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# ‘Shame and Scandal in the Family’:

Australian Media Narratives of the IOC/SOCOG Scandal Spiral<sup>1</sup>

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A quick review of the last year or so has seen the international institution of sport look more like a school for scandal than a glorious expression of physical culture.<sup>2</sup>

By May 2000 both the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) were reeling from a series of scandals that had engulfed them since late 1998. Thus, a smooth running of the imminent Olympic torch relay ceremony provided an auspicious opportunity for both organizations to win back some of the support that they had lost from sections of the media and the public during the previous 18 months. However, on the eve of this quasi-sacred event, yet another scandal erupted when IOC vice-president Kevan Gosper accepted an offer from the Hellenic Olympic Committee (HOC) that led to his daughter being the first Australian to receive the torch in Greece. This article analyzes the myths and narratives that were used by the Australian media to generate and reflect the widespread public condemnation of Gosper’s decision via an in-depth case study approach. Such an approach allows us to examine how the specific circumstances surrounding the torch relay incident simultaneously constituted and reflected the broader sequence of scandals in which the IOC/SOCOG became ensnared.

Drawing on the work of Hartley, Turner argues that both the media and its audiences feed off one another in constructing ‘public’ opinion.<sup>3</sup> This interrelationship between the media and its consumers is particularly important for a study such as ours, because coverage of media scandals is both intensified and narrated by strong ‘public’ interest and/or reaction.<sup>4</sup> For instance, forums such as letters to the editor serve to bring a sense of ‘the public’ into existence, thus allowing readers to interact with and comment upon stories and editorials. Therefore, we present examples from

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articles, editorials, cartoons, photographs, and letters to the editor that were representative of the general patterns uncovered. Our study shows that the torch relay scandal was not simply the product of ‘gutter journalists’ or a morally outraged public. Rather, it was the result of, and was prolonged and exacerbated by, complex and often unpredictable interactions among editors, journalists, readers, and those who were perceived to have committed moral transgressions.

Most of our data came from four popular newspapers. Three of these were quality broadsheets that are published in the two major cities of Sydney (*The Sydney Morning Herald* or *SMH*) and Melbourne (*The Age*), and the nationally circulated *The Australian*. We also included *The Daily Telegraph*, a Sydney tabloid. At some level, each newspaper was involved in an Olympic sponsorship program, but this does not appear to have lessened the critical intensity of coverage of Games-related scandals. Indeed, the Olympics editor for the *SMH*, Matthew Moore, has stated that reporting on the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics was the most combative experience of his career.<sup>5</sup> Most of our analysis is devoted to coverage of the Gosper scandal from when it broke on 10 May until it ‘died out’ about 10 days later, but we also examine some of its after-effects.

Based on previous research, we anticipated that analytical concepts such as mythologies, the ‘split discourse’ of sport, ‘scandal susceptibility,’ ‘media amplification spiral,’ ‘endemic institutional disorders,’ and the ‘protection of the inept’ would be relevant to our analysis. However, rather than trying to see if the data would fit into a pre-existing theoretical framework, we opted for a ‘grounded’ approach that groups items into emergent themes. We begin by locating the study in the broader context of mythologies, the split discourse of sport, and media scandals.



### **Olympian Mythologies**

The Olympics - arguably the most universally recognized and prestigious sporting event in the world - exemplify the concept of a mythology or myths.<sup>6</sup> A myth is not a total delusion or an utter falsehood, but a ‘partial truth’ that accentuates particular

versions of reality and marginalizes or omits others. Myths embody fundamental cultural values and character-types and appeal to deep-seated emotions. In the mythologizing process, events are drained of their historical 'truth' and repackaged in ways that serve the interests of powerful groups. Thus, myths depoliticize social relations by ignoring the vested interests involved in struggles over *whose* stories become ascendant in a given culture. Critically, myths disavow or deny their own conditions of existence: they are 'authorless' forms of speech that derive from specific sites and power relations, but have become so naturalized that people are seldom aware they are being interpellated by them. Myths, therefore, are central to the everyday activities of editors and journalists, as they drive the representational and ideological codes that underpin media narratives.<sup>7</sup>

The Olympics typifies this myth-making process. Some ubiquitous and tenacious Olympic myths are: the inherent virtuousness of ancient Greek civilization, personified in its Olympic Games; the continuous link between the ancient and modern genres of 'sport'; the noble motives of Baron Pierre de Coubertin in founding the modern Games; the credo of 'sound mind-sound body': an adherence to the principle of amateurism: the Olympics being 'above politics'; the Olympic motto of *Citius, Altius, Fortius*; the spirit of international cooperation denoted by the five, coloured, interlocked rings on the official Olympic flag; and the IOC's promotion of itself as a 'family.' Yet all of these myths have been refuted by scholarly research showing how the Olympics embody the processes by which modern sport has become highly politicized, scientized, professionalized, corporatized, and marketized.<sup>8</sup> A glaring contradiction in the Olympic movement is that it espouses the rhetoric of universalism (highlighted by its 'Celebrate Humanity' advertising campaign) but generally insists that teams compete on a national basis.

Moreover, Rowe notes that contemporary sport manifests a split discourse.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, there are the seemingly universal ideals of participation for its own sake, character-building, fair play, meritocratic achievement, and fraternity (sorority has only been a relatively recent arrival and sexual equality is still being fought for). On the other hand, these idealistic motifs co-exist uneasily with a pervasive win-at-all cost ethic, institutionalized hierarchies of gender, social class, race, and nation, and the outbursts of jingoism and xenophobia that so often accompany international sporting events. An everyday example of this schizoid discourse is the panegyrics about athletic performances in the sports section of newspapers, and items such as violence against and sexual harassment of women and the use of performance-enhancing substances on the front pages. These latter items, which often develop into scandals, pose a constant threat to the idealistic veneer of sport. Before turning to the recent sequence of scandals that have imperilled the idealism traditionally associated with the Olympic movement, we briefly outline the main components of media scandals.

