

2016/14: Did Australia spend too much in preparation for the Rio Olympic Games?

What they said...

'The Olympic ideal was simply to compete in an open, friendly international atmosphere and...winning...was a secondary issue. Money and national ego have trumped this naive idea and left us with a scandal-ridden mess'

Tony Priestley, letter writer to The Age

'To be role models for so many, especially kids, who will be inspired to follow in your footsteps, these are magnificent achievements'
Australia's Governor General, Sir Peter Cosgrove, addressing Australia's returning Olympic athletes

The issue at a glance

By the fourth week of August, 2016, with the end of the Rio Olympics fast approaching, recriminations had already begun within Australia over the Olympic team's failure to achieve the results that had been anticipated from it.

A News.com.au report dated August 22, 2016, included the observation, 'There have been rivers of tears and dashed dreams from Australia's best in Rio as one after another, our greatest medal hopes have failed to reach the heights predicted for them.'

This relative disappointment translated into discussion as to whether the team's performance warranted the large investment in taxpayer money that had been directed toward it.

Though various of the Olympic team managers, and numerous prominent Australians, including the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, praised the athletes' and thanked them for their efforts, the debate over the value for money that Australia's Olympic funding represents continued after the athletes returned home.

Background

(The information found below has been taken from three sources - a Wikipedia entry titled 'Australia at the 2016 Summer Olympics' which can be accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia_at_the_2016_Summer_Olympics; a Fox Sports Fox Scores report published after the Rio Olympics which can be accessed at <http://www.foxsports.com.au/olympics/rio-2016-every-australian-medal-and-daybyday-comparison-to-previous-olympic-campaigns/news-story/5e2545cc21f764e4e9b1e78b25d57110>; and a comment written by Steve Georgakis and published by SBS on August 19, 2016, titled 'Winning Edge - using public money to produce an Olympic spectacle to benefit corporates' which can be accessed at <http://www.foxsports.com.au/olympics/rio-2016-every-australian-medal-and-daybyday-comparison-to-previous-olympic-campaigns/news-story/5e2545cc21f764e4e9b1e78b25d57110>; <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/08/19/comment-winning-edge-using-public-money-produce-olympic-spectacle-benefit>)

Australia competed at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 5 to 21 August 2016. Australia was one of only five countries to have sent athletes to every Summer Olympics of the modern era, alongside Great Britain, France, Greece, and Switzerland.

Funding

In May 2014 Australian Sports Minister Peter Dutton announced that 650 Australian athletes identified as medal prospects would receive funding directly from a newly designed program that reallocated A\$1.6 million from the Direct Athlete Support program.

In the lead-up to the Rio Olympics, the Australian Sports Commission advised that it had invested A\$376.7 million in high performance sports in the Rio cycle 2012-2016. This amount includes funding to Winter Olympics and non-Olympic sports.

The Olympic funding program is titled 'Winning Edge' and is geared at maximizing Australia's chances of gaining medals.

In preparation for Rio, 'Winning Edge' was designed to ensure resources were aimed at the Australian athletes who had the best chance to medal. The Australian Government therefore allocated \$260 million through the ASC to the various sports; some sports had their funding reduced while others had it increased.

On the conclusion of the Rio games draw it is now evident that many of these financially favoured sports, including swimming, hockey and cycling, have under-performed, or, at the very least, did not reach the ASC projections.

Summary of Medals Won by Australian Athletes

Australia won a total of 29 medals in the 2016 Summer Olympics - eight gold, eleven silver and ten bronze. A more detailed breakdown follows.

Gold (8)

Swimming - Men's 400m freestyle

Swimming - Women's 4x100m freestyle

Swimming - Men's 100m freestyle

Rowing - Women's single sculls

Sailing - Men's laser

Shooting - Women's trap

Rugby - Women's sevens

Modern pentathlon - Women's

Silver (11)

Swimming - Women's 200m butterfly

Swimming - Women's 4x200m freestyle relay

Swimming - Men's 200m backstroke

Swimming - Women's 4x100m medley relay

Rowing - Men's quad scull

Rowing - Men's four

Sailing - Nacra 17

Sailing - men's 470

Sailing - men's 49er

Cycling - Men's team pursuit

Walking - men's 50km race

Bronze (10)

Swimming - Men's 4x100m freestyle relay

Swimming - Women's 200m freestyle

Swimming - Men's 4x100m medley relay

Diving - Women's synchronised

Canoe/kayak - Women's slalom

Kayaking - K2-1000m sprint

Archery - Men's team

Equestrian - Team eventing

Track Cycling - Women's keirin

Walking - Men's 20km

Internet information

On October 7, 2016, the ABC published an updated report by Matt Martino titled 'Rio 2016: Which Olympic sports gave the taxpayer more bang for their buck?'

