

Vancouver Olympics: Public anger over security measures and free speech limits

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Vancouver and the mountain resort of Whistler, British Columbia will host the XXI Olympic Winter Games from February 12 to 28 and the 2010 Paralympic Winter Games from March 12 to 21.

In the run-up to the Games, which begin this Friday, there has been the inevitable media-government promotional blitz. Nevertheless, opinion surveys indicate growing public dissatisfaction with the costs, the security and other disruptions associated with the Games. Recent polling suggests that only 50 percent of British Columbia residents think the Olympics will have a positive impact on the province, while 69 percent say that too much money is being spent on the Games.

Conventional wisdom suggested that as the Games drew closer, people would get more excited and more supportive. This does not appear to be the case. In fact, “The most striking thing in the poll is that as the Olympics get closer, British Columbians are less likely to see the Games as having a positive impact,” said Hamish Marshall, research director for pollster Angus Reid.

Estimates vary, but according to the *Vancouver Sun*, more than \$6 billion, including \$1 billion just on security, will ultimately be spent on the Vancouver Games. While much of this expenditure has been for improvements in transport and other infrastructure projects, there is widespread apprehension and resentment that the spending has been tailored to the needs of big business, which has latched on to the games as a means of promoting Vancouver as a financial hub and British Columbia as a world-class tourist destination. Toward this end, nearly \$1 billion was lavished on a new trade and convention center.

The Vancouver-Whistler Games were initially promoted by a right-wing social-democratic (NDP) provincial government eager to curry favour with big business. The Liberal government that replaced it in 2001 quickly implemented major social spending and tax cuts, but continued to tout the Games as a means to kick-start public infrastructure projects and to develop social housing.

Ultimately, Olympic organizers and the City of Vancouver entered into a mega-deal for the development of an Olympic Village on a choice piece of waterfront slated for redevelopment. According to the original plan, the Village was to be transformed post-Olympics into a combination of 1,100 luxury condos and social housing units.

But the \$750 million scheme fell apart in the aftermath of the 2008 Wall Street crash, due to a combination of cost overruns, a collapsing condo market, and the unravelling of the project’s principal financier, the US hedge fund Fortress Investment Group. To enable the Village project to be completed, the City of Vancouver was forced in early 2009 to provide a half billion dollar financing guarantee. As part of the project’s restructuring, its social housing component was almost completely abandoned on the grounds the costs had become prohibitive.

A pre-recession economic impact statement suggested that the Games could generate up to \$10 billion in business, but a recent Price Waterhouse Coopers study concluded that the total economic impact will be more like \$1 billion.

In short, the Winter Olympics appear destined to be an economic bust, at a time when both Vancouver and British Columbia face recessionary pressures, and both levels of government are preparing to impose these costs on the working class through job cuts and by rolling back public and social services and cultural programs.

The world recession has hit British Columbia particularly hard, with the province losing jobs at a faster rate than most parts of the country. BC has seen 70,000 full time jobs disappear in the last 12 months alone. The province’s unemployment rate now stands at more than 8 percent, up more than 3 percentage points from the summer of 2008, and youth unemployment is more than double that.

And the job losses are far from over. Last month, more than 500 people were thrown out of work when the West Fraser Eurocan paper mill in Kitimat closed permanently. Joanne Monaghan, mayor of the town of about 9,000 people, expects thousands of other jobs will be lost as the layoffs ripple through the local economy, affecting everyone from truck drivers to teachers and store clerks. “It’s a domino effect,” Monaghan told CBC News, “We extrapolated, and it’s anywhere from 2,000 to 3,000 [jobs in peril].”

In January, the Vancouver school board considered widespread layoffs due to funding shortfalls. About 800 teachers with less than five years of seniority were sent letters advising them of possible layoffs next year. The letters followed a board meeting at which trustees were told the district could be facing a shortfall of \$17.5 million to \$36.3 million in the 2010/2011 school year.

The Prince George School District has already closed 14 schools in recent years because of funding cuts tied to declining enrolment. The enrolment decline was brought on by families moving away because of job losses in the region, particularly in the forestry industry.

Meanwhile, stories circulate of the International Olympic Committee members coming to Vancouver with a list of demands and expectations that include top hotels, private cars with drivers, “and no waiting anywhere.”

Canada’s largest ever security operation

The security operation being mounted in conjunction with the Games—originally estimated at \$175 million, but now costing more than \$1 billion—has rightly troubled and angered many. A metropolitan region of more than two million people, Vancouver will be turned into a quasi-police state for the duration of the Games.

