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To cite this article: Barbara Keys (2018): Political Protection: The International Olympic Committee’s UN Diplomacy in the 1980s, The International Journal of the History of Sport, DOI: 10.1080/09523367.2017.1402764

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2017.1402764

Published online: 03 Jan 2018.

Article views: 6

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Political Protection: The International Olympic Committee’s UN Diplomacy in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT
In the aftermath of a widespread boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics that challenged the legitimacy of the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) began a vigorous but unsuccessful effort, lasting from 1982 to 1985, to convince the UN General Assembly to pass a resolution committing governments not to boycott the Games. Drawing on archives in Switzerland, the UK, Ireland, and Canada, this article brings to light this forgotten but important episode from the early years of Juan Antonio Samaranch’s presidency. The ambitious Samaranch and his limelight-seeking ally, Canadian Richard ‘Dick’ Pound, vastly overestimated the IOC’s global political capital in pushing governments to give up one of the most potent sport-related tools at their disposal. The IOC was at this time so weak that most governments failed even to respond to repeated entreaties about the proposal. The organization’s leaders never fully grasped the ironies of turning to what many observers considered the world’s most politicized body for a political measure to reduce political influence on the Olympic Games. Although the IOC has often claimed that it cannot force standards of behaviour on governments, the 1980s campaign was a sustained effort to do exactly that.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC), steward of the Olympic Games, felt itself under siege by 1980. The organization had been cornered into formalizing the exclusion of South Africa in 1970 thanks to an international movement against apartheid; it had endured an apartheid-related boycott by dozens of African countries at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games; and it had been hammered by a United States-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. More than 60 countries stayed home in 1980, inflicting a grievous blow to the IOC’s global and universalist pretensions. The prospect that a major, retaliatory boycott by the Soviets might take place in 1984 weighed heavily on the minds of IOC leaders. ‘Olympic sport’, as one 1985 report put it, was in danger of becoming a mere object of international politics, rather than playing an active role itself. To make matters worse, the organization was in such a precarious financial position that bankruptcy was conceivable. It had spent most of the last decade headed by a president – the Irishman Lord Michael Killanin – who was regarded by many as affable

KEYWORDS
Sport diplomacy; International Olympic Committee; United Nations; international politics of sport; Juan Antonio Samaranch

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but inept. IOC members and close affiliates worried about the possible ‘destruction’ of the Olympics.5

In 1981, now headed by an ambitious and more politically savvy leader, Juan Antonio Samaranch, the IOC fought back. It negotiated new sponsorship deals and took a fresh approach to television rights that would bring it vast wealth.6 Politically, it began a long process of increasing its clout and its access to the top rungs of power. One of Samaranch’s earliest steps in this direction was an ambitious effort to turn the tables on the governments that had just assaulted the IOC’s power: he attempted to find a way to force governments to let their athletes participate in the Games.

After considering various options, including holding an independent diplomatic conference to draft a treaty, Samaranch settled on a large-scale campaign to persuade the United Nations General Assembly to pass a declaration on ‘the protection of the Olympic Games’, committing governments, in effect, to a promise not to boycott. The effort was drenched in irony. After nearly a century of loudly proclaiming that it was above politics, the IOC now chose to combat ‘ politicization’ of the Games in the world’s most politicized body. Its leaders never quite grasped the problems inherent in such an enterprise, because in the most basic sense they misunderstood politics. In seeing (and selling) their proposal as purely moral, they made it impossible to communicate in the UN’s lingua franca: the language of politics. Nor did the IOC apprehend that the UN’s global reputation was at a low point, with North-South disagreements over proposals for a New International Economic Order joining long-standing Cold War divisions to make a highly factionalized body less capable than ever of speaking for the entire world. The IOC wanted to escape from being ‘a virtual hostage to world tensions’, as one key leader put it, but the UN – a hostage itself – was in no position to effect a rescue.7

As a result, the campaign at the UN was an utter failure. A long effort to find governments willing to put the declaration on the UN General Assembly’s agenda turned up short in 1982 because of what one report described as ‘extremely feeble support’ from governments.8 It was aborted in 1983 when it became clear that it would fail again. Resurrected in 1985, after the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles led to another mass boycott, the effort again went nowhere and was finally abandoned. The mandate to protect the Olympics was then relegated to a minor agenda item of an IOC committee devoted to fostering the ‘Olympic Movement’.9 Except for brief mentions in a few accounts, the campaign has been forgotten.10