The report estimates the cost per Australian medal achieved within the different sports at the Rio Olympics.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-22/rio-olympics-2016-how-much-does-a-medal-cost-taxpayer/7748946>

In 2015 the Clearinghouse for Sport released an overview of factors contributing to community participation in sport in Australia, especially among children.

The overview was updated on September 7, 2016.

Clearinghouse for Sport is an initiative of the Australia Sports Commission that distributes research data on sports related trends in Australia.

The overview looked at the factors increasing community involvement in sport and judged the performance of elite athletes as a making a minor contribution.

The full document can be accessed at

https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/knowledge_base/sport_participation/community_participation/sport_participation_in_australia

In August 2016, The Monthly published a comment by Waleed Aly titled 'Gold is good:

The Olympics, Sport and National Pride'

The opinion piece defends the value of nationalism, competitiveness and state funding in relation to the Olympic Games.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.themonthly.com.au/gold-good-waleed-aly-6167>

On August 29, 2016, the ABC published a news report titled 'Australian Olympic team honoured by Governor-General at Sydney event'

The report focuses on expressions of gratitude and praise received by the 2016 Australian Olympic team.

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-29/olympians-honoured-peter-cosgrove-event-in-sydney/7794088>

On August 24, 2016, Life Hacker published a report by Chris Jager titled 'Here's How Much Australia's 2016 Olympic Medal Tally Cost Tax Payers [Infographic]'

The report features tables showing the relative cost to the taxpayer of the different medals Australian athletes won.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.lifehacker.com.au/2016/08/heres-how-much-australias-2016-olympics-medal-tally-cost-australian-tax-payers-infographic/>

On August 22, 2016, The Courier Mail published a comment by Grantlee Kieza titled 'Elite sport in Australia costs too much in gold' The point of view argues that Australia's Olympic spending is too high for too little return and criticises the competitive emphasis that prompts such outlays.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/opinion/opinion-elite-sport-in-australia-costs-too-much-in-gold/news-story/c1d3f5678c1d5e0a3b23bbff77f780cb>

On August 22, 2016, News.com.au published a comment by Emma Reynolds titled 'Is Australia's disastrous Olympic campaign really \$340 million well spent?'

The point of view emphasises the disappointment felt over the Australian team's performance and the questions being asked about the value of the money spent in developing it.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.news.com.au/sport/olympics/is-australias-disastrous-olympic-campaign-really-340-million-well-spent/news-story/b6d9d7211136bbc8309939e42ec6e471>

On August 22, 2016, The Conversation published a comment and analysis by Jason Potts, Professor of Economics, RMIT University; Patrik Wikström; Principal Research Fellow: Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology and Stuart Cunningham

Stuart Cunningham, Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, Queensland University of Technology.

The comment and analysis is titled 'The price of victory: comparing the cost of Olympic gold to an elite arts prize'

The article compares the cost to the taxpayer supporting the arts in Australia relative to the cost of supporting Olympic athletes.

The full text can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/the-price-of-victory-comparing-the-cost-of-olympic-gold-to-an-elite-arts-prize-64159>

On August 22, 2016, The Guardian published a comment and analysis by Paul Connolly titled 'Australia's well-planned, well-funded Olympic over-achievement is finished'

The article argues that with dramatic increases in government and other sports sponsorship in countries wealthier than Australia, Australia may never again achieve the medal victories it has in past Olympics.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/22/australias-well-planned-well-funded-olympic-over-achievement-is-finished>

On August 22, 2016, The Age published a series of letters to the editor under the heading 'The Olympics: Winning is a bonus; losing is no shame'

A majority of letters argue for the other values that the Olympic Games promotes beyond the satisfaction of winning.

These letters can be accessed at <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-letters/the-olympics-winning-is-a-bonus-losing-is-no-shame-20160818-gqvqg2.html>

On August 21, 2016, Eureka Street published a comment by Michael McVeigh titled 'Luckily for Australia, winning really isn't everything'

The opinion piece promotes Olympic ideals other than competitive success.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=49772#.WBVYBsknLV>

On August 19, 2016 The Daily published a report titled 'Rio Olympics 2016: Australian medals cost taxpayers \$20m each'

The report estimates the probable cost to the taxpayer per medal and also notes that despite the expense surveys have indicated popular support for continued funding.

