THE OLYMPICS AS AN ICONIC EVENT

The Question of National Unity and the Vancouver 2010 Games

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Is sport just exercise and competition, or is it more than that? When athletes or teams perform as representatives of a community, a city, a province, or a country, do they perform only as individuals or groups of individuals, or are they viewed as carrying the reputation or the hopes of their people with them into their competition? Can sport be a vehicle to promote regional or national cohesion among a group of people by opposing them to a different group of people? These intriguing questions suggest that sport can, indeed, serve multiple purposes beyond its purported function of demonstrating athletic skill.

Much of the public excitement around competitive sport builds on the assumption that athletes represent some kind of social community (whether local, regional, or national) in which they are challenged by athletes or teams representing a different community. While there is not always symmetry between where one lives and whom one supports, it is the notion of “representation” that changes the competition from focusing purely on the athlete to having implications for the supporting community. It is the perception of representation that arouses and sustains media interest, which, in turn, increases public interest. Think of how the media promote the Toronto Blue Jays as “Canada’s team” in competition with American teams in Major League Baseball, or the much vaunted “Battle of Alberta,” when Edmonton
plays Calgary in football or hockey. The notion of representation may also be a factor in how the supporting community responds to the competition. Supporting a team that is losing can be demoralizing, whereas supporting a winning team can boost self-esteem. This tendency has been identified as “BIRGing” (basking in reflected glory), when a team’s successes serve as an ego-enhancement technique for a community. The opposite has been referred to as CORFing (cutting off reflected failure): the fading of interest in a team, as an ego-protection technique, when that team is losing. The implication here is that the supporting community can be deeply affected by the outcome of a competition in which their representatives participate.

The Olympics as a Representational Iconic Event

The Olympics constitute a special kind of competition because competitors are explicitly representatives of their countries. They compete under the auspices of their countries’ own national Olympic committee. They march behind their country’s flag at the opening ceremonies, and if they win a gold medal, their national anthem is played for all to hear. The athletes against whom they compete also represent their countries, and it is the national media from each country that transmit the stories and results of the competition through their own, unique national lens. Standings at the Olympics are typically measured by medal counts of countries. Olympic competitors are constantly reminded that they carry the hopes and expectations of the people of their country on their shoulders because of the principle of representation. Opponents, then, are not just personal competitors: they also represent their countries, and interpretations of a competition can often be couched in terms of assessments of the countries that different athletes represent. Interpretations of competitions often reflect how some countries are represented as “friends” and others as “enemies” and how winning is often interpreted in ideological terms. Thus, many international sporting competitions have social meanings, not just athletic meanings.

At the same time, the Olympics also must be understood as an international mega-event. A mega-event is a short-term high-profile activity that requires long-term planning and the mobilization of resources that often involves reprioritizing other items considered less urgent. The fact that the Olympics have very specific requirements (such as competition venues, housing, and transportation) and a fixed ready date for international guests, and are broadcast to an international audience means that their impact is especially compelling. What is unique about
The Olympics is that they constitute a multi-sport event that in and of itself broadens interest that transcends the Games. For example, people who do not consider themselves sports minded may find themselves mesmerized by figure skating during the Olympics, even though it is not a sport that they normally follow. Much of this interest is the result of media saturation and the presentation of the Olympics as a spectacle with a great deal of drama, colour, and ceremony, all of which is produced to draw an immense audience. The production of the Olympics as a televised spectacle enhances the Games in all its facets as a performance, eliciting wide public interest across nations.

The combination of the high-profile status of the Olympic Games and the fact that virtually all major countries participate in them means that in a globalized world, the Games occupy a special place. Apart from sessions of the United Nations, in which the general public has little interest, the Olympics are the only regularly scheduled occasion on which the world’s nations come together, and they receive intense media coverage, garnering the largest broadcast audience of any single event in the world. For this reason, the Olympics call for unprecedented preparation on the part of host cities, and they have acquired an iconic significance worldwide. But can the Olympics also be an iconic event for a host state? From a national perspective, an iconic event generates such unusual interest and participation that it plays an important role in the memory of its people and in the nation’s recorded history.