This article recovers the significance of the IOC’s campaign, drawing on British, Canadian, Irish, and IOC archives to reconstruct the episode.11 It argues that the IOC turned to the UN for help out of intense frustration over recent events, but that the move was also linked to Samaranch’s ambition. The former Spanish diplomat adored the world stage and had grandiose aims to make the IOC a global political player. His craving for diplomatic celebrity was abetted by Richard ‘Dick’ Pound, a Canadian lawyer who relished the high-level political contacts his IOC membership afforded him.12 The story of the hapless UN effort is partly a story of hubris and unhinged ambition. But the campaign failed because it was fundamentally misguided. Samaranch and Pound never recognized that the proposal offered states nothing in their own interest to offset the cost in limiting their room to manoeuvre. Ignoring this crucial consideration, the two would-be power brokers unwisely assumed that the Olympic Games commanded a moral prestige that would compel allegiance. When governments did not fall into line as they expected, they were surprised – again and again.13
The episode also illuminates the challenges faced by nongovernmental organizations when they try to influence international politics. NGO successes in this realm in recent years have led some observers to herald a new era in international order, in which nonstate actors assume leading roles alongside states. From Amnesty International to the Palestine Liberation Organization, nonstate actors have levered the UN to advance their own agendas. But in attending to the success stories, observers may be overstating the ease with which NGOs have an entrée into state-centred fora. NGOs succeed at the UN only to the extent that they persuade enough states to take up their cause. Without sufficient state backing – something the IOC never truly achieved – NGO initiatives are doomed to failure.

For an understanding of the IOC’s role in international politics, the significance of its failed effort lies in several areas. Above all, the episode shows just how far removed the IOC was from the corridors of power in the early 1980s. The fact that Samaranch was able to secure meetings with dozens of heads of state during his early years has led to portrayals of the IOC in these years as politically well-connected and influential. The UN story provides a very different picture. The IOC could not even contact most foreign ministries when pressing for its UN measure because it did not know how to get in touch with the relevant officials. Even when the proposal was received, it was simply ignored by the vast majority of governments. Samaranch and Pound both misjudged the politics of the situation in fundamental ways, misreading polite diplomatic-speak as enthusiastic support.

It is also notable, however, that despite their reluctance to sacrifice political power to the IOC, governments never objected to the lofty moral claims the IOC made. On the contrary, they readily agreed that IOC rhetoric about promoting peace and banning discrimination was credible. The moral cloaking of the Olympic Games, in other words, was a discursive tool that governments themselves found useful, even if they disagreed with the IOC that morality could be divorced from politics. Finally, the ambitious 1980s effort reveals the hollowness of the IOC’s claims in the recent past that it cannot impose moral standards, such as broad-based human rights benchmarks, on governments. Its ‘protect the Olympic Games’ campaign was a sustained effort to do exactly that: to coerce governments to behave according to moral standards.

An understanding of the 1980s campaign must begin with two men: Samaranch and Pound. Samaranch was eager to undertake the effort, which coincided with his moulding the IOC in his own image, because it accorded with his notions of the grand role he should play on the world stage. By the time he retired in 2001, at the age of 80, he could rightly claim that the organization he left was almost unrecognizable from the one he had inherited. He had turned the view that the Olympics existed in a realm separate from politics on its head, openly embracing the world of politics, at least when it suited him. His philosophy was to be proactive: ‘I am utterly convinced that in politics one must show initiative and not let oneself be overtaken by events.’ He allowed corruption to flourish as revenues skyrocketed, but he also co-opted more athletes and the very first women into the IOC, and did much to diminish debilitating squabbles with international federations and national Olympic committees. He learned from the failed 1980s UN effort, and in the 1990s would nearly single-handedly forge a tight relationship with the UN on the basis of a supposed common interest in peace.

