Olympic local Sydney venues, with the possibility of appearing at an Olympic soccer game in Canberra.

Michael Knight claimed the insulting compromise deal would be a "fantastic Australian Olympic experience" for the American and Japanese band members. He ruled out any reversal and said SOCOG would play "hard-ball in the courts" in order to avoid paying $10 million in legal costs for compensation and breach of contract.

There is no doubt that this sordid episode reveals the inward looking, short-sighted and provincial character of those running the Sydney Olympic Games and exposes the disproportionate influence radio talk show hosts and a small group of right-wing elements have over the political and social agenda. The question that has to be answered is, however, why has SOCOG made a decision that has alienated so many, may involve millions of dollars in legal costs, and added to the already badly tarnished reputation of the Olympic Games?

Two factors are at work. Firstly, SOCOG confronts serious financial problems—a product of the ongoing allegations of bribery and vote-buying against the International Olympic Committee and its delegates, including one of Australia's IOC representatives Phil Coles, and a serious shortfall in corporate sponsorship and ticket sales.

SOCOG faces a $200 million sponsorship deficit and last May slashed $65 million from the Games' budget. More than $600 million must be generated in ticket sales, half of this in Australia. While SOCOG has refused to release any detailed information, the sales campaign has been a marketing disaster, with the high-priced tickets way out of the reach of most families.

A mid-range ticket for the three-hour opening ceremony costs $500, the best seats $1,382. A 12-session pass for decent seats at the diving costs $5,600 or a good seat at one of the swimming semi-finals $455. According to one survey only 9 percent of households with incomes under $30,000 plan to attend the Games, but even amongst higher-than-average income earners, only 31 percent of households say they will buy tickets.

While SOCOG members, to a greater or lesser degree, embrace the nationalist political outlook of the talk show hosts, their decision to dump the international marching band is conditioned by the view that if they appeal to the most right-wing layers they may be able to overcome flagging ticket sales.

Secondly, SOCOG's actions demonstrate something more fundamental about the degeneration of the Olympic Games as a whole. As the Olympics have become more commercialised, with billions of dollars in advertising, media and broadcasting deals up for grabs, the sentiment dominating those organising and hosting the event is the single-minded pursuit of the financial bottom line.

SOCOG's dumping of the international marching band is yet another public demonstration that nationalism, provincialism and crude money-grubbing take precedence over contractual obligations and international commitments, let alone any adherence to the so-called Olympic spirit.

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