

# Olympian Politics: The Australian Olympic Committee

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*It was a scrappy affair, and it resulted in a predictable result: the re-election of veteran administrator John Coates as president of the Australian Olympic Committee by 58 votes to 35. Such a process was all in all dull but for the notable lid it had blown off regarding Olympic harmony down under.*

King Coates, as it were, has ruled for 27 years, and had faced no elections. He has made sports personalities drivell with delight at his maneuverings, praising his genius as a politician. (Sports personalities, by this logic, should be kept away from sporting administration.) Over time, he started to resemble a long-in-tooth equatorial dictator, immune from criticism.

The length of such a reign had begun troubling a few in the sports establishment. Disagreements started to froth and bubble, notably in the Coates cosmos. Allegations were made that Coates' loyal media director Mike Tancred had bullied former AOC chief executive Fiona de Jong.

AOC President John Coates

De Jong had no intention of keeping the matter quiet, further suggesting that a culture of bullying had flourished in the AOC hothouse since 2004. It had become, in the words of an email chain, a "sheltered workshop" where incidents could be housed and concealed.

A challenge eventually took form with former hockey player Danielle Roche, who marketed herself as saviour and grand mop, cleaning up a mess produced by a "broken" Olympic family. Coates, in turn, read the matter politically, treating de Jong as an incompetent chief

executive, and Roche as the unreflective extension of her master, the Australian Sports Commission.

His grievances were outlined in a letter published by News Corp last month.

“There is clearly a coordinated and sadly vindictive campaign to damage me personally, and to tarnish all that has been achieved by the AOC.”

Among Roche’s targets was Coates’ hefty remuneration: \$729,000 per annum.

“I can certainly change the percentage straight away by not accepting \$3 million over a four-year period,” claimed Roche on the campaign stump, sounding much like a noble celebrity politician happy to sacrifice a large wage in the name of public service.

Had she won, she claims she would have reduced the wage to \$100,000 and waived it for the first term.

On that wave, Roche predicted a “very, very close” vote that would “come down to the wire.” But her political nose was evidently less developed than her sporting sense. Coates had already been given a “non-unanimous” nod from the AOC athletes’ commission provided he take a few of Roche’s suggestions on board, including a review of the salary package while embracing a “planned and strategic transition”. The final piece in this list of requests was a promise to hold an independent investigation into the bullying culture of the AOC.

Danielle Roche

Coates won in a canter, and the grand dark eminence that always shadowed discussions was the International Olympic Committee, to whom Coates owes his loyalty. The canny administrator’s voice, rather than an athlete’s outraged conscience, was always going to win through.

The issue very much on point here involved pitting the reform suggestions of an Australian

movement born in local indignation, against an organisation arguably on par in terms of corruption with FIFA, football's answer to an internationalist mafia movement.

While Coates may well have seen Roche as annex and puppet of the ASC, he is the voice and cardinal of the IOC down under, romanticised foolishly by followers as a noble advocate of Olympism and its grand civilisational ideals. Any student of the movement will understand that the original premise has long been undermined, tossed overboard in favour of finance, manipulation and racketeering.

A few veteran sporting figures insisted like card carrying members of the Olympic cult that the IOC line be towed, to be followed like an unquestionable deity. It was administrators in the IOC who dictated the various conditions under which their emissaries in other parts of the globe would operate under. It did not matter that Coates had a mammoth salary relative to his position, or that he seemed impregnable: the IOC would not have it any other way.

One such figure was former Olympian Jane Flemming were more or less suggesting that Australia had to march to the same tune of corruption and practice, embracing a policy of concealment when needed.

To introduce, for instance, fixed terms to such presidential positions or up the element of democratic accountability would be impractical if not impossible. That is the language, not of reform but submission, and was always the most likely outcome.

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