**ICONIC EVENTS PRECEDING VANCOUVER 2010**

It could be argued that one of the greatest sporting landmarks in Canadian history was the XXI Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver, British Columbia, in February 2010. In this chapter, I attempt to determine this event’s iconic significance. Although the test of history cannot yet be applied to these Games, contemporary evidence can be explored. While Canada hosted two Olympic Games before Vancouver (the Summer Games in Montréal in 1976 and the Winter Games in Calgary in 1988), I have chosen the Vancouver Games for this analysis because they are still fresh in the nation’s collective memory and appear to have had an unprecedented impact on both the host city and the nation.

This is not the first time that sport has played an important role in arousing widespread public interest across the nation. Analysts often refer to the Canada-Russia hockey series in 1972 as a particularly stirring moment that awakened national consciousness. Held during the height of the Cold War and utilizing professional
players from Canada for the first time in international competition, the tightly fought eight-game series was won in the final thirty-four seconds of the last game with a goal by Paul Henderson. Perhaps cementing for all time hockey’s iconic role for Canadians, this hockey series made it clear that sport plays a pivotal role in the collective identity of Canadians.

As already noted, the Olympic Games comprise many sports and are thus much more complex than an international hockey series, requiring a diversity of venues and much more coordinated planning and involving dozens of nations. The Montréal Games in 1976 are often remembered more for the controversies that they stirred, the most notable of which was the spiralling debt incurred, than for the achievements of the world’s best athletes. After Mayor Jean Drapeau had guaranteed that the Game’s costs would be kept under control, the price of the Olympic stadium became the symbol of the city’s financial failures. It took thirty years to pay off the debt on “The Big O,” which was often referred to instead as “The Big Owe.” The Montréal Games were also held at a time when the nationalist movement in Québec was very influential, raising the question, for example, of whether the Queen of England, as Canada’s head of state, should be invited to open the Games. Political wrangling at numerous government levels contributed to muting the impact of the Games across Canada. This is not to minimize the successes of the Games but to point to the factors that limited its impact and, above all, its legacy.

The Calgary Games, in contrast, took place under very different conditions. The financial consequences of hosting the Games, as represented by the experience of Montréal, had had a chilling effect on the bidding to host the Games. Los Angeles (hosting in 1984) stepped into the breach and became the model for a new kind of Games, essentially financed without government backing and using existing facilities rather than embarking on massive construction projects. Part of the success of this approach was related to new revenues generated by the sale of television rights. The Calgary Games (1988) built on this model; although government backing and new venue construction were required, it was the sale of television rights (an unexpected $309 million contract with ABC) that brought substantially increased revenues. Calgary had just begun to grow out of its role as a regional city: its influence on the national and international scene was expanding, primarily because of its central role in the oil and gas industry. In this context, a local euphoria surrounded preparation for the Games, which were seen as a “signaling” or “showcase event” for an ascendant city that was just entering the global stage. The city’s strong volunteer heritage and the customary participation of local inhabitants in “festival” events was clearly manifested during the hosting of the
Calgary Olympics, resulting in strong positive affect that was transmitted across the country.” However, both the Montréal and Calgary Games were notable in that no Canadians won a gold medal in their own country. Thus, prior to the Vancouver Olympics, sporting success was not a part of Canadians’ memories of Olympics hosted in their country.

The Montréal Olympics took place in an era of boycotts; many nations did not participate in protest of various issues. Four years later, a number of the United States’s allies boycotted the Olympics in Moscow, with many of Russia’s allies, in turn, boycotting the 1984 Games in Los Angeles. Most African nations boycotted the Montréal Games over the International Olympic Committee’s decision not to ban the New Zealand rugby team, which had toured South Africa, where apartheid was still the law. Although the Olympics are supposed to be a peaceful encounter among nations of the world, an undertone of global conflict permeated the entire Olympic movement around the time of the Montréal Games. Not only were these the first Olympics to be held in Canada, but they were also the Summer Games, which included many competitions in which Canadian athletes were not particularly strong.