Involving the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and numerous other national and municipal security agencies and police forces, the security operation for the Vancouver Games is the largest ever such operation in Canada. It includes the

following:

•**The Vancouver 2010 Integrated Security Unit or V2010 ISU.** Led by the RCMP and headed by Assistant RCMP Commissioner Bud Mercer, the V2010 ISU includes RCMP personnel and police officers from 117 other law enforcement agencies—provincial, municipal and aboriginal police forces across Canada and Sheriff Services from Alberta and British Columbia. 6000 police officers (approximately 10 percent of the country's law enforcement personnel) will police the Games' Security Coverage Area.

•**Specialist Police Units.** SPUs—comparable to US-styled special weapons and tactics teams, police dog units and tactical units—will also be directed by the V2010 ISU. Among its special weapons will be the Vancouver Police Department's newly acquired "Sonic Gun" or Long Range Acoustical Device (LRAD). The LRAD appears to be intended for use against anti-Olympic or other protesters. It "... fires a concentrated beam of sound at its targets that can cause hearing damage and temporarily disrupt vision."

•**Integrated National Security Enforcement Teams.** INSETs are made up of representatives from the RCMP, other federal agencies such as Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and provincial and municipal police services. According to the RCMP's Bud Mercer, INSET is "a very robust and capable partner that is well-connected world wide within the various intelligence services." INSET is tasked with providing anti-terrorism intelligence to the V2010 ISU.

•**The Canadian Armed Forces.** The CAF will have 4500 soldiers patrolling Whistler and other back country venues and taking on those duties that, "... the Canadian Forces are much more adept and experienced in taking on than perhaps other agencies." CF-18 fighter jets, along with other aircraft and helicopters will be a common sight throughout the Games. According to CAF Major Dan Thomas, "The whole spectrum of Canadian Forces capabilities is available as required."

•**The North American Aerospace Defense Command.** NORAD is providing aerospace warning and aerospace control during the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. "We don't want spectators to focus on fighter jets in the air," says NORAD spokesman Lt. Col. Martin. "... However, we realize CF-18s are hard to ignore."

•**The Olympic Shiprider Pilot.** This is a joint operation between the RCMP's Federal Border Integrity Program and the United States Coast Guard. The Pilot program will permit Canadian and US officials to conduct integrated cross-border maritime law enforcement operations in shared waterways during the 2010 Winter Games. Marine law enforcement vessels will be jointly crewed by specially trained and designated Canadian and U.S. law enforcement officers authorized to enforce the law on both sides of the international maritime boundary.

•**Perimeter Intrusion Protection Services (PIDS).** Honeywell Canada is charged with providing 27 kilometers of perimeter security. Perimeter security includes 900 closed circuit televisions installed at Games' venues and another 50 to 70 CCTVs installed at heavily-used public spaces in urban areas. Magnetometers, or airport-style metal detectors, will also be installed. The equipment will be run by V2010 ISU personnel, with Honeywell staff providing maintenance and support.

•**Private Security.** Additionally, up to 5000 private security guards may be hired under a \$97 million contract with Vancouver-based Contemporary Security Canada Inc.

The V2010 ISU underwent a security exercise in November 2009 called Exercise Gold. It involved the V2010 ISU and over 140 federal, provincial, municipal and private sector organizations. It tested communication and coordination between these organizations. Ominously it also involved a Canadian Armed Forces component consisting of two full-scale live-action events simulating chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or explosive (CBRNE) incidents in Vancouver and the suburb of

Richmond. "These events provide a realistic environment with mock casualties," boasts the federal government's Public Safety Canada, the Canadian equivalent of the US Homeland Security Department.

V2010 ISU will be controlling all road, marine and air traffic in and around Vancouver and Whistler. Roads will be closed and traffic flows controlled. Marine Security Zones will be in place around various waterside venues and areas. Similarly, security zones have been created in the airspace surrounding Olympic venues.

People travelling in and out of Vancouver will be subject to enhanced security. For example, during the Games, inter-urban bus travellers on Pacific Coach Lines will only be able to disembark at the Vancouver terminal, and not at scheduled stops along the route. PCL and Greyhound buses will also require passengers wanting to travel to Vancouver to carry photo ID that matches the name on their bus ticket, presumably so security officials can keep tabs on who is entering the city.

