
Media Self-Censorship in Australia's Olympics Bid

by Dr. Sharon Beder

Perhaps the rarest and most perverse form of flattery that a writer can receive is to have the government seek to suppress his or her work. I had the opportunity to experience one of these institutional efforts at censorship in 1993, when two senior government officials—the general manager and the information manager of the Homebush Bay Development Corporation—visited me and the head of my university department, demanding to see a copy of an article I had written for *New Scientist*, the international science magazine. My article dealt with pollution remediation methods for the Homebush Bay toxic waste site in Sydney, Australia where authorities were hoping to locate the year 2000 Olympic Games.

The timing of my article, and of the visit by these government officials, was critical. The article had already been accepted for publication and was scheduled to appear in the weeks leading up to the International Olympic Committee's final decision about which city would host the year 2000 games. The front-runners at the time were Sydney, Beijing and Manchester.

My article detailed the contaminants buried at the site, government efforts to bypass public consultation on site remediation, and inadequacies of the government's preferred remediation process which would leave contaminants untreated on site. Some of the information for the article had been obtained from unpublished reports commissioned by a state government authority. I had gained access to these reports as an academic researcher, but after finding out that I was writing an article, the person who had given me access demanded the right to review the article prior to publication. And then came the visit from the senior officials.

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My visitors told me that some of the reports that I obtained were not even available to the public under Freedom of Information legislation (implying that they therefore had some sort of right to control information obtained from them). I told them that they should approach the magazine itself for a copy of the article. Within three days of this visit I received a phone call from the magazine's deputy editor informing me that they had held an editorial meeting and decided not to run the article. He said the article was well written and balanced but that they had decided to "kill" it for political reasons.

He gave me three reasons. First, it would be unfair to run such a story on the environmental credentials of

the Sydney bid if they did not run stories on the environmental credentials of the Manchester and Beijing bids, and there was not time to do that before the winner was announced. Second, he said that the Chinese were playing dirty and would use such an article to campaign against Sydney winning the Olympics and that at all costs they didn't want China to win the Games. Third, he feared that the magazine would bear the brunt of blame if it published my article and Sydney lost the bid.

The Australian media were effectively closed to criticism of the Sydney bid at this time. The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism published a special Olympic Edition of its newsletter *Reportage* which covered a number of stories that were not being covered in the general media. The Centre's director, Wendy Bacon, noted that the few journalists who wrote critical stories had been "attacked as unpatriotic, eccentric, inaccurate and negative." Meanwhile, public support for the bid had been mobilized using a "pervasive media and marketing exercise" which included putting the bid logo on milk cartons, car registration stickers, buses, and all sorts of other places.

AFTER THE VICTORY

The state government began releasing information about the contamination of the site to the media shortly after the bid had been won, carefully framing the information in terms of the clean-up. "Restoring Homebush Bay for the 2000 Olympics, billed as the biggest environmental repair job undertaken in Australia, is reversing decades of environmental abuse at a cost of \$83 million," reported an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which went on to reassure the public that the clean-up would make the site perfectly safe.

My article, the one that had been "killed," was published a month later in the Australian *Current Affairs Bulletin*. I was subsequently interviewed about it on Australian public television. The Homebush Bay Development Corporation responded by issuing a news release headlined "Attack on Remediation Program Scientifically Flawed."

It claimed that "all the allegations contained in the article were bereft of fact. What we are doing at Homebush Bay is the greatest urban environmental reformation seen in Australia's history. . . . The remediation strategies adopted for Homebush Bay are the best international practice for the type of contamination at the site. . . . Scientists with proven track records in this field endorse this approach." (The release neglected, however, to identify by name any of these "proven scientists" or their evidence.)

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the Corporation's response even though it had not deemed my article important enough to mention previously. Its Olympics reporter, Sam North, wrote an article based on the press release criticizing my article without contacting me for comment. When I contacted the *Herald* to complain about inaccuracies in North's article, the paper refused to report on my response and suggested I write a letter to the editor, which they published.