In contrast, the Calgary and Vancouver Games were the Winter Games, in which Canada was more likely to excel. Furthermore, in both 1988 and 2010, controversies surrounding the Olympic movement were much more subdued, even though between these two Winter Olympics, corruption and unbridled doping were rampant, particularly around the time of the Salt Lake City Games (2002). Calgary marked the beginning of a new era in two respects: television audiences were increasing, as was local participation in the Games through activities in the public realm. For example, in Calgary, the public was invited downtown every evening for medal ceremonies in a newly constructed park, Olympic Plaza, along with a laser light show in which colourful beams were projected between high-rise office buildings. Dozens of hot air balloons were launched every morning, free pancake breakfasts were served to locals and visitors alike, and the downtown pedestrian mall became a hub of daily pin trading and busking. Calgary’s Games set a new trend in that during the Olympics, local residents experienced their downtown as a gathering place for fun rather than just a place for work and shopping. Two of the heroes of the Calgary Games who underscored the point that there is a place for ordinary people in the Olympics were Eddie the Eagle, a British ski jumper, and the Jamaican bobsled team—both of whom finished last. One of the songs played in Calgary about Eddie during the Games had this refrain, “He made us see the Olympics for what they really are—that everyone can play the game and everyone’s
a star,” which, of course, reverses the idea of the Olympics as being a place for only high-performance athletes. The Jamaican bobsled team members who competed in Calgary have the distinction of being the only athletes to have had a movie made about them after finishing last in the Olympics. From the point of view of local residents, success was not measured by the number or colour of medals won but by public participation and a profitable bottom line.

HOW THE VANCOUVER GAMES WERE DIFFERENT

The Vancouver Games provide a dramatic contrast to both Montréal and Calgary in that they were highly successful for Canada in terms of medals. A nonprofit national umbrella organization known as Own the Podium was created in 2005 to bring concerted funding to support the development of high-performance athletes—particularly in preparation for the 2010 Games. Since Canada was the only country in the history of the Olympics to have hosted the Games while not winning a gold medal, it was thought that a coordinated effort was needed by all sports organizations across the country to provide the resources for success. Supported by both the federal government and segments of the private sector, Own the Podium established goals to ensure that Canada would become a leading winter sports nation. As a result, Canada finished with the most gold medals (fourteen) of any competing nation at the Vancouver Games and finished third overall, with twenty-six medals. While some criticized as unsportsmanlike the theme of dominance implied in the notion of “owning” the podium, which was thought to be particularly offensive coming from a host nation, it is clear that resources were mobilized based on the assumption that Canadians’ renowned sense of inferiority in international competition needed to be replaced by a different attitude that would enhance the collective spirit of Canadians. In that sense, Own the Podium became an important symbol of the relationship of athletic success to national identity and of the Olympics as the mechanism, or the iconic event, to mediate that relationship.

Another indicator of the iconic status of the Vancouver Olympics was the extent of television viewing in the country during the Games. The opening ceremonies, televised live, became the most watched television event in Canadian history up to that point. Twenty-three million viewers, or about two in every three Canadians, tuned in to some part of the ceremony. About 84 percent of all people watching television in Canada that evening were watching the opening ceremonies, with an additional one million Internet video views. On the last day of the Olympics, the
gold medal hockey game between Canada and the United States became the most watched television event in Canadian history. Almost half of the Canadian population watched the entire game, while 80 percent watched at least part of the game. About two-thirds of the Canadian population watched Sidney Crosby score the winning goal against the United States, in overtime, that gave the Canadian men's hockey team the gold medal. The closing ceremony on the evening of the same day became the second most watched broadcast ever. The fact that the Games were aired live on nine television networks and in eight languages in what was known as Canada's broadcast media consortium helped to ensure success. Overall, television viewing in Canada increased 22 percent during the Games over the preceding five weeks. Clearly, the Vancouver Olympics had extraordinary drawing power among Canadians, and the amount of participation through television viewing provides an understanding of how these Games might play an important role in Canadian national consciousness.