## Media Scandals

Media scandals are often dismissed as the work of gutter journalism. However, it is no longer possible to draw rigid boundaries between 'quality' and 'tabloid' media outlets. If we look just at sporting scandals (e.g., the O.J. Simpson and Mike Tyson trials, the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan incident, the 'bust' of Ben Johnson, 'Magic' Johnson's disclosure of his HIV-positive status, the gambling activities of

Pete Rose, match-fixing by Hansie Cronje) both 'highbrow' newspapers and 'quality' radio and TV programs have increasingly viewed scandals as an irresistible source of both news value and market share.<sup>10</sup> Thus, quality outlets have borrowed many techniques of conventional tabloid journalism in covering stories (e.g., shock tactics, infotainment, sensationalism, voyeurism, speculation, chequebook journalism, and outright fakery). As Rowe puts it: "Contemporary media sports scandals are integral to the political economy of media sport, not aberrant manifestations of it."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, scandals can provide us with insights into how struggles between dominant and subordinate groups are articulated via representations of morality in the media. The fact that so many rich and powerful individuals and organizations (including, belatedly, the IOC) hire spin-doctors to handle media scandals clearly underlines their importance to elites.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we concur with Tomlinson's assertion that media scandals need to be taken seriously rather than simply dismissed as an "opiate of the masses" or "bread and circuses."<sup>13</sup>

According to Tomlinson, scandals are "middle-order moral events" that lie somewhere between misdemeanors and serious crimes.<sup>14</sup> Tomlinson maintains that media scandals provide contexts for 'communal moral reflection and debate at a time when traditional sources of authority - religion, the state, and education - are in decline. By using the principles of semiotics, discourse analysis, and narratology it is possible to delineate some general features of media scandals.

First, media scandals always contain pronouncements about the moral character of individuals, groups, institutions, and even nations. The transgressions of 'high moral-grounders' and rich, powerful, famous, and privileged people are frequently singled out for condemnation:

. . . the media scandal is a narrative of a disruption, where a particular set of acts is seen to violate the moral boundaries of a culture... stars, with their uniquely telling cultural signifiers, are likely candidates for morality tales. Such tales tell us about a culture's moral constraints and its moral values.<sup>15</sup>

Second, the tendency of the media also to focus on the 'degenerate' behaviour of the powerless can also tell us a great deal about patterns of power and morality. Ubiquitous stories that reinforce public prejudices about 'dole bludgers,' 'welfare mothers,' the criminal activities of ethnic communities, and alcoholic and petrol-sniffing indigenous people, inform us that these groups are seen as habitually breaching community mores, while simultaneously reinforcing class, gender, ethnic, and racial stereotypes.

Third, scandals generally follow discernible patterns and each one has a particular 'ecology' that can be identified *ex post facto*.<sup>16</sup> However, once a given scandal emerges, it is often difficult to predict its precise trajectory. One reason for this uncertainty is that editors and journalists are driven by a variety of bureaucratic, political, legal, economic, and professional imperatives that make coverage of scandals a contingent endeavour.<sup>17</sup> What is more, the genealogy of a given scandal depends upon the complex interactions among the media that produce stories, how audiences use these stories, and how the media subsequently respond to the multiple ways in which audiences react to the stories.<sup>18</sup>

Given this intricate and recursive arrangement, it is seldom possible to anticipate

the myriad reactions of the media, the public, and the parties involved in a scandal. A full and swift public admission and a plea for absolution by the transgressors sometimes brings public forgiveness and full or partial rehabilitation. This occurred when Texaco was scandalized after some of its executives were recorded making racist remarks and obstructing the company's affirmative action initiatives. The CEO responded by apologizing, punishing the executives, and revamping the company's hiring and promotion program.<sup>19</sup> Other scandals conclude when both the media and the public believe the transgressors have been suitably punished or a 'good news' story over-rides the obsession with disgrace. Sometimes, interest in an event lapses due to 'scandal fatigue' on the part of both the media and audiences. This phenomenon partially explains why Bill Clinton has been able to evade total condemnation for lying to the American public about his sexual peccadilloes. It is also what IOC marketing maestro Michael Payne is hoping for when he says that, "Everyone is bored with the scandal."<sup>20</sup> At the other extreme, some stories develop into a "seemingly endless media scandal amplification spiral."<sup>21</sup> In such cases, the story "... is not just a logical reporting of damaging facts... the story triumphs over the facts at some point and in doing so takes on a life of its own."<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the most prominent example here is Watergate, where Richard Nixon and his aides used a variety of ploys: denial, counter-attack, denigrating the motives and/or moral character of the accusers, down playing the significance of the allegations, concealment, and stonewalling. However, these tactics only intensified the scandal and resulted in the conspirators becoming social outcasts. Although some of the events surrounding Watergate have faded from the American collective memory, nearly 30 years later they still provide a frame for scandal discourses in a variety of contexts.<sup>23</sup> For instance, one newspaper in our study used the term "Gospergate" to describe the events that we analyze below.<sup>24</sup>