The report can be accessed at <http://thenewdaily.com.au/sport/rio-olympics-2016/2016/08/19/rio-medals-australia/>

On August 19, 2016, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by Malcolm Knox titled 'Ultra-nationalism is the ugly face of the Rio Olympic Games'

The opinion piece is critical of the nationalistically-based competitiveness displayed at the Rio Olympics.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/sport/olympics/rio-2016/ultranationalism-is-the-ugly-face-of-the-rio-olympic-games-20160819-gqwclz.html>

On August 17, 2016, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by Chris Barrett titled 'Rio Olympics 2016: Medals come at a heavy price for Australian taxpayers'

The opinion piece regrets Australia's performance at the Rio Olympics and the cost to the Australian taxpayer.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/sport/olympics/rio-2016/rio-olympics-2016-medals-come-at-a-heavy-price-for-australian-taxpayers-20160816-gqu6t8.html>

August 14, 2016, The Daily Mail published a report titled 'Is it worth it? Australia's eight medals so far in the Olympic pool in Rio have cost us \$5million EACH - as it's revealed taxpayers forked out a massive \$40million on the swimming program'

The article is critical of the Australian swimmers relative lack of success given the extent of the taxpayer investment in their performance.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3738757/40Million-taxpayer-funds-spend-Australian-Olympic-program-past-four-years-worth-it.html>

On January 11, 2016, The Australian Olympic Committee published an opinion piece titled 'Rio means much more than medals'

The comment stresses the advantages that Olympic competition supplies beyond the possibility of winning.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://rio2016.olympics.com.au/news/rio-means-much-more-than-medals>

On July 31, 2012, Eureka Street published a comment by Fatima Measham titled 'What's the point of the Olympics?'

The opinion piece is critical of the contemporary corruption of Olympic ideals.

The full text can be accessed at <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=32551#.WBVg7MknLV>

Arguments suggesting that Australia spent too much

1. Australia's achievements at the Rio Olympics were below what was expected

In an opinion piece published by a news.com.au four days before the end of the Rio Olympics, Emma Reynolds noted, 'With \$340 million ploughed into this four-year cycle, fans are questioning whether the underwhelming results represent value for money.

Aussie athletes have so far scooped 27 medals (29 medals were finally won), at a cost of \$12.5 million per medal at this stage.'

Reynolds argues that this failure to achieve as expected despite massive investments of public funds has become a feature of Australia's Olympic performance. She states, 'The Sydney 2000 Summer Olympics marked a record high for Australia, which came fourth with 58 medals, 16 of them gold.

But the nation's Olympic performance has been in steady decline ever since. At Athens 2004, the country won 50 medals, dropping to 46 at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, with 14 golds.

By London 2012, Australia won just 35 medals, eight of them gold.

Four years on, the team is on track for its worst medal haul since Seoul in 1988 as a series of athletes choke or narrowly miss out on the top-three.'

Critics of Australia's performance note that Government sponsorship of Australian athletes has to be seen as a misuse of public funds as the sole objective of Australia's Olympic program has been more medals, not mere participation.

Via the 'Winning Edge' funding strategy, Australia did not seek to increase the number of athletes who qualified to compete in the Olympics; it sought to increase the nation's medal tally. Therefore by the criteria that the Australian Sports Commission set for itself, the Rio games must be seen as an ineffective expenditure of taxpayers' money.

In an opinion piece published in The Sydney Morning Herald on August 17, 2016, Chris Barrett stated, 'The deflating return will serve as a reality check amid aspirations, voiced by chef de mission Kitty Chiller in the weeks before competition, for as many as 15 gold medals and a top-five finish on the medal tally.

It is also expected to prompt fresh questions about the effectiveness of the funding model introduced after London and overseen by the Australian Sports Commission.'

A similar point was made by Dr Lisa Gowthorp in a comment published in The Conversation on August 23, 2016. Dr Gowthorp stated, 'Rio 2016 is over and questions are being asked about why the Australian team didn't perform any better. Making things worse is the fact that this worsening performance comes despite a new sports funding strategy [the Winning Edge] that was supposed to boost the national medal tally.'

2. The nature of the 'Winning Edge' strategy ignores relatively undeveloped sports and athletes

It has been claimed that a strategy of funding only those sports and competitors that were judged likely to achieve a medal at Rio reduced the prospects of others boosting their performances and even their prospects of qualifying for Olympic competition. The argument is, 'If sports are denied funding, or have their funding reduced, how can they be expected to improve?'