Small commuter airlines wanting to continue regular commercial flights into Vancouver must submit their aircraft, aircrews, passengers and goods to search by the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority. As CATSA "screening services" are not available at many smaller airfields, many commuter flights connecting smaller centres to Vancouver have effectively been shut down.

This massive security operation is being used to develop capabilities, including joint operations with US security agencies, that could be used in a future crisis to control major population centers

It has also involved large-scale surveillance and infiltration of anti-poverty, First Nation (aboriginal) and other groups that have publicly opposed the Vancouver Games or are deemed likely to mount protests during the Games.

Police surveillance, intimidation and infiltration

RCMP officers have visited the homes, families and neighbours of a significant number of anti-Olympic activists, ostensibly to seek their cooperation in ensuring that the protests remain peaceful and do not involve any disruption of Olympic related events. The RCMP continued and even expanded the practice of home visits after it was condemned last June by the Olympic Resistance Network and the BC Civil Liberties Association.

"What we seek to do," Corporal Bert Paquette told CBC, "is either confirm or disregard individuals as potential threats to the safety and security of Canadians and visitors to Canada who will be here during the Games."

Late last year, Victoria Police Chief James Graham publicly boasted that the police had infiltrated a protest during the Olympic torch relay. Given the long record of provocative and illegal acts carried out by undercover operatives of the RCMP and other Canadian police forces, opponents of the Games are concerned that *agents provocateurs* will stage illegal and violent acts so as to provide the pretext for police violence and mass arrests. Following their public exposure, the Quebec Provincial Police was forced to admit that three of its officers had thrown rocks and otherwise tried to incite violence during a demonstration at the August 2007 Canada-US-Mexico summit in Montebello, Quebec. (See: Canada: Police agent-provocateurs unmasked at Montebello summit protests).

The V2010 STU announced long ago that the Games will have designated "Safe Assembly Areas" or SAAs for use by protestors. Due to a public outcry, the authorities have been forced to concede that protests will be lawful outside of the SAAs—so long as protesters adhere to a myriad of restrictions relating to security, traffic-flow, and the maintenance of order.

Vancouver City Council has passed bylaws that stifle dissent and free speech. The first bylaw, in the name of protecting the privileges of Olympic sponsors, sought to restrict messages on signs within perimeters around Games' venues to those that celebrated the Olympics or increased positive feelings around the Olympics.

The bylaw, along with the police department's acquisition of the above noted LRAD caused the president of the BC Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA), Robert Holmes, to state, "The secret purchase and implementation of the LRAD, in conjunction with Vancouver passing a bylaw that suppresses free expression, reduces the credibility of blandishments from city officials about not interfering with lawful and peaceful demonstrations."

City Council rewrote the bylaw after being challenged in BC Superior Court by the BCCLA. But the new bylaw makes it an offence to interfere with someone's enjoyment of Olympic entertainment—a vague, catch-all prohibition that could be used to illegalize all manner of protests.

Advocates for the homeless accuse the provincial Liberal government of providing police with an instrument to force Vancouver's large homeless population off the streets. Under the recently adopted Assistance to Shelter Act police are empowered to use "reasonable force" to compel homeless people into shelters if the provincial Minister of Housing and Social Development or designated community representatives declare an "extreme weather alert."

Despite the Olympic-sized raid on the public purse, the threat of paramilitary lockdown, and the commensurate erosion of democratic rights, politicians of all stripes are hailing the coming spectacle as a showcase of Canada to the world.

Both BC's Liberal and the federal Conservative government are seeking to use the Games as a distraction from economic and political problems. Prime Minister Harper is set to address the BC Legislative Assembly today, the first time a Canadian Prime Minister has ever addressed BC's parliament. It has not escaped notice that Harper plans to address the BC legislature while Canada's parliament remains shutdown due to Harper's anti-democratic decision to prorogue parliament so as to prevent further exposure of Canada's complicity in war crimes in Afghanistan.

Whether the public will allow BC Premier Gordon Campbell and Harper to bask in "the reflected glory of the Olympics" remains to be seen, especially as both appear set to table post-Olympic austerity budgets.

On Tuesday, the BC Liberal government presented a Throne Speech that proclaimed the Olympics "a launching pad to lift British Columbia and Canada to new heights and prosperity," even while pledging to "curtail expectations of government." The speech committed the government to make "innovations"—i.e. increase private sector, for-profit involvement—in health care. "Stemming the unaffordable growth in health costs," declared the BC government, "is essential in meeting our obligation to rebalance the budget by 2013."



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