It should be evident from the above discussion that both how and why the behaviour of certain individuals and institutions gets classified as morally reprehensible, and how transgressors, the media, and the public respond to the alleged offenses, are difficult to study via conventional notions such as 'objectivity,' 'truth,' 'balance,' and 'reality.' Thus, our study is underpinned by a 'social constructionist' approach. From this viewpoint, the media do not merely *reflect* but also *constitute* social meanings, identities, and relations. This means that we are not interested in whether or not the behaviour of Kevan Gosper was nepotistic or if he atoned sufficiently for his perceived transgressions. Rather, our interests are *semiotic*: analyzing the cultural codes, especially the mythologies and narrative devices that determined *how* the stories surrounding the scandals were told, and *discursive*: the possible *effects and consequences* of these selective renderings.<sup>25</sup> The events we analyze in this paper illustrate the spiraling process whereby a scandal develops into an incident that attracts national and even global media coverage. Before describing the events related to the torch relay ceremony, it is necessary to explain the larger scandal matrix in which they were embedded.

### **The IOC/SOCOG Media Amplification Spiral**

... once people start talking about a scandal it's hard to talk about anything else. (Kevin Kline as the American president in the film *Dave*)

The literature on media scandals indicates that the more personalized a scandal, the more explosive its coverage and reaction. It is easier for the media to single out individuals for opprobrium than to apportion blame to ‘faceless’ institutions, where individual actions are concealed by bureaucratic structures.<sup>26</sup> Editors and journalists, therefore, were faced with two main ways of covering the scandals surrounding the Olympics: they could have taken the time-consuming path of analyzing how the institutionally structured practices of IOC/SOCOG members actually generate scandals; or, they could have adopted the simpler and routine journalistic practice of focusing on highly visible individuals who were deemed to be guilty of nefarious conduct, and then use them as targets for the general sense of disapproval felt by the media and sections of the public at both organizations. Our evidence demonstrates that journalists favoured the latter option. Since Gosper was embedded in the wider IOC/SOCOG scandal matrix, his behaviour during the torch relay made him a readily identifiable target who personified and crystallized a generalized climate of resentment towards the perceived arrogance, corruption, incompetence, and elitism of the IOC/SOCOG.

A key to understanding the public outrage over Gosper’s decision is the fact that he was inescapably enmeshed in the media scandal vortex that has marred the once revered reputation of the IOC and undermined public support for SOCOG’s preparations for the 2000 Games.<sup>27</sup> These incidents include:

- the disclosure in November 1998 that some Salt Lake City boosters had bribed some IOC officials in order to secure votes for the 2002 Games
- Marc Hodler, a member of the IOC’s executive board, subsequently breaking ranks and publicly criticizing the gift-demanding and gift-giving culture that surrounds the visiting and bidding processes
- a succession of internal and external investigations that resulted in the IOC reprimanding and expelling 15 of its members for violating the Olympic oath in various ways
- constant criticisms that the IOC has lax drug-testing procedures
- allegations that the Russian Mafia has infiltrated the Olympic ‘family’
- sustained attacks on SOCOG for:
  - \* botching the food and drink arrangements for the 2000 Games
  - \* hiring marching bands from overseas to perform at the opening ceremony
  - \* misleading the public about the availability of seats, including secretly reserving spaces for corporations and exclusive clubs at expensive prices, when they could have been allocated to ‘ordinary’ Australians
  - \* acrimonious administrative, financial, and political disputes with the NSW state government, the IOC, and the AOC
  - \* building a beach volleyball stadium for the Games on iconic Bondi Beach
  - \* insensitive behaviour toward indigenous Australians
  - \* its questionable environmental policy
  - \* budgetary blow-outs; and
  - \* the succession of its officials who either resigned or were fired.

Even before the Salt Lake City scandal broke, the *SMH* ran a feature article on the power struggle between the AOC and SOCOG with photos of the main protagonists accompanied by the headline “OUT OF CONTROL.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, the scandals sur-

rounding the IOC/SOCOG have become so numerous and interdependent that the *SMH* even had a dedicated Olympics scandal website (<http://www.smh.com.au/news/content/oly scandal/index.html>). Elements of the various scandals also entered into everyday discourses. For example, one of the most popular shows on Australian TV in recent times has been *The Games*, a satirical series on the (dis)organization of the Sydney Olympics. In a fascinating example of ‘hyper-reality,’ some of the indignant letters to the editor we studied invoked motifs from the program to castigate Gosper in particular and the IOC/SOCOG in general. As an example of our earlier point about the interdependence of the media and the public in generating and sustaining scandals, one of the program’s co-stars, Bryan Dawe, has commented that: “... in a strange sort of way we’re representing the audience in the argument. We’re doing it on their behalf.”<sup>29</sup> By the time of the torch relay ceremony, SOCOG had finally become a signifier of gross ineptitude and disaster in its own right, with one commentator referring to an error “of SOCOGian proportions.”<sup>30</sup> It is within this larger configuration of interrelated scandals that the immensely hostile reaction to Kevan Gosper’s behaviour must be understood.

### The Rise and Fall of Kevan Gosper



**Kevan Gosper**

The entry for Kevan Gosper (AO) in the 2000 edition of *Who’s Who in Australia* occupies nearly half a page due to his numerous business and sporting achievements and the honours he has received from prestigious Australian and overseas organizations. As recently as June 1999, Gosper was touted as a front-runner to succeed IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch when he retires in 2001.<sup>31</sup> However, a little more than a year later Gosper announced that his presidential aspirations were over after a rapid fall from grace.