For most people, in Canada and around the world, the Olympics are a mediated event. In other words, the media interpret the Games to their audiences by choosing what to focus on and what to discuss. The dominant media form, of course, is television, and because of the number of countries that broadcasted the Vancouver Olympics, the potential global reach of the Games was an unprecedented 3.8 billion people. In reality, 1.8 billion people watched at least some of the Games; unless they were involved in the Games in some other way as well, their knowledge of the Vancouver Olympics came to them through the lens of a television camera and the words of a commentator. Other forms of media also play a role; print media, for example, decide what is newsworthy and how to interpret the news they choose to present. For example, the cause of the death of the Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili was open to numerous interpretations, from poor design of the track to inexperience of the athlete. The way in which this accident was interpreted reflected on whether the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC), the IOC, the International Luge Federation, or the athlete was to blame. Furthermore, the adjustment to the luge course made by authorities after this accident had a major impact on the results of the race: moving the starting point affected the Canadian women's team, who lost their training advantage by having a much shorter course. This is an example of how the media play a major role in helping others interpret events as they unfold. The media can create a sense that the Games are a huge success, but they can also create images of an event filled with controversy and conflict. Similarly, they can decide to zero in on matters that create emotional responses, such as the death of Canadian figure skater Joannie Rochette's mother prior to the competition, which
focused viewers and readers especially on her. These are some of the ways in which the Olympics in Vancouver were mediated to audiences across Canada.

However, some host city residents have a somewhat different vantage point on the Games, for they are at ground zero and are not totally dependent on the media. Since the IOC makes its host city decision seven years in advance of the Games, people in Vancouver had been part of the local Olympic drama for at least the seven years of preparation. Many issues drew citizens into public and private discussions, starting in 2003, when local residents were asked in a plebiscite whether they wanted to host the Games. Although the final tally supported hosting the Games (64% in favour, 36% opposed), battle lines were drawn and controversy persisted around three basic questions:

- Is hosting the Olympics a good idea for our city, and what are the costs?
- How might hosting the Olympics affect me?
- How should I respond to the decision?

These questions were debated continuously in Vancouver, particularly over costs and benefits, with a focus on fiscal priorities in the context of government cutbacks. The notion that hosting the Olympics is an international honour was challenged by questions about the Olympics as a form of capitalist manipulation and alienation. As the Games grew closer, it became clear that VANOC would be temporarily transforming the way the city normally works, with Olympic lanes on major roadways, road closures, heightened surveillance, and threats to civil freedoms supposedly justified by the need to “cleanse” the city from any sources of disturbance or conflict. In other words, that hosting the Games was an unalloyed benefit to the city was by no means a foregone conclusion. In the event-preparation period, the Olympics thus provided the basis for considerable dialogue and debate among local residents, stimulating much civic and social interaction. In Vancouver, organizations such as No Games 2010 and the Olympic Resistance Network played a major role in contesting the positive interpretation of the Games provided by Olympic organizers by accentuating the controversial aspects of the Olympics.

As the Games began, it was intriguing to watch the spirit of an interactive festival taking over the city. First, the Games transformed the public realm as people mingled on crowded streets that were closed to vehicular traffic to become pedestrian corridors. At peak times, an estimated 150,000 people crammed the Robson Street-Granville corridor. Second, multiple forms of entertainment became available: live sites and pavilions with massive tents were erected in parks, parking lots were provided with huge screens for people to watch events; live bands performed
in a variety of venues; and exhibitions were set up around the city. The Yaletown live site, for example, typically received twenty-five thousand visitors a day, with many people turned away because of its confined space. Third, interest was so high that access to everything, whether the live sites or the rapid transit system, involved lengthy lineups where people often broke out in cheers or singing. The mood was radically transformed: people were high-fiving strangers, dressing in costumes, and being entertained by buskers or flash mobs.