This argument has been put by Dr Lisa Gowthorp in an opinion piece published in *The Conversation* on August 10, 2006. Dr Gowthorp paraphrased the position of critics of this strategy. Gowthorp wrote, 'The concern among many involved in less popular sports is that the government's sport investment focus is now only supporting successful sports and successful athletes. But how do athletes become successful without support structures and systems around them? And how can sports develop and nurture talented athletes with no funding?'

Former Australian Olympic marathon champion and former director of the Australian Institute of Sport, Robert de Costello, has been particularly critical of the Winning Edge strategy. Costello believes that in focusing on those areas where medals seem most likely to be won, the strategy reduces the likelihood of improvement in other areas and undermines the overall pursuit of sporting excellence and the development of potential.

Costello has stated, "'I have never been a huge fan of Winning Edge and the fundamental thing I disagree with it is that it is medal count focused and it's not really about elite performance.

There is a tendency to focus purely on medal tallies. If there are soft medals to be won...that is where a lot of the emphasis has gone. I think that is a cop out. That's like avoiding the tough competition. I don't believe that there aren't [for example] athletes in the schools and around countries who can be finalists in the Olympic 100 metres.'

Similarly John Coates, the president of the Australian Olympic Committee, has stated, 'They clearly need to look at the [funding] model and the system behind the model. There has got to be a greater spread of funding. There are sports out there that are doing it tough now...

I don't think there's sufficient attention being paid to the next group of athletes coming through.'

In an overview published in the *Australian Financial Review* on July 23, 2016, John Stensholt noted, 'Critics charge that Winning Edge's model of dispersing more of the \$254 million in sports funding to those with the biggest chance of winning medals - such as swimming, cycling and rowing - means saying goodbye to the days of lesser-known Australian athletes winning pleasantly surprising medals in sports such as taekwondo, canoeing and equestrian.'

According to this line of argument, if the Australian Sports Commission funds primarily on the basis of anticipated success, many athletes whose potential has not yet been recognised or fully realised will be denied the opportunity to succeed.

3. Investment in potential Olympic competitors is not the best means of promoting fitness within the wider community

One of the arguments put forward to justify directing public money to elite athletes is that successful competition in high level events such as the Olympics encourages sporting participation in the country as a whole and that this increases national fitness and health. While many studies have linked playing sport with increases in personal fitness and increased community sporting participation with increased national fitness, especially among children, there is little data to suggest that sporting success among elite athletes leads to an increase in fitness within the wider community.

Clearinghouse for Sport is an initiative of the Australia Sports Commission that distributes research data on sports related trends in Australia. In 2015 the Clearinghouse released an overview of factors contributing to community participation in sport in Australia, especially among children.

The overview noted, 'The research literature has identified a number of key factors that influence organised sport participation among children, including: parental influence; cost; socio-cultural and socio-economic considerations; coaching; facilities; and role models. There also appears to be a trend in sport participation showing a shift from traditional organised sport to social sport and other forms of non-organised physical activity. This trend is captured in Australian Bureau of Statistics data and other participation surveys.' This suggests that a wide range of factors are important and that there is also a move away from the more traditional styles of sport promoted through Olympic competition.

The overview concluded, 'In summary, there are several strong underpinning factors for grassroots participation, particularly among children, they include: fun, social interaction, and a sense of accomplishment in learning new skills. Exposure (primarily through various forms of media) to high performance sport and sportspersons may heighten a child's interest, but many personal and social factors will shape their desire to maintain an ongoing commitment to participation.'

Critics have argued that the current funding model with its emphasis on elite sport and on established state and national sporting bodies is not equipped to reach a majority of the population, particularly those for whom there are economic, social or cultural impediments to participation. It has also been suggested that the definition of sport participation being promoted is too narrow, especially when it is recognised that the most commonly practised physical activity in Australia is walking.

In an opinion piece published in *Sports Business Insider*, Brad McCarroll stated, 'Frankly, with its current archaic structure, government funding almost entirely distributed to national and state bodies, and ever-increasing funding needed to prop up the professional / elite part of sport, I believe the sport system in Australia is not equipped to achieve real outcomes for "grassroots". Especially as I consider "grassroots" as the club system and beyond, and inclusive of all people in communities who do not and cannot access the club system.'

In May 2003, Marija Mirkovic wrote, 'If we want an increase in sporting participation by children, shouldn't we be funding for direct access to sports and the ease of engaging in physical activity for them? Shouldn't we be subsidising sporting activities for the young?in the form of?boots, balls, racquets and free swimming lessons?instead of giving the elites a free ride?'