Gosper first became prominent in the IOC/SOCOG crisis as a member of the IOC's ethics committee that investigated the fall-out from the Salt Lake City scandal. When the multinational firm Hill and Knowlton was hired by the IOC early in 1999 to manage the adverse publicity from this incident, Gosper was one of the handful of IOC officials whom its spin-doctors suggested should be key players in its sophisticated media campaign to win back public confidence. Gosper later became embroiled in the Olympics ticketing scandal in October 1999, when it was discovered that SOCOG officials had misled the public for over a year about the availability of seats for the Games. This included stating that some events were sold out, when more than 80,000 seats had been secretly reserved at premium prices for corporations. Despite a public outcry, SOCOG officials initially refused to atone for their deception. SOCOG board member and Olympics Minister Michael Knight unrepentantly described the scheme as a routine business practice of 'stinging the rich' (he later admitted that SOCOG had resorted to secrecy because it was afraid that the negative publicity from the Salt Lake City bribery scandal would prevent it from reaching its revenue target). At a media conference Gosper defiantly refused to apologize for the fiasco. On 26 October 1999, *The Daily Telegraph* decried SOCOG's handling of the crisis, with the front page headline "5 BLIND MICE" and a photo of Gosper, Knight, AOC president John Coates, ticketing manager Paul Reading, and ticketing committee chairman Graham Richardson at a media conference.<sup>32</sup>

In what became a familiar refrain, the *SMH* ran stories with headlines such as: "The dreadful truth: sessions were declared full when they weren't;" "Schools, community groups 'betrayed,'" and "All we wanted was a fair go...now we just feel sold out."<sup>33</sup> In an editorial titled "Games chiefs earn gold for deception," *The Australian* accused SOCOG of lying, being arrogant and un-Australian, and called for the resignation of its CEO Sandy Hollway, as well as that of Knight and Richardson.<sup>34</sup> When the full extent of the scheme leaked out, Gosper was forced to back down and make a humiliating public apology, while Knight used the word 'sorry' 16 times in expressing his regret. This embarrassing event caused Knight to lose confidence in Hollway, even though he initially hired him. In what was an ominous harbinger, on 4 November 1999, images of Gosper, Knight, and Richardson constituted part of a collage on the cover of the weekly media supplement to *The Australian*. Entitled "Sultans of spin: The new breed of crisis managers." The collage also showed popular Australian radio talkback host John Laws, who was under investigation by the Australian Broadcasting Authority for possible unethical conduct, a refinery explosion, and a man cleaning up an environmental catastrophe.<sup>35</sup>

In summary, this maelstrom of scandals intensified public perception that both the IOC and SOCOG were nepotistic, undemocratic, corrupt, and inept organizations, and also added momentum to media coverage of any new crises that emerged. To make matters worse, Gosper had stood down from the IOC's ethics commission that was investigating the Salt Lake City debacle, after asking it to inquire into allegations that he accepted extravagant hospitality from boosters on a trip he took to Utah with his family in 1993. The committee was due to announce its findings a few days after the torch-lighting ceremony in Greece. Given the public's pervasive mistrust and cynicism towards the IOC and SOCOG and the adverse image it had of Gosper, he could not have chosen a more unpropitious event than the hallowed Olympic torch relay ceremony to incite even greater public disapprobation.



### **‘Gospergate’**

In April 2000, the HOC informed St. Spyridon College in Sydney that one of its students would run with the Olympic torch when it was handed over at Olympia the following month. According to one story, when it was announced that the college staff had chosen Yianna Souleles, a 15-year old, third-generation Greek-Australian to receive the torch, “nobody was surprised...except for Yianna herself.” According to the acting head of the college, Souleles was “an excellent ambassador... a great role model, good sportswoman. Academically, she gets good results and gets on really well with students and staff.”<sup>36</sup> Although it was unclear if Souleles would be the first Australian to carry the torch in Greece, none of her compatriots had been mentioned as late as a week prior to the ceremony, so it was assumed that she would have this honour.

Unknown to the college, however, the HOC had also asked Gosper if he would like his 11-year-old daughter, Sophie, to run (she was ineligible to carry the torch in Australia because SOCOG had set a minimum age of 12). Gosper made one of the biggest miscalculations of his life by accepting the invitation, as the HOC subsequently made Sophie the first Australian to receive the torch and bumped Yianna down to fourth in the running order. Gosper disclosed that he had received the invitation in April, discussed it with his wife, and then accepted, but maintained that he was unaware that Sophie would be the first Australian torch-carrier until a few days before the event. At this point, a politically astute Gosper would have either declined the offer or allowed Sophie to carry the torch at some stage, as his son did in the lead-up to the Atlanta Olympics. In the latter scenario there probably would have been only passing comment in the media. After Sophie completed her 300 meter leg of the relay, Gosper stated that, “Somehow in my heart I felt it was intended to be. You know I am an Olympian...I started off as an Olympian and to see Soph carry the torch was quite

something.”<sup>37</sup> Despite Hollway’s claim that the incident was “a giant storm in a teacup,” there was widespread public indignity to what was perceived as an act of blatant nepotism. The most venomous reaction appeared on the front page of *The Daily Telegraph*,<sup>38</sup> with a photo of an angry Gosper getting out of a car and the huge, bold headline:

G reedy

O bstinate

S elfish

P ompous

E gotistic

R epile

In Athens, where he had been depicted proudly snapping photos of Sophie running with the torch, Gosper initially reacted angrily, declaring that he might never return to Australia. Waving a faxed copy of the ‘reptile’ article, Gosper furiously told a TV journalist, “I am shocked, appalled, and saddened. I don’t know what crime I have committed on behalf of my daughter, whose rights I’ve protected as a father. I am totally shocked. They did not even talk about the enemy during the war like that...”<sup>39</sup>

