

## **A Conversation with Helen Jefferson Lenskyj**

Am Johal, 2008-01-02

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj is the author of *Inside the Olympic Industry* (2000), *The Best Olympics Ever?* (2002) and the forthcoming book *Olympic Industry Resistance*.

**AJ: Since the UN Special Rapporteur for the Right to Adequate Housing visited Vancouver in the middle of October 2007, there have been three more low income rental buildings planning to evict tenants and convert by the end of February 2008. Over 700 have already converted since the Olympics were awarded to Vancouver and the City of Vancouver predicts that another 660 are under threat. Is this the usual story of Olympic promises not being kept?**

Certainly. Why would they have bothered with this inner-city inclusive commitment statement if it wasn't for public relations. It was window dressing and it is part of a very common process for Olympic Organizing Committees.

**Not only does this divide community groups on the ground, it doesn't really lead to results. It seems either a moderate or a more radical approach doesn't seem to effect policy-making. There seems to be simple menu of public policy options available that they seem to be neglecting either through incompetence or poor planning.**

In watching and monitoring everything that happened including pushing out homeless people, Olympic watchdog groups in Australia were partially effective in raising issues. Certainly homelessness would have been worse if they hadn't been there. They had an important role to play.

### **How are the Beijing Olympics moving along?**

The COHRE report that came out last June documents the almost 1 million housing evictions that happened in the lead-up to the Olympics. Some journalists have tried to get the inside scoop on the shantytowns that are being razed to the ground. My knowledge of Beijing is limited to the work already done by reputable researchers and investigative journalists.

**Related to Winter Olympics, Salt Lake City is probably the most relevant to Vancouver as a North American city where evictions took place. It also had a large security cost as the first games following September 11<sup>th</sup>. In terms of preventative public policy that can be put in to place, such as moratoriums on conversions of low rent hotel rooms, public purchase of hotels, what are other kinds of policies that can be put in to place when the Olympics come to town in order to prevent evictions?**

On a number of fronts, these types of moratoriums and other policies are worth pursuing, but government seems to act too late. In Sydney, there had to be an approval process

before the stock of affordable housing could be converted or before low-income tenants could be evicted. That type of ripple process can be stemmed from the beginning if the intent is to protect the low-income housing stock. Vancouver City Council is not a good place to start right now, given its composition. The current council doesn't support legislation to prevent conversions. They believe that kind of legislation would prevent development, which is a totally lame excuse. I'm pessimistic about changing public policy but it is a good strategy to take into account all facets. Vancouver's Inner-City Inclusive Commitment Statement has not done very much so far. It was not a binding document. It was a feel-good kind of thing, just like the Toronto commitment statement during its Olympic bid.

**In Vancouver, we had asked for 2010 units over and above the existing housing program at the time of 1,200 units per year. Community groups are now calling for a legacy of 3,200 units. Not only did the housing program get cut, but the legacy is paltry on the housing front given what the actual need is and given the size of the provincial surplus. There basically has been no funding to have an independent watchdog group. They want to set the terms and conditions of the relationship and the methods of working – it is incredibly arrogant. I feel like what many aboriginal people must feel like when they're sitting across the table from a forestry or mining executive who is engaging in 'stakeholder relations.'**

It is politically dumb for VANOC to imply they have problems working with critical groups. The message that they will only work with you if you are willing to say positive things is not an authentic way of involving the community.

A groundswell of pressure on political leaders to get at least minimal protections for low-income residents through grassroots activism is definitely needed. Engaging with organizations like VANOC will not be particularly effective. They are primarily worried about the appearance of things, rather than responding in an authentic way.

**It seems like some funding programs that are Olympic related will be quite positive, but they seem to lack creativity. Organizations like Legacies Now seem to have funding pockets that are disconnected from the needs of the sectors that they are funding. VANOC and the different levels of government seem to be missing out on opportunities to really invest in smaller art and cultural institutions.**

Doing things on a big, "world-class city" scale is what the Olympics are all about.

There will also be many cost over-runs. In London, the estimates are woefully inadequate. When the budget was released, they affirmed that they were the final figures and now they are going well over budget. I reckon they will do the same in Vancouver.

**Everyone seems to have been sidelined for being even slightly critical. This could have been an opportunity to invest in civil society and develop social leadership, but it seems that this approach lacks foresight. By failing to involve people, VANOC has created critics when many people could have been their biggest supporters.**

The Olympic industry uses the divide-and-conquer approach. The government and VANOC pick their favorite groups and then marginalize the more critical ones. It is really quite a dangerous environment to be critical. But solidarity is crucial. For example, there was a wide range of community groups involved in the Anti-Olympic Alliance in Sydney, from the Salvation Army and the Red Cross to Greenpeace and Rentwatchers. As well, the Aboriginal movement in Australia is not just one single group – there are many politically diverse Aboriginal organizations.

Although it was hard to come to the table to talk when groups had different ways of working, in Sydney those differences were not so significant in the end. It's a difficult part of that kind of coalition politics, but some kind of appearance of solidarity, with differences worked out behind closed doors, is more effective than working at cross-purposes.

**It seems that one of the things that happens is that since funding is not forthcoming for groups which are even slightly critical, that funding for academics do not include community capacity building or organizing funding, it does limit the ability of groups to effectively animate the legitimate issues on the ground.**

There can be a lot of exploitive relationships created in this type of situation. Even though the onus is on community groups not to be co-opted, on the other hand it is an opportunity for them to get their issues recognized.

There is certainly a top-down pattern being reproduced in Vancouver which is disappointing, but not surprising. In Toronto and Vancouver, Olympic boosters tend to say "We're not American, we'll do things the Canadian way, we'll be more humane," but there's a template for putting on the Olympics, and organizers are constrained by the IOC. I wouldn't exonerate those who are blatantly profit-oriented, though. They are few well-intentioned but naïve people who think they are working on a project that will do good, but they are not being realistic or honest about its impacts on low-income people.