4. The focus on winning is narrow, jingoistic and fuels unnecessary expenditure

There have been numerous commentators who have noted that a spending regime focused on winning is narrow and damagingly nationalistic.

From this perspective the importance of competing should be defined by the effort involved in arriving at an international standard and then in performing to one's best during international competition. According to this line of argument, the emphasis should be on skill, discipline and effort. Instead, it is claimed, the Olympics have become highly jingoistic with the focus being on winning as a proof of Australia's superiority to other nations. It is this drive to win at all costs because winning is the only measure of success that has been criticised for leading to excessive spending.

The destructive nature of this endeavour was stressed by Malcolm Knox in an opinion piece published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on August 19, 2016. Knox stated, 'In a four-yearly showcase of all that is great in human athletic endeavour, in the one place the whole world gets together and celebrates their common love of sport and their shared humanity, there is simultaneously the most wild outbreak of ultra-nationalism: the focus on one's own country's need to succeed at the expense of all others.'

Knox went on to criticise the narrow emphasis placed on investing in Olympic competitors in order to win medals to bolster national pride and concluded, 'The best Olympic memories - and those who were in Sydney in 2000, or other Games, will endorse this - come when you let go of your national aspirations and become a citizen of the world. My favourite moments from these games were

provided by Fijian, American, British, South African, Japanese, Singaporean, Uzbek, Iranian, Indian, Argentine, Spanish, Hungarian and Brazilian athletes.'

In a letter to the editor published in The Age on August 22, 2016, Tony Priestley wrote, 'I thought the Olympic ideal was simply to compete in an open, friendly international atmosphere and, while winning was to be celebrated, it was a secondary issue. Money and national ego have trumped this naive idea and left us with a scandal-ridden mess.'

Priestley concludes that Australia's Olympic ambitions have gone awry and that we are investing large amounts of public money in successes that may not be worth that we appear prepared to pay for them.

A similar point was made in a letter to the editor published in the same edition of The Age from Archdeacon Peter Macleod-Miller. The Archdeacon stated, 'The steroids pumped into international sport have created huge muscles in some areas while others have atrophied. All the green and gold publicly funded Lycra can't stretch over the unsightly bulges of drug abuse, corruption, bad behaviour and the loss of the Olympic ideals of amateur competition.'

5. There are better means of promoting international harmony and goodwill

Creating international harmony and goodwill is one of the founding ideals of the modern Olympic Games. Critics of the current operation of the Games argue that there are better ways of achieving these goals which are largely secondary to the nationally-based competitiveness that shapes Olympic competition.

Australia's Department of Trade and Foreign Affairs' Internet site outlines the range of initiatives with which the country is involved in order to promote international harmony. Participating in the Olympics does not feature on this list.

Active participation within the United Nations is seen as important in promoting world peace. In 2009 Australia, contributed \$43, 536, 970 toward the operation of the United Nations in direct donations and support. It has been estimated that each bronze medal won by an Australian in the 2008 Beijing Olympics cost the nation \$15,000,000; while each gold and silver medal cost \$40,000,000.

Critics have argued that if Australia's aim is to promote international harmony, greater support of the United Nations is required. In a report published in The Guardian on September 7, 2016, senior figures within the United Nations were reported as saying that the UN's humanitarian agencies are on the verge of bankruptcy and unable to meet the basic needs of millions of people because of the size of the refugee crisis in the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Arguments suggesting that Australia did not spend too much

1. The Australian team performed well at the Rio Olympics

Defenders of Australia's Olympic performance at Rio argue that despite not achieving at the predicted level, Australia's rating of tenth on the medal tally list is creditable.

In a comment published in The Guardian on August 22, 2016, Paul Connelly noted, 'Australia has actually done quite well in Rio for a nation of its population and wealth. Yes, no doubt, a number of performers and teams failed to live up to their potential, but look at the countries above Australia on the table, all countries with bigger populations and bigger GDPs. Take out the Games of London, Athens and Beijing (as well as the Melbourne Games of 1956) and Australia's performance in Rio compares well to any of the others since the modern Olympics began in 1896.'

The question of Australia's performance relative to its comparatively small population has been stressed by a number of commentators. On August 19, 2016, The Herald Sun ran a report which considered what the relative positions of all top ten placegetters on the Rio Olympics medal tally list would be if their populations were taken into account.

The report stated, 'Australia is the bone fide best of the Top 10 nations for overall medals so far, with one medal for every 894,886 people.'

With numbers like that, we can thumb our noses at the mother country who have only managed one medal for every 1.18 million...'