Gosper’s reaction simply exacerbated the already heightened state of moral wrath, sparking condemnation from Australian Olympic legends like Dawn Fraser (“an utter disgrace”<sup>40</sup>), Ron Clarke (“Kevan, I think you blued”<sup>41</sup>), and Kieren Perkins (“You just shrug your shoulders and shake your head. It’s insane”<sup>42</sup>), high-ranking politicians, and even AOC, SOCOG, and IOC officials. Faced with such extensive denunciation, as well as pressure from as high up as the IOC president, Gosper consulted with some close advisors and his wife and then backed down in an emotional public apology. In a rare display of introspection and humility, Gosper described himself as “today’s ugly Australian,”<sup>43</sup> saying that fatherly pride had clouded his judgement, and then relinquished his spot in the torch relay at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, offering it to Souleles (he previously described this opportunity to run at the MCG as the most important moment of his life since he won a silver medal there in 1956).

### **Gosper’s ‘Sins’**

Newspaper editors, cartoonists, photographers, and journalists were virtually unanimous in their denunciation of Gosper; of the letters to the editor on the incident, only four of the 66 received by *The Australian* and four of the 114 sent to the *SMH* supported him. In decrying Gosper’s behaviour, both the quality and tabloid press invoked biblical motifs: “Gosper gospel taints Olympics;” “Gosper a sinner in a nation that loves sport.”<sup>44</sup> Our analysis of the data revealed that the media and the public believed Gosper was guilty of three grave ‘sins’: he had betrayed the Olympic

ideals, had abused ‘family’ privileges, and had been un-Australian.

### **Betrayal of the Olympic Ideals**

As already noted, the myths surrounding the Olympics are a key part of their widespread appeal. Idealized notions of the Olympic ‘spirit,’ ‘sharing the dream,’ being part of the ‘family,’ and symbolizing the height of sporting achievement help to reinforce and perpetuate both the popularity and marketing of the Games. Gosper’s perceived abuse of his privilege as a member of the Olympic ‘family’ was seen to have made a mockery of these ideals and profaned the Olympic mythos. According to one headline in the *SMH*, the IOC deserved a “Gold medal in nepotism,” with the author claiming that, “Bootlicking is the mother tongue of the International Olympic Committee. As dotting acolytes of Juan Antonio Samaranch, they hardly miss a chance to call him ‘excellency.’ Gosper, an IOC member for 23 years, has done his fair share of it and probably sees nothing wrong.”<sup>45</sup> The following excerpt was typical of many articles that pursued this line of argument:

It is all very well to ‘Share the spirit,’ as Olympics organisers implore, but what happens when there is no more spirit left to share?

Kevan Gosper, the supposed upholder of Olympism in Australia, has done more to drain the nation of its building Olympic passions than any marching band fiasco...

The ‘Sophie’s choice’ episode is a trenchant reminder of all that is wrong with the international Olympic movement - the crawling patronage, the ingrained nepotism, the blatant disregard for fair play.<sup>46</sup>

Readers also picked up on these themes, fuming over the paradox of a schoolgirl upholding the Olympic ideals *because* of the arrogance of an executive IOC member. In a sense, the readers were complicit in a media/audience morality play between the dignified and ‘good’ Souleles and the autocratic and ‘bad’ Gosper:

The Olympics opening ceremony, I believe, will resound with boos and jeers when the autocratic Mr Gosper appears. Hopefully, his hapless daughter will be spared that ordeal.

Then, to restore the tattered vestige of the ‘spirit’ we have all been enjoined to share, could anything be better than the entry of the Olympic flame in the hands of the downgraded but gallant Greek-Australian schoolgirl Yianna Souleles - who, I suggest, should also ignite the flame cauldron.<sup>47</sup>

Gosper’s betrayal of the Olympic ideals became a metonym for a wider Olympic malaise related to a deeply entrenched state of nepotism and corruption within the Olympic ‘family’ itself.

### **Abuse of ‘Family’ Privileges**

As noted, the IOC is fond of promoting itself as a ‘family’ that is generous, hospitable, and cosmopolitan. However, families can also be nepotistic, incestuous, toxic, dysfunctional, and treacherous. For instance, long before the torch relay scandal

emerged, journalist Roy Masters claimed that the Mafia was the only organization in the world that used the term family as often or obsequiously as the IOC.<sup>48</sup> Thus it is not surprising that the media invoked nefarious aspects of the family in covering the torch relay scandal. The coverage contained, often simultaneously, dual levels of meaning: the personal nepotism associated with Gosper allowing his daughter to carry the torch, as well as cronyism within the larger IOC clan. Many journalists and readers decried the special and elitist deals for ‘family members’ that Gosper and the IOC enjoyed. Gosper, as an Australian, was disowned and singled out as an Olympic *apparatchik*. In turn, this produced a nationalist discourse containing the implication that if the Sydney (read ‘Australian’) Games were to be a success, it would be *despite* the machinations of the IOC. In other words, any success the Sydney Games experienced would be because of ‘our’ efforts, and (consistent with the widespread perception of individual and organizational incompetence) any failure would be due to ‘their’ incompetence:

Thank you Kevan Gosper for confirming what lesser mortals knew all along - that nepotism and cronyism are alive and well in the Olympics.  
Any success the Sydney Olympics may have will be in spite of, rather than because of, the IOC.<sup>49</sup>

A cartoon in the *Age* showed Gosper in an athletic uniform with the word NEPOTISM on the front of his vest and grinning as he broke the tape at the finishing line. *The Daily Telegraph’s* cartoonist drew five ancient gods of Olympus atop platforms in front of the Parthenon, one of whom was a sour-looking Gosper clad in a robe, holding a flaming torch, and standing on a dais entitled “Gosperus: God of Nepotism.” Another cartoon in the *SMH* showed five female runners at the starting line in front of a packed stadium where an Olympic flag with ‘Sydney 2000’ on it was flying; the bubble from the loudspeaker states, “And who’s this lining up for the start of the women’s 400m race, in place of Cathy Freeman? ... It’s ... Sophie Gosper.” Both Gosper’s perceived betrayal of the Olympic ethos and act of nepotism were also seen as profoundly ‘un-Australian,’ and this trespass also pervaded many of the articles, editorials, cartoons, photos, and letters we examined.



