Boycotting Sochi is lame political subterfuge

Not since the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in 1979 has there been so much recrimination and fanfare over the holding of the Olympics. Led, once again, by the United States, cries are being heard to boycott the Sochi Winter Games, whether over Russia’s policy towards the distribution of homosexual material to minors or its human rights record.

Afghanistan provoked US president Jimmy Carter organised a mass boycott of the Summer Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980. 65 nations ultimately refused to participate in the games, whereas 80 countries sent athletes to compete.

The Soviets and their allies responded in 1984 by refusing to attend the Los Angeles Games, though they claimed non-political reasons for doing so. North Korea, with equal predictability, then boycotted the Seoul Olympics of 1988. These themselves were only the latest in a long series of political abstentions from what is supposed to be a sporting event. Republican Spain boycotted the 1936 Summer Olympics in Nazi Berlin. Seven countries refused to compete in the 1956 Games, in various protests against international events which were serious, but not the responsibility of the athletes to resolve.

When countries realised that boycotts penalised their own flag bearers they became more subtle. The mass African boycott of 1976 was in response to a New Zealand rugby tour of apartheid South Africa. Although political, this was ostensibly a sporting matter.

The only boycott of a Winter Olympics came in 1980, when Taiwan refused to compete under the name Chinese Taipei. Unless you count all the years China would not send teams because they objected to Taiwan calling its team Republic of China. But just when we thought everyone had got over using the Olympics for this purpose, there are calls are being to boycott the Sochi Games for reasons which are nothing to do with athletics.

Politics and sport have never been mutually exclusive. Indeed, a number of Olympic athletes have entered politics after their sporting careers are over. Emil Zatopek was a leading figure in the Czech Communist Party prior to 1968. Sebastian Coe became a UK government whip. Marcus Stephen, a weightlifter who competed in the 1992, 1996 and 2000 Olympics, was President of Nauru from 2007 to 2011.

Yet despite their importance to national prestige athletes are still seen as a politically expendable commodity. No matter how hard they train, how much they achieve and how much money is spent on them by their respective governments, their careers and hard work can be ruined, just like that, when some politician wants to make a point.

But what sort of point is being made here? The reasons for countries boycotting any particular Games have never been unanimous. This time round, the Circassians want the Games cancelled or moved due to claims of a Russian genocide against their people in the 19th Century. There are also concerns about the environmental impact of the facilities and Russia’s supposed record on human rights and gay rights.

Several nations have also raised concerns about holding the Games so close to Abkhazia, one of the Georgian breakaway regions over which Russia and Georgia went to war in 2008. Georgia did, of course, enter the other
region, South Ossetia, during the 2008 Olympics, hoping the Games would distract the world’s attention from this move, and the actions it took there, classified by any standard as war crimes. But those are not actually protests or principled stands at all, they are exactly the opposite.

If Russia’s gay rights legislation, for example, actually bothers other governments there are a number of actions they can take. Even though there’s been no gay protests to be held in Russia itself.

But do governments really care? No. Why? Because they don’t really care all that much about these issues, or those affected by them. The worse your opponent is, the more points you can score off them. But if you really cared about these issues, you would not just complain about them but do something about them.

Sports boycotts do work: the long ostracisation of South Africa is held to have been instrumental in helping dismantle the apartheid system. But in that case it was “bad” South Africa’s sportsmen who paid the biggest price, not those of the “good” countries protesting.

When politicians demand that their athletes, who have nothing to do with the issues they are talking about, give up their lifetime’s dreams to “properly represent their country” they are simply running away from all responsibility. What they are saying is that they do not care about their own country, much less the victims of events elsewhere which they could take real action over if they wanted to.

Politics cannot be abstracted from international sport and grand international sporting occasions. Athletes themselves have made political statements at the Games. Czech gymnast Vera Caslavska turned her head away from the Soviet flag at the ‘68 Games. In 2004 Iranian judoka Arash Miresmaeili allegedly went on an eating binge, thus making him overweight and disqualifying himself, rather than fight an Israeli.

But if athletes representing their country have to represent its politics too, what about all the other events they represent their country in? How often is an ordinary international match in any Olympic sport disrupted by the politicians withdrawing their team? Do the issues only surface when the Olympics come round? If so, what is the problem? Just complete the Olympics and they will go away again, there is nothing to protest about.

Once upon a time people looked forward to the Olympics, winter and summer, as a great international festival which created new heroes in a dizzying array of events you would never otherwise see. Now we wait with trepidation for the next political manoeuvre, wondering which nations will actually turn up, and what will be used as a reason for not doing so.

In 1980 Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister famously used to getting her own way, stated that the United Kingdom would join the Moscow Olympics boycott. It didn’t, because Sir Denis Follows, head of the British Olympic Association, reminded her that the UK is a signatory to the Olympic Charter. As such, it had to send a team unless it didn’t have the money. For this he was branded a dangerous Communist, not someone who respects his country’s signature.

The aforementioned Sebastian Coe, who won the 1500 metres gold at those Games, was put under considerable pressure not to go. The Foreign Secretary had a long and threatening meeting with his father. But as Coe said in 2006,

“My gut instinct was that there was an intellectual dishonesty about what we were trying to achieve. History proved us right of course, because four years later when we went to LA for the 1984 Olympics the Russians were still in Afghanistan, and the boycott had no impact.”

Countries welcome home their gold medallists with fanfare, and now pay them handsomely out of public funds. Their leaders should not therefore brand their athletes as traitors to their country, and destroy their careers, because they are too scared to take action over an issue themselves - when it is their responsibility, not the athletes’.

Or maybe the importance of the issues does justify some sort of grand gesture. Fine. Let us all boycott every event involving Americans over the most important issue of today - the double standard by which its allies can threaten to boycott events over this or that alleged crime, whilst doing exactly the same thing themselves, in their own country and other peoples, whether or not they were invited.

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