An editorial published in The Age on August 22, 2016, stated, 'The reality is that Australia has overachieved in recent Games.'

Australia was fourth in the medal table in Sydney and Athens and still in the top 10 in Brazil. There is no particular reason why our athletes should have won more gold medals than they did in London, where they also won eight.

In fact we would like to congratulate and thank our sporting men and women, their coaches, sports institutions, families and other supporters for giving Australians impeccable reason to be impressed. Every nation above Australia in the medal tally has at least twice our population...

Of course, winning is a crucial goal - for competitors, administrators and spectators - but it is not pre-eminent. The most important thing is to compete with honour and courage. This our team did admirably and with significant success. They deserve our respect and appreciation. They deserve to feel proud. And Australians should take genuine pride in them.'

The team chief, Kitty Chiller, has similarly praised their performance. Chiller stated, 'I'm extremely proud of our team. There have been many standout and breakthrough performances and those should be a focus. Our efforts here were very, very often close but they fell just short...I have told each and every one .. they have not let anyone down...'

This is a time when we should celebrate the achievements of our team. The blame game always follows. I am not interested in the blame game.'

Chiller further noted that 65 per cent of the team were 'Olympic rookies', having never attended the event before, which reflected the strength of Australia's young sporting talent.

Australian athletics coach, Craig Hilliard, has similarly defended the performance of his athletes. He said 28 of them made the top 16 in their sport while nine Australians made the top eight, and also pointed to what he called a 'renaissance in distance running'.

2. The 'Winning Edge' strategy was meant to come to fruition over ten years

Defenders of the 'Winning Edge' strategy for funding Australian Olympic athletes have noted that it is a long-term scheme. The strategy was only put in place in 2012 after the London Olympics and is not anticipated to show its full benefits before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Although supporters admit that the medal tally anticipated for 2016 was not achieved, they claim it is still far too soon to judge the effectiveness of the plan.

This point was made by Lisa Gowthorp in an opinion piece published in The Conversation on August 10, 2016. Dr Gowthorp stated, 'At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the Winning Edge strategy will have been in place for eight years. We will then be able to identify how the program has contributed to the development of the next generation of Australian athletes across all Olympic sports.'

The results in four years' time will truly reflect the impact the strategy has had on sport development, sport participation and sport pathways in Australia.'

Defenders of the current program note that any new development seeking to affect a major change in sporting achievement needs a significant lead-in period. New procedures take time to have an effect.

The funding model now used in Australia is similar to that employed in Great Britain where funds are primarily channelled toward those sports most likely to achieve Olympic success. Over the last three Olympics Great Britain has ranked fourth, third and then second at this year's Rio Olympics. Supporters of Great Britain's strategy note not only its success, but also that the strategy has

been in place since 1997 and that it took several Olympics before discernible improvement were made. In the two earlier Olympics, Great Britain came tenth (admittedly a significant improvement from their 36th in Atlanta in 1996). It has also been noted that Great Britain's success has not only been achieved through targeted funding. There has also been a dramatic increase in the amount of funding directed toward Olympic sport. This has been made possible by the proceeds of a specific Olympic lottery being directed toward preparing the British athletes. Australian Sports Commission (ASC) head, John Wylie, has claimed that an on-line national lottery to provide extra funding is crucial if Australia is to finish once again in the top five on the Olympic medals table.