## Gosper as ‘The Ugly Australian’

Negative coverage of Gosper’s behaviour was characteristic of a larger shift by which winning the right to host the Games went from being the epitome of Australianness (‘Sharing the Spirit’) to sometimes being framed as a decidedly un-Australian affair. In setting up a framework in which to condemn Gosper, the media and public needed to utilize venerable myths in order to ‘prove’ that his behaviour was immoral. Nationalist mythologies provide such naturalized discourses, because they constitute and reproduce the supposedly positive, triumphant, and desirable features of ‘national’ culture.<sup>50</sup> In the Australian context, the traditions of egalitarianism, ‘mateship,’ and a ‘fair go’ are central to this myth and Gosper had obviously sullied them by his actions prior to, during, and after the torch relay ceremony.<sup>51</sup> This behaviour only confirmed what some colleagues, journalists, and readers had previously said about him: he had “a patrician air and Establishment links,” was “not a slap-on-the-back kind of guy,” and has “never been a jokey, knockabout sort of fellow,” as ‘typical’ Australian men are often represented.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising that overtly nationalist discourses were used in this instance, as it is consistent with the Olympic Games having long been an arena for the expression of nationalist sentiment under the guise of ‘friendly’ international competition. The depiction of Gosper as having violated what ‘most Australians think is right’ is a powerful way of condemning an Australian public figure, particularly when his actions provided an ‘unfair advantage’ to his daughter:

Kevan Gosper’s delusions of grandeur have brought him crashing down. His singular arrogance was glaring as the controversy erupted over his daughter, Sophie, becoming the first Australian to run with the Olympic torch...the anger was intense because Mr Gosper continued to try and defend what to most Australians was a clear-cut case of nepotism.

The sheer pomposity of Mr Gosper’s behaviour last week must have terrified the International Olympic Committee...

Almost singlehandedly, with his blundering defence of something so offensive to the Australian ideal of a fair go for all, Mr Gosper managed to wreck a great moment for all.

Well, Mr Gosper, you’ve learned the lesson the hard way. Australians believe in equal opportunity for all, not unfair advantage based on who you know - or who you’re related to.<sup>53</sup>

Gosper’s ‘un-Australian’ behavior was then exacerbated by his impenitent reaction to the widespread condemnation. In claiming that he was being victimized by the media and had done nothing wrong, Gosper left himself open for accusations of betraying the nation’s apparently long-held penchant for ‘fairness’:

Well, Kevan Gosper, we’re all sorry if you’re ‘extremely disappointed’ at the reaction of the Australian public to your decision to allow your daughter to be the first Australian Olympic torchbearer. We’re a little disappointed, too. Your decision reeks of nepotism, elitism, cronyism and all the other ‘isms’ that Australians, generally, abhor.

But more than that. it's just not fair. And fairness, surely, is at the heart of what the Olympic ideal should be all about...<sup>54</sup>



Gosper also became a source of deprecatory neologisms in the Australian idiom that signified ineptitude, haughtiness, and elitism (e.g., ‘doing a Gosper,’ a ‘Gosperism,’ or ‘being Gospered’). In the wake of the scandal, AMP, which is the main sponsor of the torch relay, rescinded its decision to reserve six spots in the relay for the children of its executives. This move was described on the front page of *The Australian* as an attempt by AMP officials to “de-Gosper their children.”<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, Souleles had endeared herself to the media and the Australian public by graciously declining Gosper’s offer to take his place at the MCG unless he also ran, and expressing sympathy for the difficult situation in which Sophie had been placed.<sup>56</sup> She received hundreds of letters, cards, and faxes commending her for upholding both the Olympic ideals and quintessential Australian values such as egalitarianism, humility, compassion, and a ‘fair go.’ For example, a story entitled “Why Yianna deserves a gold medal for grace” was accompanied by a photo of Souleles in Greece wrapped in the Australian flag, while an article in *The Australian*, headed “Yianna shows true Olympic spirit,” contained a photo of Souleles when she was 10 in front of the Parthenon with the caption “Monumental performance.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, like Gosper, Souleles also became a mythological product of the media, except that she was deified on the noble/innocent/‘true Aussie’ hero side of the binary code, thus facilitating the potential for Gosper to be demonized as the dishonorable/deceptive/un-Australian villain. The status of Souleles was subsequently enhanced even further when she agreed to do promotional work for *Legacy*, a revered voluntary organization that cares for widows and dependents of deceased military personnel and uses a torch as its organizational symbol.

