

# Ginger Sufferings: FIFA President Gianni Infantino's Sportswashing Performance

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*Gianni Infantino, president of FIFA, the most famous 52-year-old brat of the world football federation, has not been much in the news of late. Such creatures of authority do their best (and worst) work in the shadows. But given that the FIFA Men's World Cup is upon us, he thought it wise to address a few issues that had irked his pure, troubled self. They were addressed to the naysayers and critics, those critical of Qatar's human rights record, its approach to sexual minorities, its lamentable labour safety record, its successful bribing efforts to secure the bid in the first place. In short, the joke that is this World Cup.*

What followed was almost gruesome in its hilarity and could be summed up with the old biblical injunction against casting the first stone. Perhaps there was something of US President Woodrow Wilson about it, who claimed in 1915 that no one nation could judge another. (Fabulous as this was, the president proceeded to judge Imperial Germany and Kaiserism, committing the United States to World War I.)

FIFA has always been of that restricted view of judgment, for good reason. It hardly counts as a sporting organisation and should be likened to a mafia-styled corporation. For its officials, corruption has been naturalised to the point of habit, and anyone willing to cast stones at it would need a quarry.

What took place at this [press conference](#) in the lead-up to the tournament was an exemplar of sportswashing at its grotesquely finest, a sure sign that Qatar's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy had really struck a chord and gotten to the infantile, unhinged

Infantino.

In his attempted flaying of critics of Qatar's record, the tournament and, by implication, his organisation's credibility and competence, Infantino listed a range of groups who had been disadvantaged and abused, claiming kinship with all of them.

"Today I feel Qatari, today I feel Arab, today I feel African, today I feel gay, today I feel disabled, today I feel [sic] a migrant worker."

This promised to become a very poor performance in stand-up identity politics, but Infantino qualified his remarks by revealing a psyche troubled in childhood.

"I'm not Qatari, African, gay, disabled and I'm not really a migrant worker but I know what it means to be discriminated and bullied, as a foreign[er] in a foreign country, as a child at school I was bullied because I had red hair and freckles. I was bullied for that."

It all came down to being a persecuted ginger.

Throughout his speech, he scolded the criticism as "moral lesson-giving", one-sided and hypocritical. "I don't want to give you any lessons of life, but what is going on here is profoundly, profoundly unjust."

Europe itself needed to own up to its less than enviable record. "For what we Europeans have been doing for the last 3,000 years we should apologise for the next 3,000 years before giving moral lessons to people." How convenient.

In salesman's mode, Infantino urged the press and the baffled to engage, help and unite. "The world is divided enough. We are organising a FIFA World Cup, we're not organising a war. We organise a FIFA World Cup where people who have many problems in his or her life try to come and enjoy." The tournament would also "open the eyes of many people from the Western world to the Arab world."

Much of this delusional address, apart from a plea not to see the obvious, was based on the idea that societies can change with generous dollops of sporting endeavour. But there is no reason why they should, nor much historical evidence that this has ever happened. The reverse is true: the regime of the day takes in the kudos of putting on a show and feels rewarded.

It is a false equation to assume that holding the Olympics in, say, Nazi Germany in 1936 could make societies more understanding and tolerant. It certainly did not, nor did it change the pathway to war and genocide pursued by Hitler and his murderous henchmen. The odious nonsense stemming from Infantino is the sort spouted by managerial classes from universities to sports administrators. Police states and sport can exist and thrive side by side without any fuss.

Often, the very sporting endeavour itself is appropriated, advanced as part of the state's agenda. Which is precisely why Qatar has been so busy, and profligate, hiring ethically dim footballers and amoral PR specialists to spruce its tattered image. The authorities also know that no single team promised to boycott the tournament, leaving the players to engage in faux moralising about the country without effecting change.

Infantino's own role is clearly that of well moneyed servitude, the administrator's toadying answer to David Beckham's prostration and those players who happily receive the largesse of the Qatari state.

Infantino best get back into the shadows, where he can grease palms and speculate about his past as a tormented, freckled ginger. He will also be getting four more years as the head of FIFA. "Repulsive. Dangerous. Damaging," [came the assessment](#) from journalist Melissa Reddy, who was nonetheless there to cover the tournament. "Yet this is a man being re-elected as head of FIFA unopposed." For someone bullied, he has done rather well for himself.

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**Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)

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