Fourth, the Olympics stimulated all kinds of social interaction and a sense of inclusion. Even people who watched the Olympics on television often did so with other people, whether in bars or at home parties, rather than alone. Local people did not need to have tickets to Olympic events to feel they were part of the Games. As John MacAlloon notes, local people in a host city experience the Games not primarily through the spectacle created by the media but through interaction with others that is stimulated by being located at ground zero. These social connections in the public realm, which can be described as “urban encounters,” played a major role in helping Vancouverites experience their city in a new way. Helen Liggett notes that these encounters are important in the creation of “momentary hybrid spaces” where people come to see themselves not in terms of their mutually exclusive identities but in terms of how they share spaces important to city life. All of this rather unusual activity, at least compared to normal life in Vancouver, helped to contribute to the role of the Olympics as an iconic event for the city. But this mood was also transmitted to the rest of Canada by the media, and many reports were received of celebrations in cities across the country prompted by the Olympics because these were Canada’s Games.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES: OPINION SHIFTS AND PATRIOTISM

One of the most significant outcomes of the Vancouver Olympics was the shift in public opinion about the Olympics. Before the event, Vancouverites had vigorously debated the costs and benefits for the city of hosting the Games. By the time the Games concluded, the share of people who thought that they would have a negative impact on the city had dropped from 36 percent to 10 percent, while those who thought they would have a positive impact had increased from 52 percent to 83 percent. By the end of the Games, 85 percent of Vancouver residents were following the Olympics either “very closely” or “moderately closely.” Although 83 percent thought the Games were a success, only 65 percent thought they were “worth it.” This suggests that questions about economic value remained, and yet there
was an overwhelming sense that the Games had been successful. The reticence of people in Vancouver before the Games was reflected in a telephone poll conducted in January 2009, which found that while 73 percent of Canadians felt that holding the Games in Vancouver would have more benefits than drawbacks for the province, within British Columbia, only a small majority (54 percent) agreed, and 40 percent said that the drawbacks would outweigh the benefits. Similarly, 72 percent of Canadians were of the opinion that the Vancouver Games would have more benefits than drawbacks for the country as a whole, but only 52 percent of British Columbians concurred, and 39 percent felt that the opposite would be the case. Debt and misplaced fiscal priorities were the greatest concerns before the event, but as the Games unfolded, success was broadened to include no breaches in security and no organizational problems that would give the Vancouver Olympics a black eye. An analysis of responses to surveys at the end of the Games demonstrated that one of the most powerful factors in the attitude shift was the opportunity for residents to participate in the Olympics through non-ticketed events in the public realm, including free concerts at live sites and visits to the exhibitions and pavilions. This is not to suggest that all people were happy with the Olympics, but it is clear that the social dynamics of the event in the host city played a role in cooling opposition and creating fond memories of a unique iconic event not typical of normal urban life.

The second major outcome of the Vancouver Olympics was that they fostered a spontaneous expression of patriotism almost unheard of in the country before this event. While the most dynamic expressions of patriotism occurred in Vancouver, they were also experienced elsewhere in Canada. The nationwide department store chain the Hudson’s Bay Company carried Olympic merchandise, with the most popular being the famous red mittens. Not only were over 3.5 million pairs of mittens sold across the country, but they were sold out within the first week. These mittens sported the Canadian maple leaf and were the clearest means of connecting the Olympics with Canada as a nation. On the streets of Vancouver, people wore other Canada-themed clothing, often burst out in cheers for Canada, and were even frequently heard spontaneously singing the national anthem, “O Canada.” These were striking expressions of love for country—particularly since 40 percent of Vancouver’s population is foreign born, half of whom had arrived in the last fifteen years. Recent immigration to other Canadian cities means that the “new Canadian” factor may also have played a role in expressions of patriotism elsewhere in the country: the Olympics provided the occasion for many new Canadians to express their new national identity in public for the first time.
emotional fervour building to the gold medal final men’s ice hockey game on the last day of the Olympics—and against the United States, in particular—created the background for a patriotic frenzy that was strikingly unusual. Interestingly, all of this happened with little prompting. Merchants obviously helped by making the themed apparel available, but it was what people did with these products that was so dramatic. These raucous demonstrations of patriotism provide clear evidence for the iconic significance of the Vancouver Olympics in Canadian history.