### The Spiral Continues

A month after the torch relay incident, Gosper again acknowledged that he had made a mistake, but added that he did not “try to find a compromise very hard

because I was concerned that I would risk the loss of Sophie's place in the relay altogether." Gosper also claimed that "some sections of the media went to the most extreme case I have ever seen."<sup>58</sup> A month later, Gosper announced despite all the controversy he would still stand for the IOC presidency if he thought he had enough support after the Sydney Games: "Of course I believe I could do the job, and I suppose somebody will say, there he goes ... he's being arrogant again, which I'm starting to think is almost a compliment."<sup>59</sup> The *SMH* immediately lampooned him by publishing a cartoon with the headline, "IOC Presidency - Daughter - Torch," that showed an unflattering image of Gosper clutching a paper and saying: "I believe in the Olympic ideal...Winning is everything." The day before the opening ceremony *The Daily Telegraph* ran a cartoon showing a jubilant group of people running behind a torch-holder, while an imposing looking Gosper lurked around a corner with Sophie. The caption stated: "Little did the public suspect, there would be another attempt to grab the torch . . . . "A week after the closing ceremony Gosper declared he was no longer a candidate for the IOC's top job, saying he wanted to spend more time with his family, and that his experiences both as an Olympic athlete and organizer of the successful Sydney Olympics had left him "totally fulfilled." These official reasons aside, it is highly unlikely that Gosper could have ever recovered from the infamy attached to the torch relay scandal. As one of the reader's letters above correctly predicted, Gosper was booed and jeered at some of the events he attended in Sydney, something that possibly made his decision to withdraw from the IOC presidential race a bit easier.

### **An Institutional Analysis**

The environment is not a preexisting set of problems to which an organism, or an organization, must find solutions; the problems were created by the organisms or organizations in the first place.<sup>60</sup>

The themes that permeated this study are by no means unique to the IOC/SOCOG. As Goode notes, the ideal of meritocratic achievement in modern societies stands in stark contrast to the cronyism, nepotism, and 'protection of the inept' that pervades all organizations to some degree.<sup>61</sup> Thus, although Gosper's behaviour might seem aberrant, it is, in fact, entirely consistent with the general conduct of IOC officials. In his insightful genealogy of the Olympic movement, Hoberman shows how the IOC is similar to other transnational sporting (FIFA, FINA, IAAF) and non-sporting (the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, the Esperanto movement) organizations that emerged around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>62</sup> Hoberman argues that the IOC belongs to a "genre of international organizations" with a "self-perpetuating" membership process that produces "a core repertory of behaviors and attitudes" and an "ideological affinity group." Furthermore, such groups share "endemic disorders" that precipitate organizational crises. As Hoberman notes, these institutional features mean that organizations like the IOC have been able to proclaim themselves as paragons of ecumenicity, while simultaneously having harboured anti-Semites, reactionaries, and fascists (this is not to suggest that Kevan Gosper belongs to any of these categories). Confirmation of Hoberman's thesis can be found in the work of Sugden and Tomlinson, who have demonstrated that similar organizational pathologies have

caused a succession of crises and scandals in FIFA, another international sporting organization that is also fond of portraying itself as a 'family' and positions itself as the guardian of 'the people's game'.<sup>63</sup>

We argue that Hoberman's thesis is even more relevant to the IOC today. For instance, the Olympics are now at the epicentre of a *globally* integrated business/sports-entertainment/politics/media complex.<sup>64</sup> These labyrinthine articulations mean that the Olympics now have a very high degree of what Lull and Hinerman term "scandal susceptibility."<sup>65</sup> Moreover, as our data shows, the fact that quality media outlets increasingly deploy features that were hitherto restricted to tabloids, creates even more problems for spin-doctors. As Rowe argues, "The Olympics provide the greatest opportunity for scandal in sport because... its highly romanticized mythology lends itself most easily to the all-purpose transgression of 'cheating.'"<sup>66</sup> Since an organization like the IOC is always in the global media spotlight, acts of perceived arrogance and nepotism by its members are easy targets for the "modern scandal production machine."<sup>67</sup> As two journalists put it, "The rage against Gosper might be an Australian issue but it is now ensnaring the IOC itself."<sup>68</sup> For instance, in our study there were several accusations in the media that the HOC gave Sophie the opportunity to carry the torch because the organizing committee in Athens was having formidable problems with its preparations for the 2004 Games and needed support from her powerful father. This globalizing aspect of scandals associated with the IOC is evident in Lenskyj's observation that: "... the Salt Lake City case was not an isolated example of impropriety, but part of a complex system of relationships among bid committees in the United States, Canada, and Australia, and links between members of bid committees and the IOC."<sup>69</sup>



**Michael Knight**

Furthermore, attempts by IOC/SOCOG scandal managers to 'out-spin' journal-

ists merely reinvigorate this global scandal matrix: journalists break the scandals; organizations then hire spin-doctors (some of whom are ex-journalists) to manage them: but journalists then castigate the cynical behaviour of the spin-doctors in reporting on their tactics. A case in point was Michael Knight's hiring of former journalist Michael Cassidy as his media advisor. However, in a feature article on spin-doctors, a journalist described Cassidy's advice to SOCOG about how to handle its ticketing scandal as "breathhtakingly cynical."<sup>70</sup> These sorts of intra-media maneuvers only extend the scandal spiral even further and deepen everyday cynicism and mistrust toward the IOC/SOCOG. A cartoon in *The Daily Telegraph* was one of the few items we discovered that captured this situation. The first frame ("Olympia - the Torch is Lit") showed two women dressed in traditional Greek garb beginning the ceremony; the second panel ("Sydney - the Finish - Hopefully") depicted John Coates, Phil Coles, Kevan Gosper, Michael Knight, and Juan Antonio Samaranch holding AOC, IOC, and SOCOG flags. They were bound together around a stake in a cauldron with terrified looks on their faces, because an anonymous holder of the Olympic torch (possibly the Australian public) was igniting a pile of kindling underneath them.

