Australia: Horse-racing lobby forces Sydney Opera House to advertise $13 million horse race

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18 October 2018

Events in Sydney over the past 10 days have provided a stark reminder of the nexus between Australia's multi-million dollar horse racing and gambling industry, the mainstream media and the major political parties. They reveal precisely how this ignorant and grasping milieu, and its single-minded pursuit of personal gain, dictates and debases cultural life.

Last month Racing NSW demanded its "right" to advertise its forthcoming Everest Cup horse-race—a $13 million annual event at Sydney's Royal Randwick racecourse—on the exterior of the Sydney Opera House (SOH).

The corporate gambling group wanted images of the competing horses, their barrier-draws, jockeys' colours and the race trophy itself to be projected onto the world-renowned "sails" of the architecturally acclaimed building on October 9, a few days before the race.

The Everest Trophy is the world's richest horse race with an entry fee of $600,000 per horse. The first prize in 2020 will have climbed to $15 million.

SOH chief executive Louise Herron opposed Racing NSW's demand, informing state government officials, during a series of heated meetings, that it violated the building's operating charter and would threaten its World Heritage listing. The charter states that projection of colours and images on to the sails of the Opera House should be "confined to exceptional, non-commercial occasions of brief duration."

This conflict, however, was largely unknown to the city's residents until the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* and *Australian*, along with 2GB radio announcer and extreme-right demagogue Alan Jones, joined the attack.

Jones, 77, a multi-millionaire horse owner and major investor in the gambling industry, who is well-knwon for his anti-immigrant views, decided to interview the SOH's Herron on his radio show. Two of Jones's business partners in the racing industry had contenders in the Everest Trophy.

Jones demanded that Herron stop blocking Racing NSW and allow its advertising scheme to proceed. "Who the hell do you think you are?" he thundered on public radio. " *We* own the Opera House! Do you get that message?"

When Herron refused to capitulate, Jones threatened to call NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian and instruct her to immediately sack Herron.

A few hours later, Premier Berejiklian overruled SOH management and the official charter and ordered the October 9 advertising media display to proceed.

Jones's bullying and the government decision provoked an immediate response from thousands of Sydney residents.

Scores of enraged social media posts and letters to the media denounced Jones's outrageous behaviour, the blatant commercialisation of the building, and the government's slavish relations with the gambling industry. The National Trust and peak architecture, visual arts and theatre organisations all issued statements opposing the decision.

The angry response followed allegations last month that Rupert Murdoch had called for the removal of Malcolm Turnbull as prime minister and revelations of government interference in the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Indifferent and contemptuous of the popular anger, newly appointed Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a former advertising and marketing executive, declared

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that the horse race was a “big money spinner” for NSW and advertising it on the SOH’s sails was a “no-brainer.”

The Opera House, he declared, was “the biggest billboard Sydney has…I can’t work out what all the fuss is about.”

Labor Party MPs in NSW—state Labor leader Luke Foley and federal MP and shadow minister for tourism Anthony Albanese—immediately concurred. Albanese told the media that people should “chill out a bit” because “this [horse] race is beamed around the world.”

In other words, the prospect of major profits for the gambling industry from such global exposure trumped any other consideration. Last year gambling revenue in Australia totalled more than $23 billion, the highest per capita in the world, including $3.3 billion from racing. The industry is notorious for gouging its super-profits from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged layers of the population.

Within days, more than 311,000 people had endorsed an online petition opposing the advertising, and a newspaper survey indicated that 80 percent of NSW residents were against Racing NSW’s “light show.”

On October 9, the night of the Everest Cup advertisement, over 2,000 people gathered outside the Opera House, chanting slogans against the government, Alan Jones and Racing NSW. Placards were held aloft declaring “Sails, not $ales,” while many shone torches and hi-beam lights on the SOH’s sails in an effort to disrupt the advertisements.

Such was the public uproar that a few days later Jones decided to offer a bogus apology to Herron, while a senior Racing NSW bureaucrat told the media: “I don’t think we’ll be going down this path again.”

Greens MPs in NSW and various small ‘l’ liberal independents, demagogically denounced Jones, the racing industry and the Liberal and Labor parties.

The Greens declared the protest had forced Jones and Racing NSW to change tack and deemed it an important victory against the big business interests threatening the “cultural integrity” of the SOH.

Addressing last Tuesday’s protest, Greens MP for Newtown, Jenny Leong, declared that the demonstrators had “drawn a line in the sand” and that the “people have said enough to bullies, enough to the idea that people with power can buy this city.”

The immediate eruption of outrage, on the part of hundreds of thousands of people, against the wealthy elites and the gambling industry—one of the largest donors to Australian federal and state politicians—is a powerful and healthy reaction, and based on an elemental understanding that the cultural rights of the population were under attack.

To imagine, however, that this episode will pressure big business, including gambling, the media and their political servants would be a grave error. The horse-racing and gambling industries are promoted and run by the most ruthless and selfish social layers. They spend millions lobbying those in power, and simply refuse to take “no” for an answer.

As Premier Berejiklian told the media late last week, “the Opera House guidelines have from time to time been amended… and I don’t want NSW to fall behind because other cities and states are promoting these events.”

Ending this scourge requires nothing less than the development of a revolutionary socialist movement of the working class to rid society of the capitalist profit system itself.

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