3. Fielding a successful Olympic team boosts national pride, social cohesion and provides great entertainment

It has been claimed that the achievements of a successful Australian Olympic team promote national pride and cohesion. Australia's federal treasurer, Scott Morrison, has defended the importance of governments supporting Olympic competitors because of the positive social values that Olympic competition engenders. Mr Morrison acknowledged Australia's gold medal tally had not increased, but he believed the nation's Olympians had provided 'vision' and 'inspiration' to Australians. Mr Morrison stated, 'Sport...builds community. I know that in my own community ... sport is actually today what brings more of the community together on a regular basis than anything else. It's critically important.' The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, has also stressed the capacity of Olympic sport to generate social cohesion. He referred to the way in which a large majority of Australians actively support the efforts of Australian competitors and suggested that this helps to create a unity that transcends individual differences. When welcoming the Australian Olympic team back from Rio, the Prime Minister stated, 'All this is a family occasion, the big Australian family - 24 million of us. We embrace you, we applaud you, we've been inspired by you, we are so proud of you.' Before the Rio Olympics began, the Australian team manager, Kitty Chiller, acknowledged that the team's importance could not simply be measured in terms of the number of medals they won. She stressed that the athletes were exemplars of the type of behaviour that Australians aspire to as embodying the country's national ideal. Chiller initially drew on the examples of former Australian Olympic greats stating, 'Herb Elliott, Murray Rose, Betty Cuthbert, Marjorie Jackson, Shane Gould...and of late Susie O'Neill, the Oarsome Foursome, Ian Thorpe and Cathy Freeman. These legends set the example. They wore their Australian blazer with confidence, pride and humility. They all competed hard - with grit and determination - and they all conquered the world. But at the end of their race they looked their opponent in the eye and shook hands - in victory and in defeat. This is quite simply, the Australian way and this is the way we want to be.' The negative impact that poor Olympic performances might have on the Australian self-image has been considered. On August 7, 2012, CNN published a comment by Monica Attard, considering the negative consequences of Australia's relatively poor performance at the London Olympics. Attard wrote, 'Australia has been in distress since the London Olympics began, watching a parlous performance in the pool where it usually performs exceedingly well... As a result, this sporting nation has been thrown into an identity crisis of sorts, played out in public as a tussle over what it means to be Australian. There are those who argue a poor gold medal tally is an appalling reflection of Australia's sporting prowess and an even worse for its self-esteem, playing out as it has on the international stage.' The popularity of the competition can be gauged by the large audience that watched the televised Olympic Games events. The television audience reached a total 17.5 million people across the competition. The strongest viewing day was 1.9 million and the least viewed day was 1.01 million. In digital terms, Seven's Rio coverage has also clocked more than 32 million online streams and almost 55 million social video views. If viewer interest can be used as a guide, a very large number of Australians appear to have actively followed the Rio Olympics.

4. Investing in potential Olympic competitors has a positive impact on national fitness

One of the primary reasons why countries such as Australia invest in Olympic athletes is that they are seen as role models whose achievements are likely to encourage more active sporting involvement within the general community. The federal treasurer, Mr Scott Morrison, has stated, 'The programs have to be accountable and we invest generously in sport, but the reason for it at the end of the day is so young people, people at all ages, remain active, remain physically active.' A similar point has been made by Australia's Governor-General, Sir Peter Cosgrove, who, when welcoming the returning team back to Australia, stated, 'To be role models for so many, especially kids, who will be inspired to follow in your footsteps, these are magnificent achievements.' The Future of Sport report (otherwise known as the Crawford Report), produced by the Independent Sport Panel for the Australian Government in 2009, made the following statements regarding elite sportspeople as role models: 'Australia prides itself on our sportspeople delivering superior performances on the world stage. These athletes are continually put forward as role models for budding athletes and our nation.' The report also stated, 'There seems to be a general view among sporting organisations and governments that role models are important in attracting young people to sport. This can be seen in the efforts of major professional sports to work with their athletes to address binge drinking, illicit drug use and other societal issues.' A report produced by the University of Technology, Sydney, in December 2015 and titled 'Athletes of influence - the reality of sports role models' opened with a statement of the widely-held belief in the positive effect of elite athletes as role models. The report states, 'It has become a truism that professional athletes, whether they like it or not, "are" role models for others. Talented sportspeople hardly win every time, and sometimes they do not exemplify fair play. But many athletes convey attributes about performance, character and resilience that draw admiration from fans. For the youthful, sports stars may prompt efforts to emulate tries, wickets, goals and baskets in backyards or parks. No surprise, then, that professional athletes are assumed to provide a "role model effect" for sport at community levels, whether by stimulating entry into organised activities or by catalysing ongoing participation.'

5. The Olympics are a means of promoting international harmony and goodwill

It has long been claimed that the Olympic Games are a valuable means of encouraging peaceful interactions between the competing nations. In 2012 the American Psychological Association published an article by Drs Gary Juneau and Rubin Neal titled, 'The Olympic Truce: Sport promoting peace, development and international cooperation'. The authors claimed, 'These organized sports have enjoyed an honored tradition of promoting peaceful international relations among diverse peoples as nations compete without strife and in spite of geopolitical differences.' They further went on to note that organisation such as the United Nations have come to recognise the value of athletic competition in fostering international goodwill.

Juneau and Neal observed, 'In the 21st century, the United Nations (U.N.) has become increasingly committed to communicating its vision of global human rights through the implementation of athletic programs that promote peacemaking initiatives, tolerance and reconciliation while decreasing tensions, inequity and prejudice.' The further noted, 'The U.N. Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) supports sport and athletic programs that impact development and peace. Many of the U.N.'s programs are coordinated through the U.N. Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace and the U.N. Communications Working Group on Sport for Development and Peace. Over time, these groups have been engaged in supporting the Summer and Winter Olympic Games, the Paralympics, the World Cup and the Youth Olympic Games. These games are noted for assembling individuals and countries, some with opposing philosophies about war, peace, negotiations, resources and power, in the name of friendly and peaceful rivalry, through sporting events.'