The reactions to Gosper can be construed as "a populist challenge on privilege" and an attempt to "bash the power-bloc."<sup>71</sup> Connell is referring here specifically to the tabloid media, but given the process of tabloidization we have demonstrated above, we argue that his comments also apply to quality outlets. However, it would be misleading to assume that these sorts of sentiments constitute any kind of significant threat to the IOC. As Connell indicates, such 'rants' are not necessarily politically sophisticated, calculated, or progressive. In fact, as the literature on deviance and moral panics shows, attacks on 'deviant' individuals and groups often reaffirm myths.<sup>72</sup> Thus, we maintain that the criticisms of Gosper and IOC/SOCOG we analyzed actually reinforced myths about both the Olympics and Australian culture. As we have seen, sections of both the media and the public did, indeed, rail against the IOC and SOCOG for transgressing sacrosanct community norms. But the three, entwined conservative standards that were perceived to have been violated - an idealized version of sport, traditional family values, and an unreflective cultural nationalism - hardly constituted the basis for a coherent and progressive political 'movement that could have demythologized the ideology of Olympism.

Besides, if we follow Hoberman's thesis of "endemic disorders" to its logical conclusion, then IOC officials (the odd loose cannon like Marc Hodler notwithstanding) are, by definition, virtually impervious to criticisms that there is anything problematic with either their individual or organizational practices. It is unlikely that an organization with a president who was a functionary in Franco's fascist regime will countenance anything but cosmetic reforms.<sup>73</sup> Gosper's myopic behaviour during the torch relay ceremony is a vivid example of the self-generating scandal spiral in which the IOC has now trapped itself. Additional confirmation of our thesis can be found in one reason Gosper gave for withdrawing from the race for the IOC presidency: "I go in a race if I think I can win. And I've certainly thought up until recently I could."<sup>74</sup> This comment lies in stark contrast to the revered IOC dictum that it is more important to take part than to win.

## Conclusion

... for each sport scandal and corruption story to be really shocking, it is necessary to have a very short memory and an even shorter attention span.<sup>75</sup>

Rowe's comment neatly sums up how elements of morality, cynicism, idealism, memory, and cultural amnesia determine which side of sport's split discourse becomes ascendant. Appreciable numbers of Australians were and still are angry about the events we have described, especially at a time when both state and federal governments are withdrawing their moral and economic commitments to health, education, and welfare. Nonetheless, we argue that there is an ambivalent configuration between the cynics, who believe that 'they were dumb enough to get caught,' and the romantics, who cling tenaciously to the Olympic ideals, even if a few individuals have corrupted them. Thus, despite the intensely hostile reaction to Gosper's conduct, the torch relay ceremony attracted extensive praise from both the media and the public as it went around Australia (again though, this was attributed to the efforts of 'ordinary Australians' instead of SOCOG). Moreover, Sydney 2000 has been hailed as an unqualified success. The 'best Games ever' have been credited with clearing the way for genuine reconciliation between black and white Australians, generating an economic 'bonanza,' unifying the nation, and finally ending Australians' cultural cringe (again, it was the athletes and volunteers who received most of the credit rather than SOCOG). Thus, the powerful discourse of cultural nationalism rooted in sporting success temporarily transcended the scandal discourse of the preceding two years. However, similar proclamations were also made following the dramatic Australian America's Cup victory in 1983 and the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, only to evaporate after familiar social divisions quickly re-surfaced. Therefore, it is doubtful that this 'feel good' factor will supersede the scandals over accountability, expenditure, political in-fighting, and drugs that are likely to re-emerge once the Olympic euphoria fades. In fact, the Olympic cauldron was barely cold when another public row erupted between some executive board members of the IOC and Michael Knight, when the latter ensured that SOCOG's CEO Sandy Hollway did not receive an Olympic Order of Gold for his services to Sydney 2000.<sup>76</sup>

As it stands it is unlikely that the IOC will even think about instituting the sorts of substantive democratic reforms suggested by Lenskyj and the group of disillusioned Olympic athletes and advocates who have formed *Olympic Advocates Together Honorably (OATH)*.<sup>77</sup> In the short term, such groups have a difficult task given the media's preoccupation with the immediate exuberance associated with Sydney 2000, but there is still plenty of time before the next winter and summer Games for both ongoing and unanticipated scandals to once again take center stage.

## Endnotes

1. The first part of our title is taken from an old pop song that the first author is old enough to remember but the last two are young enough never to have heard of. We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers, Geoff Lawrence, Helen Lenskyj, Toby Miller, Murray Phillips, David Rowe, Phil Smith, and Alan Tomlinson for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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  76. According to journalist Alex Mitchell, at a meeting with Samaranch and Jacques Rogge (whom Knight supported as Samaranch's successor) three weeks prior to the closing ceremony, Knight recommended awarding silver to Hollway and gold to himself, Coates, and David Richmond. The latter was a long-time friend whom Knight had installed as head of the Olympic Co-ordination Authority, thereby sidelining Hollway. However, just three hours before the closing ceremony,

Rogge informed Knight that Dick Pound, Anita DeFrantz, and Kevan Gosper, who were regarded as Rogge's main rivals in the bid to succeed Samaranch and were also long-standing critics of Knight, had insisted Hollway should also get gold at a ceremony the following day where Richmond was to receive his award. Knight replied that he would refuse his award if this transpired and Pound, DeFrantz, and Gosper backed down. A. Mitchell, "Why the Premier said good Knight," *The Sun Herald*, 8 October 2000, p. 77.

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