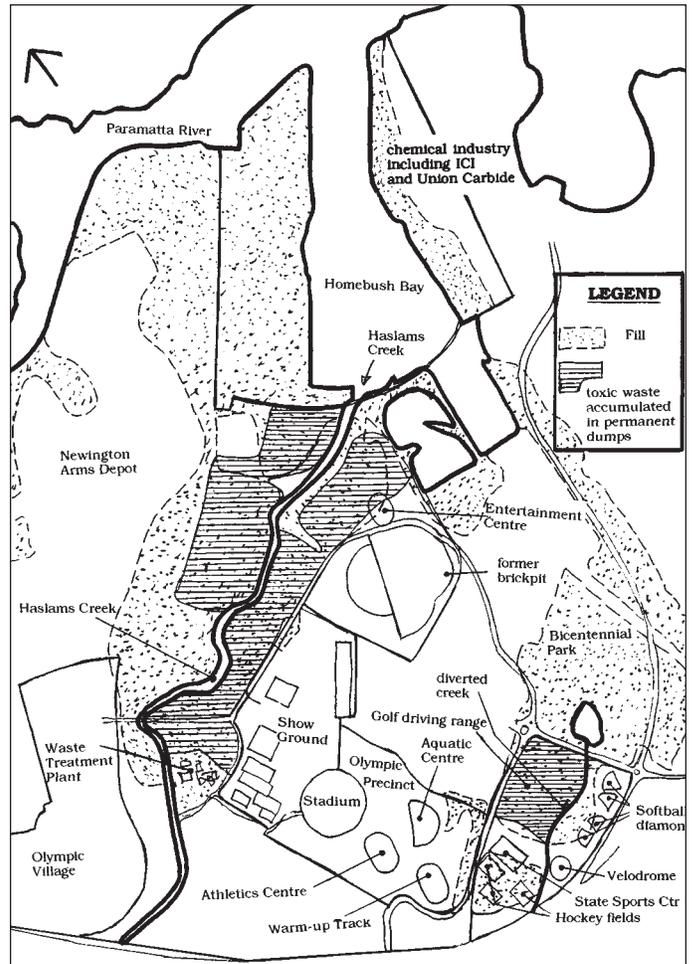
After it was announced that Sydney would host the 2000 Games, the Freedom of Information Act for New South Wales was amended to ensure that Sydney Olympic committee documents could not be accessed. This decision was criticized by the NSW Ombudsman, who pointed out that the exemptions to the Act had been added without public consultation.

The amendment specifically denied the public access to contracts, proposals for the various Olympic facilities including the athletes' village, the criteria for selecting contractors, progress reports, committee meetings, and public opinion surveys. Contractors who work on the facilities must sign a confidentiality agreement. Even the contract between the NSW government and the International Olympic Committee is a state secret.

In 1996, *Herald* environment writer Murray Hogarth reported on the continuing secrecy surrounding the Games: "Though we are less than four years out and closing fast, there are five rings of secrecy enveloping key aspects of Sydney's Olympics. They are the often-impenetrable International Olympic Committee (IOC), the State Government with its spin doctors, the 30-year Cabinet secrecy rules and the ban on Freedom of Information requests, SOCOG and its media Games-keepers, OCA's ICAC-inspired probity requirements, and finally big business, with a tangled web of confidentiality agreements."

In 1997 Nathan Vass of the *Herald* reported that the state government was considering setting up a multi-million dollar strategy to deal with an expected 5,000 or so international non-accredited journalists who would be hanging around Sydney before and during the 2000 Games looking for stories. Such journalists, unlike the 15,000 or so officially accredited journalists there to report on the sporting events, were likely to be the source of critical stories.

In preparation for this feared onslaught of scrutiny, the Olympics manager of the Australian Tourist Commission has recommended a "crisis media management program" to deal with negative stories about the environment, the ozone layer and Aboriginal issues. The plan called for seeking money from Olympic sponsors to



A diagram of the Olympic Games site, showing the location of toxic waste dumps.

establish a center to house and respond to such journalists, thereby ensuring that "the non-accredited media present Sydney in a very positive fashion."

In the years following the winning of the bid, the story of the toxic waste contamination of Homebush Bay has been well covered by the Australian media and has also received some international coverage, especially in Germany. But when journalists from throughout the world begin arriving in Sydney to cover the Olympics, will they be able to see through the "media management" that is being geared up to greet them? n

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