

Melbourne's Commonwealth Games: glitter covering glaring inequality

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"Give 'em that old razzle-dazzle, razzle-dazzle 'em!" So sings the shyster lawyer in the popular musical *Chicago* as he prepares to dupe the jury. The bright lights, glitz, glam and glimmer are aimed at disarming his audience and rendering them incapable of considered judgment and critical thought.

The razzle-dazzle technique is not, however, restricted to fictional lawyers in Broadway musicals. It has increasingly become a feature of the lavish, and, one might add, garish, sporting and other events, dished up for mass consumption on a now all-too-regular basis.

One of the central purposes of these spectacles is to distract ordinary people from the growing social inequality and deteriorating living standards in both the host country and the homes of the various participating teams.

Distraction is also essential to the other key aspect of the modern sporting extravaganza—to showcase the host country and city as modern, up-to-date and technologically savvy, and therefore fit destinations for global investment dollars.

The Commonwealth Games that wound up in Melbourne, Australia on March 25 were no exception. The razzle-dazzle was laid on exceptionally thick. Games chief John Harnden declared the Games "showcased the city in a way that I think it's never been showcased before".

The event cost in the region of \$770 million, including a \$30 million opening ceremony, complete with a preposterous flying Melbourne tram, giant koalas, aerial ballerinas, a performing duck and a cast of thousands. It ended with an equally extravagant \$20 million closing ceremony, topped off with the inevitable million-dollar fireworks display. On top of the enormous operational outlay was \$338 million to

rebuild the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) as the Games' main stadium.

For two weeks, Australia's official establishment engaged in an orgy of self-congratulation. The event was declared the "friendly games" and "the best Commonwealth games ever". The athletes, we were told, were members of a "great family of nations"—that is, the 71 territories and former colonies of the British Commonwealth. Of course, the Games received nationwide wall-to-wall daily media coverage, with blazing headlines and shrieks of rapture every time an Australian athlete won gold.

God forbid that anything should be allowed to cut across this image of universal joy. Life, none-the-less, has the annoying habit of pushing aside the tinsel curtain to reveal glimpses of the nasty reality it is supposed to cloak.

No doubt, all the athletes competing had trained hard and long to produce many noteworthy and outstanding performances. However, the huge disparity between the number of medals won by athletes from advanced or developing countries, and those from underdeveloped countries was itself a startling reminder that the vast majority of the nations participating were among the poorest on the face of the earth.

Australia, the host country, came top of the medal heap winning a staggering 84 gold, 69 silver and 68 bronze—a total of 221 medals in all. England came next with 36 gold and a total of 110 medals, while Canada reaped 26 gold and a total of 86. India followed with 22 gold and a total of 50, followed by South Africa with 12 gold medals and a total of 38.

At the other end of the tally board, the combined medals won by athletes from 22 of the underdeveloped countries came to 49, that is, just over a quarter of the number won by Australia alone. Of the 49 only 13 were

gold—15 percent of the Australian team’s gold.

The top three countries—for a range of commercial and political reasons—expend considerable amounts on training programs for athletics, including the provision of elaborate training facilities and state-of-the-art equipment. They provide athletes’ uniforms and other essential items, including the very best running shoes. Around \$30 million a year in the four years leading up to the Commonwealth Games was spent to prepare the Australian athletics team, which, with 107 athletes, was the biggest in the history of the sport.

In contrast, the Solomon Islands, a tiny impoverished Pacific Islands nation, fielded just 20 athletes and failed to win a single medal. On returning home from Melbourne, the angry and frustrated Solomon Islands weightlifting coach confronted government officials at Honiara International, shouting that he was “sick and tired” of broken promises for funds for new equipment.

Bangladesh fielded just 19 athletes winning two medals, one silver and one bronze. The country has the highest poverty rate in South Asia and among the highest rate of malnutrition in the world. The annual per capita income is just \$US240. Over 38 percent of the child population does not attend primary school and the female illiteracy rate is 74 percent.

In 2004, the child mortality rate in Bangladesh was 88 deaths in every 1,000. Despite increasing foreign investment over recent years, mainly to take advantage of the country’s cheap labour, the rate of poverty has decreased only marginally.

The tiny Pacific Island nation of Nauru won one silver and one bronze. It has been virtually bankrupt since the beginning of the new millennium after overseas companies—including Australian—having made hundreds of millions of dollars from mining phosphate, pulled out, leaving the island little more than a gigantic hole in the ground with no arable land. Today, unemployment in Nauru stands at a massive 90 percent.

The team from Cameroon won one silver and two bronze. Over 48 percent of the African country’s population lives on an income below the poverty line; the unemployment rate is around 30 percent and life expectancy is 50.75 years. Infant mortality is 68.26 deaths for every 1,000 live births. The country’s public debt stands at 64.8 percent of GDP.

The African state of Sierra Leone did not win a single medal. Despite being mineral rich, processing

diamonds, titanium ore, bauxite, iron ore, gold and chromite, because of continuing exploitation by international corporations and local corruption, Sierra Leone remains the world’s poorest country. Approximately 68 percent of the country’s population lives below the poverty line. Infant mortality rate is 143.64 deaths per 1,000 births while average life expectancy is just 39.87 years. About two-thirds of the working-age population engages in subsistence agriculture.

Sierra Leone’s 28 athletes arrived at the games with little equipment and no uniforms. A donation of \$25,000 from the Whitehorse City Council in Melbourne helped provide them with tracksuits, shorts and running shoes.

But, as the games got underway, 14 athletes from the Sierra Leone team absconded, together with seven from Cameroon, a Tanzanian and a Bangladeshi. They clearly had no desire to return to the poverty and disadvantage, as well as the political repression, they suffer at home.

The immediate reaction of the Australian government was to launch a police hunt for the missing men and women and to cancel the visas of the Sierra Leone athletes. With the international spotlight trained on the issue, the Howard government temporarily relented and issued the athletes with short-term bridging visas. Judging by the its record to date, however, one can be sure that this will be but the initial stage in the athletes’ eventual incarceration and deportation.

Behind all the hype about the “great family of nations” in the British Commonwealth, the reality is that if you happen to be from one of the poorest—in Asia, Africa or the Pacific—the door will be slammed firmly shut once the Games are over.



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