Assessing the Iconic Status of the Olympics in Canada

What role did the Vancouver Olympics play in developing a national consciousness? Without question, the 2010 Winter Games became a powerful vehicle for the expression of Canadian patriotism. Given Canada’s failure to win a single gold medal in the two previous Olympics held in Canada, it was fascinating to watch the mobilization of financial resources to enhance Canada’s medal count (or “podium performances”) to become “a world leader in high-performance sport.” This initiative was clearly motivated by the patriotic goal of enhancing Canada’s position in global sport and thereby building national pride. Even though Canada had a slow start in medal performances in the first week of the Games, which led to disappointment and scaled-back expectations, the second week brought a significant reversal, and Canada ultimately finished first with a record number of medals. Because of the prominence of hockey in Canadian culture, emotional fervour was particularly raised by the success of the women’s hockey team and, especially, the dramatic overtime finish by the men’s hockey team in the gold medal final on the last day of the Olympics, which created an almost scripted grand finale. The Own the Podium program was perhaps the clearest declaration in Canadian history of the role that high-performance sport via the Olympics might play in developing a more cohesive national spirit. This is because Olympic athletes have always been viewed not just as individual competitors but as representatives of a nation. Whether the global community would be impressed by the outcome of the Own the Podium program was less important than the sense of confidence and victory it gave to Canadians. In a country accustomed to being dominated by larger, more powerful nations, including in the Olympics, it is important not to underestimate this outcome.

A very important element in drawing national attention to the Olympics was the Olympic torch relay, described as a unique opportunity “to unify Canadians from coast-to-coast-to-coast and generate a feeling of national pride.” The torch
relay that led up to the 2010 Winter Games involved twelve thousand torchbearers who relayed the torch forty-five thousand kilometres to more than a thousand communities across the country, bringing the torch within one hour's drive of 90 percent of the population of Canada. Clearly, the torch relay provided a common symbol and focus for the country's inhabitants. While this common focus also provided opportunities for protesters to express their opinions, many Canadians spoke of the intense patriotic emotions evoked by the torch relay and associated rallies.

Another element of considerable importance was the attempt by organizers in Vancouver to incorporate Aboriginal peoples into the Olympic narrative. Given the sense of exclusion often felt by First Nations people in Canada—in particular, the contested nature of land claims and treaty rights in British Columbia, even in the territory in and around Vancouver—the Olympics were seen by some as an opportunity to draw international attention to the plight of Aboriginal people. Instead, VANOC was able to co-opt Aboriginal participation and inclusion by inviting the Lil’wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations to be the four host nations for the Games. While some argue that this negotiated position allowed Aboriginal peoples to play a significant part in the host city experience through, for example, art and crafts merchandising and the Aboriginal pavilion, which drew thousands of visitors during the Games, others contend that this participation was mere tokenism that did little to reverse the sense of subordination felt by Aboriginal peoples. Of course, the Olympics alone cannot reverse the effects of years of domination, but the Games undeniably represented an attempt to elevate Aboriginal cultures and, in some sense, to include them as foundational to Canadian consciousness.

Is it appropriate, then, to claim that the Vancouver Olympics serve as an iconic event for Canada as a nation? Will they be identified as an important moment in Canadian history or a significant marker in the development of a national consciousness? Patricia Leavy uses the term *iconic event* to describe events or experiences that are indelibly engraved on a people's spirit and memory and that serve as a repeated reference point in that group's history. All societies have collective memories, which are often perpetuated and interpreted over time by the media or by governments in a way that enables an event to take on mythic proportions, so much so that the event becomes an important part of social and political discourse. But will the 2010 Vancouver Olympics play that role in Canadian national consciousness?

While such sentiments cannot be said to reflect the feelings of all Canadians, two letters to the editor that appeared in the *Vancouver Sun* on 2 March 2010, at the
conclusion of the Games, provide evidence of at least some of the intensely patri-otic emotion that people expressed at the time. A woman who had been born in the United Arab Emirates but now lived in Canada described her experience this way:

The day of the biggest hockey game, and I thought that I would have to miss it for a meeting with about eighty women and girls at my mosque. I arrived and started to listen to our respected speakers, but soon we were interrupted by one of the organizers. He said we would stop our program to watch the hockey game and then continue later. The organizers had set up a forty-two inch HD television for us. Hockey is a passion for many and Islam tells us to love our country and support it in every way. All of us were rooting for Canada.

