

POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND THE OLYMPIC FLAME

BY JANET CAHILL

*Olympic Games Project Manager for the University of Technology,
Sydney (UTS) and consultant to the Olympic Games Business
unit at the Australian Tourist Commission.*

The Olympic Charter states that one of the roles of the IOC is to “oppose any political or commercial abuse of sport and athletes” (IOC, 1994:13:2.9). However, notwithstanding the Charter, this has sometimes been a difficult task for the IOC in avoiding the influence of politics. In particular, this paper looks at the political influence that has been evident this century over the Olympic flame and torch.

There have been occasions this century when the Olympic flame has not been lit due to war: “The truce was broken three times - in 1916, 1940 and 1944. Wars used to be stopped so that the Games could be celebrated but now the Games are stopped to make war” (Olympic Games Organising Committee, 1976:284).

The following examples further relate to how politics have conflicted with the Olympic flame and torch in the past and the Olympic ideals of peace and harmony.

Slowikowski (1991) presents the idea that following Hitler’s official announcement that the Germans were of ancient Greek stock, (given their fair-hair and blue-eyes), the Organising Committee for Berlin decided to organise a torch relay to carry the sacred flame from Olympia in Greece to Berlin to symbolise the two races (1991:247). It could be said that Hitler used this demonstration to display his political strength to the world.

The flame was “carried in relay to Berlin by 3,000 athletes and arrived through the ranks of thousands of uniformed members of the Hitler Youth Movement with huge banners marked by Swastikas banked behind them”

(Hugman et al., 1988:11). The final torchbearer running into the 1936 Olympic stadium was Fritz Schilgen, and Barry (1975) describes that Schilgen lit the Olympic fire cauldron only after a dramatic gesture was made of holding the torch high in triumph.

This raises two issues: firstly, that the torch may have been held high, not in reverence for its symbolism, but in a Nazi salute with respect and pride for the current day regime. This contradicts the idea that the relaying of the flame should be that of a sacred light from Olympia that would illuminate the hopes of the world's youth as described by the 1976 Olympic Games Organising Committee (1976: 280).

Secondly, this may be the first instance of blatant advertising used in connection with the torch relay, and more specifically political advertising. It appears that the sacred light was used in the torch relay as a propaganda plot. Each subsequent Olympic Games have continued with the torch relay, and so has the attempt at deriving political gain or satisfying political agendas.

As a tribute to the Centenary of the Olympic Games in 1996, the Olympic torch relay route travelled through all previous Olympic host cities. Thus the flame returned to Berlin in 1996, and the final 1936 torchbearer, Fritz Schilgen, joined in the celebrations. He said that carrying the torch and lighting the flame in 1936 "was naturally an unforgettable experience" (AFP, 1996). However, he made no comment in respect of the theory of political association relating to the torch relay's origins.

Another example of a conflict of political ideals occurs in the 1980 Olympic Games. The Organising Committee's report, states that the Olympic torch "symbolises man's unquenchable thirst for peace, harmony and beauty" (Olympic Games Moscow, 1980:260). These comments are incongruous coming from a country that contributed so much to the cold war. They were to further abuse the Olympic ideals by boycotting the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984.

As a result of this boycott, the Friendship Games were held in Moscow in 1984 to cater for those countries not participating in the Los Angeles Olympic Games. However, as

the genuine Olympic flame was in Los Angeles, the "altar" at the Friendship Games was lit from the flame that burns in the Kremlin (Slowikowski, 1991:245). The boycottees obviously felt the symbolism and association with the Olympic flame to be so strong, that it could not be dispensed, or perhaps felt that the presence of the flame gave credibility and power to their renegade Games. Whilst at the Los Angeles Games: "More people had the opportunity to carry the torch, [and there was]... media coverage of disabled, blind, black, very young, and very old torchbearers. These were media events, calling attention to the previous non inclusion of such groups in the event at the same time spotlighting them for their difference" (Slowikowski, 1991:252).

Thus, the torch being carried by minority groups was publicising their presence in American society and authenticating the role of the IOC which "fights against any form of discrimination affecting the Olympic Movement." (IOC 1994:12:2.4). And, this may have offered these groups opportunities to capitalise on the exposure offered by their association with the Olympic torch relay.

The Olympic torch became involved again in fighting discrimination in Georgia during preparations for the 1996 torch relay. A Gay activist group named 'Olympics Out of Cobb threatened to disrupt the Olympic torch relay unless the route was diverted from travelling through Cobb County on the final leg of its 26,000km journey. This disruption resulted from Cobb County adopting an anti-gay resolution in 1995,

and the 'Olympics Out of Cobb group argued that the County's anti-gay resolution was at odds with the Olympic Spirit.

The dispute was finally settled, and the Olympic torch made its way through the county. One local resident on witnessing the relay said: "Even though certain county council members came very close to ruining the moment for this city, the flame burned on through the night. I must have taken 20 pictures of the flame with 20 different cameras. I'm 6-foot-4. In a large crowd, it was hard to see. So, I found myself taking pictures for other people. It may sound sappy, but I guess the torch truly has brought America together. All for a little fire on a small stick" ("Torch will see U.S. by land, sea, air").