Proponents of the Olympic games in Australia and elsewhere claim that the advantages it brings in terms of establishing harmonious relations between nations well justify the expense incurred by the countries that send participants.

Further implications

It has become increasingly difficult to justify the cost of sending participants to the Olympic Games and of hosting the Games. This is particularly the case as the primary objectives that the Games are intended to achieve appear only imperfectly attained.

The Games' capacity to promote international goodwill seems questionable given the fixation on winning among those countries that have a prospect of achieving a place toward the top of the medal tally. Australia's Olympic funding strategy, titled 'the Winning Edge', is a clear instance of this fixation, revealing, as it does, our pre-occupation with gaining medals as a measure of our athletes' Olympic success.

In an opinion piece published in Eureka Street on July 31, 2012, during the London Olympics, Fatima Measham claimed, 'The notion of sport as a great equaliser unravels...when we consider which nations have the most summer Olympic gold medals in history (excluding former Soviet Union countries and East Germany): Japan, Australia, Sweden, Hungary, China, France, Italy, Great Britain, Germany, and the United States.

The list mirrors the dynamics of power in other parts of the international arena, where the likelihood of success is not only correlated to GDP (or more precisely, the level of state funding for sport); it also fosters triumphalism and a sense of entitlement among lead nations. In other words, the Olympics has become a circle-jerk attended by the sports elite, avidly filmed by the media.'

Measham contrasted the current Olympics with its focus on national pride and winning, that is the particular province of the wealthy nations of the world, with what was intended by the founder of the modern Olympic Games. She writes, 'It is a state of things far removed from the philosophy of the founder of the modern Olympics. Pierre de Coubertin envisioned an athletic competition where amateurs from different nations could compete as equals, promoting intercultural understanding and peace.

"Wars break out because nations misunderstand each other," he said. "We shall not have peace until the prejudices which now separate the different races shall have been outlived. To attain this end, what better means than to bring the youth of all countries periodically together for amicable trials of muscular strength and agility?"

While it is arguable that competing in the Olympics may result in some degree of inter-racial and inter-cultural understanding and harmony between the athletes concerned, it seems far less likely that this quality is transferred to the nations from which these athletes come.

It has further been noted that the fostering of active sports involvement and of fitness among the general populations of participating nations is another goal that remains more a hope than a reality.

Research data simply does not show a significant correlation between nations' investment in the Olympic Games and the sporting participation of their populations. For example, despite Great Britain's dramatic success in climbing up the medal tally list over the last four Olympics, British people's rate of active sporting participation has fallen during the same period. There is a similar picture in the United States, where the country's continued success in terms of winning Olympic medals has not resulted in increased levels of fitness among Americans.

Given this, it is hard to argue that the large amounts of taxpayer money nations such as Australia spend funding their Olympic athletes is money well spent. Even were the money raised via a lottery, as is the case in Great Britain, there are many who would argue that it could be directed toward more socially advantageous ends.

These said, recent surveys suggest that Australians support continued government funding of Australia's Olympic competitors. Other studies have suggested that Australia will need to be prepared to invest far more than it currently does if it wishes to remain near the top of the medal tally.

Perhaps it is time for a mature national debate on why, if at all, Australia considers participation in the Olympics important. With this clarified, we would be better placed to decide how much we are prepared to spend on this competition.

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

AGE, August 20, 2016, page 30, comment by Paul Hayward, 'Good, bad, ugly: why the Olympics still matter'. [🔗](#)

H/SUN, August 17, 2016, page 24, comment by Ron Reed, 'Debate looms on program that didn't give us an edge'. [🔗](#)

AGE, August 18, 2016, page 17, comment by Joshua Hill, 'Swimmers a pool of talent, medals or no'. [🔗](#)

H/SUN, August 16, 2016, page 20, comment by Shaun Carney, 'Too little bang for our bucks'. [🔗](#)

AGE, August 15, 2016, page 18, comment by Amanda Vanstone, 'Rio medals cost dearly'. [🔗](#)

AGE, August 23, 2016, page 14, editorial, 'Bravo, team Australia, you did us proud in Rio'. [🔗](#)

AGE, August 29, 2016, page 16, comment by Tiffany Cherry, 'Olympics more than return on investment'. [🔗](#)