She then described how she had prayed that Canada would win and how the hall echoed with screams when the winning goal was scored. Although these women came from a place where hockey was not part of the culture, the Olympics gave them an opportunity to identify emotionally with their new country and to express their love for it. The writer of another letter commented that, while it was the Team Canada athletes who carried “the weight of a country on their shoulders,” the performance of these athletes had

given “regular folks” the ability to finally wear our red and white and shout: Yes, I am proud to be Canadian! . . . No matter what ethnic background we come from, province or village that we live in, we are finally ONE PEOPLE. . . . Children now have the visual memory, the written history, and the oral legends to fuel their own dreams.

Although this perspective may be somewhat overdrawn, it reflects the euphoria that many people experienced during the Games. Granted, because emotional reactions tend to be fleeting, they may not be a good barometer of reality over the long term. All the same, the memory of participating in the Olympics, whether as a spectator or an athlete, has the potential to be reawaken those feelings of reverence and pride.

**Conclusion**

There is no question that Canadian athletic success contributed to a very positive sense of national “victory” through the Vancouver Olympics. It can be argued that the phrase “Own the Podium” in itself connotes a sense of power, dominance, and even arrogance that runs contrary to Canada’s traditional spirit of national
inferiority. To the extent that the Vancouver Games represented a reversal of that mode of thinking and to the extent that it is possible that the performance in Vancouver may not be repeatable at future Olympics (indeed, Russia mounted a program similar to Own the Podium for its Sochi 2014 Games, and although Canada earned only one less medal than in Vancouver, we came third overall), it is possible that the 2010 Games on Canadian soil will be a watershed moment in Canadian history.

In hindsight, other factors may also contribute to that assessment. Around the time of the Vancouver Games, the Canadian government was in considerable disarray. Canada has always had very strong conflicting currents along regional and ideological lines, and the election of a minority government at the federal level in 2008 provided ample evidence of that fact. Talk of a nonconfidence vote and a possible coalition government among the contending parties created a situation where Parliament had become dysfunctional and was prorogued for a second time in just over a year, from 30 December 2009 until the Olympics ended. It is ironic, then, that at a time of considerable political division, the Olympics could provide welcome relief, if not a sense of unity.

One of the major themes of the Olympic movement is the idea of legacy—namely, the long-term and enduring outcome of the Olympics for the host city and country. Whereas Olympic legacy was once thought of mostly in terms of the construction of new sport facilities to be used by athletes and the general public, the emphasis more recently is on how the Olympics make the host city a more pleasant, efficient, and sustainable place to live. Again, this is often thought of in terms of hard legacies such as new airports, better transportation systems, better accommodations for tourists, or new facilities that can be converted for other uses after the Games are over. As Richard Cashman documents for Sydney, not all Olympic outcomes prove to be positive, but the most valuable legacies are often the soft ones—national or civic pride, warm feelings and pleasant memories, a sense of accomplishment. These positive, but less quantifiable, effects are sometimes referred to as “emotional capital.” Some economists have argued that the question of whether the economic benefits exceed the economic costs must be answered negatively, or it must be acknowledged that it is impossible to calculate. What many do acknowledge is that often it is the soft legacies—the intangible, immeasurable outcomes—that remain. In the end, it is these soft legacies that will determine whether the Vancouver Olympics achieve lasting iconic status in the Canadian pantheon of national mythologies. What I have tried to explore in this chapter are the factors that might ultimately confer such a status on the Vancouver Games.
NOTES


12 CTV Bell Media press release, 1 March 2010.
13 International Olympic Committee (IOC), *Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games: Global Television and Online Media Overview* (Lausanne: IOC and Sponsorship Intelligence, 2010).


18 MacAloon, “Theory of Spectacle.”