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Meanwhile as the County Cobb debate loomed, across the world Hillary Clinton, wife of the United States President, attended the lighting of the Olympic flame at ancient Olympia, Greece. One reason for her high profile presence may have been to placate Greece in not being invited to host the Centennial Olympic Games. "In one of the trickiest diplomatic tasks. . . Clinton tried to soothe the hurt feelings of the Greeks who had hoped the games would be held in Athens to mark the 100th anniversary of modern Olympics" (O'Shea, 1996).

Mrs. Clinton "implored nations 'to find peace and camaraderie through sport'...[and said] 'This flame . . . will serve as the guiding light in the centennial games this summer in Atlanta'" (O'Shea, 1996). In sending the first lady to represent the United States, it appears that the American government found this ceremony an important prelude to the Olympic Games together with the politics of keeping the peace and remaining friends with Greece.

However, when the Olympic torch passed through some villages on the sixth day of the torch relay in Greece, residents 'booed' the torchbearers and entourage. The villagers were not challenging the choice of host city for the Centennial Games, but rather, were unhappy with the American government not taking sides with Greece against Turkey in their recent claim over uninhabited islands of the Aegean Sea (Cheakalos, 1996). Yet another example of how politics have conflicted with the Olympic torch and the ideals of peace and harmony.

History reflects that political decisions have sometimes been made as to whether Athletes should be included or excluded from Olympic events, including the Olympic flame ceremony.

For example, the Helsinki Organising Committee wanted Paavo Nurmi to be the final torchbearer at the 1952 Olympic opening ceremony. Nurmi was an obvious choice as he had retained hero status amongst his countrymen as the greatest distance champion of the athletic track. However, there had been a 'falling out' between Nurmi and the Finnish Olympic Committee in 1932, and Nurmi becoming the final torchbearer symbolised an "Olympic reconcili-

ation with the man who had once been excluded" (Borgers, 1996:31).

Paavo Nurmi: Olympic Reconciliation

At the 1924 Games in Paris, Finnish Athletic officials decided not to allow Paavo Nurmi to compete in the 10,000 metre race. History suggests this decision was made to allow Nurmi's countryman, Ville Ritola, a chance at a Gold Medal in this race, as Nurmi, had already won 3 Gold Medals at these Games. Incensed, Nurmi ran his own race at a nearby training track, and by his own stopwatch beat the time of the Gold Medalist for the 10,000 meter race. However, this act of defiance led to a disagreement with the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) who may have interpreted Nurmi's actions as insolence.

In 1932, Nurmi was excluded from competing at the Olympic Games because the FOC decreed that he had lost his amateur status, having earned too much money (albeit in expenses) during his 1929 tour of Germany.

Given the sour relationship between Nurmi and the FOC, it may have been a political decision on the part of the FOC not to allow him to compete in 1932. However this action was rectified with their invitation to Nurmi to light the 1952 Olympic flame cauldron. (Source: ESPNNet, 1998)

Further political decisions are associated with the 1952 Olympic Games. Two flames burned in Helsinki in 1952: one that had been lit at the Pallas Tunturi and the other lit at Olympia. Paavo Nurmi lit the flame cauldron representing the

1952 Helsinki Games, and Hannes Kolehmainen lit a second cauldron as a symbol of the 1940 Games that had been cancelled due to WWII (Buschmann and Lennartz, 1996:130).

Each host nation will no doubt have differing attitudes and opinions toward the Olympic Games, its ideals and the torch relay. For example, the torch relay was part of a political message at the 1972 Sapporo Winter Olympic Games. The island of Okinawa invited the torch relay to run through the island, "to underline the wish of the island to return to full Japanese sovereignty" (Borgers, 1996:165).

Another approach to the political symbolism of the flame is evidenced by the Vice President of the Seoul

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Olympic Organising Committee (SOOC) who in his speech at the flame lighting ceremony in Olympia, 1988 said: "The Korean people . . . will respect all that this sacred flame stands for . . . For Koreans, this flame is especially meaningful for we have a long tradition of reverence for fire and what it represents. Fire symbolizes purity and prosperity - and the Olympic Games are pure in their ideals and clear in their aims of building a better world for all people." (Seoul Olympic Organising Committee, 1989:344-345).

The ambiguity of these symbols and ideals becomes evident when one considers that at the same time the government was in conflict with neighbouring North Korea, which ultimately boycotted those Games.

The Korean government's ideals were therefore not in accordance with those of SOOC and the Olympic Charter. The Charter clearly states that "The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity" (IOC, 1994:10). Whilst pleasing in theory, this goal, and the ideals of peace and harmony are not achieved so readily in practice.

It would appear from the above examples that the symbols of the Olympic flame and torch and events surrounding the Olympic torch relay continue to provide a platform of exposure for groups, political or otherwise to voice their opinions or agendas to the rest of the world. These sacred symbols have also been used by Olympic host nations to voice their objectives in staging an Olympic Games.

Given this paper's content, the question will be raised as to the success of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games torch relay and its avoidance of political influence or comment. The Sydney Olympic Organising Committee (SOCOG) are striving to support the role of the IOC in protecting the 2000 Games, its ceremonies and athletes from political or commercial abuse. History will provide us with the answers to their success soon enough.

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