Pound was a rising figure in world sport who used the UN initiative as an opportunity to build a close working relationship with Samaranch and to dabble in the kind of international politicking that he found exhilarating. A former Olympic swimmer, he had served as
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president of the Canadian Olympic Committee in 1977 and became a member of the International Olympic Committee in 1978. In the mid-1980s Samaranch put Pound, a tax lawyer, in charge of negotiating the television and sponsorship deals that would eventually transform the IOC into a multibillion-dollar organization. The Canadian later became openly critical of the Spaniard, especially when, on his retirement, Samaranch refused to support Pound’s candidacy for the IOC presidency. In the 1980s, however, Pound was one of Samaranch’s key allies. A relatively junior member when the UN campaign began, he turned it into a springboard to membership on the Executive Board, which he achieved in 1983; in 1987 he became a Vice President. Though he is one of the most important figures in recent Olympic history, Pound has received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

Before Samaranch took over, the IOC tried to keep its distance from the UN. When the UN specialized agency UNESCO (the United Nations Educations, Cultural and Scientific Organization) founded what would become the International Council for Sport and Physical Education in 1959, it sought IOC input, but then-IOC President Avery Brundage demurred. Throughout Brundage’s presidency, the IOC refused to engage with UNESCO. In the late 1970s, under the directorship of Senegal’s Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow, UNESCO embarked on a barely concealed power grab to take over the Olympic Games. It failed, but not before provoking considerable resentment and hostility in IOC circles. Samaranch’s presidency marked a turning point. In September 1981, the IOC succeeded in obtaining a UN Treaty, known as the Nairobi Treaty, on the Protection of the Olympic Symbol, under the auspices of the World Intellectual Property Organization, a UN specialized agency. Negotiated as a sideline to a revision of the Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, the Treaty was an effort to protect the Olympic symbol of five interlocking rings from commercial exploitation by licensing its use. Although its utility was limited – it gave the IOC the right to prohibit the use of the symbol in some cases rather than to authorize it, and it was ratified by few countries – it may have contributed to Samaranch’s inflated sense of the IOC’s standing vis-à-vis the UN. For example, wrote to Samaranch about the Nairobi Treaty: ‘Even though this was a conference among states, the IOC and its representatives were given more than the usual opportunity to participate in the discussions’. The IOC had also recently obtained recognition under Swiss law as an international non-governmental, non-profit organization with legal personhood.

Samaranch from the beginning saw the UN as a vehicle for achieving the new political standing he sought for the IOC. One magazine reported that he was ‘doing his utmost to make [the IOC] a universal nongovernmental organization acknowledged by [the] U.N.’. Soon after taking office, he sought a meeting with UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim to discuss IOC-UN collaboration and cooperation with UNESCO. At the same time, however, the IOC was watching apprehensively the UN’s ongoing drafting of a Convention against Apartheid in Sports, which would be adopted in 1985. The IOC remained aloof from the process, fearing the potential intrusion of governments into the domain of sporting organizations.

The 1980 boycott, the most serious challenge to the Olympics since their founding, precipitated a widespread sense of crisis and calls to act. Meeting in Lomé in 1981, African national Olympic committees produced a report on ‘the renewal of the Olympic movement’, which lamented that the IOC’s ‘authority is sometimes challenged by governments, its fundamental regulations also violated and even slighted by its own partners’. Strong measures to buttress the IOC’s authority were needed, they claimed, so that the IOC
would be recognized as an association with the kind of power wielded by the International Committee of the Red Cross: ‘weight, authority and [independence] from governments.’ The document recommended that Samaranch ask the UN General Assembly for ‘a statement on the mission, duties and the prerogatives’ of the Olympics, including recognition of its autonomy.32

The UN campaign that materialized at the end of 1981 appears to have been instigated by Michal Jekiel, vice president of the Fédération Internationale Amateur de Cyclisme (FIAC). After US President Jimmy Carter began lobbying for an international boycott of the 1980 Olympics, Jekiel argued that the IOC needed to push for an international convention that would protect the Games from political interference.33 International sports federations that were dependent on the Games for exposure were especially eager to prevent future boycotts from diminishing their own visibility. Jekiel’s cycling federation was, for this reason, protective of the Games. He first put the proposition to his federation, which voted in July to request that the IOC consider a UN convention to protect the independence of the Games at its 1981 Congress.34 In October, Jekiel wrote the first draft of a proposal for a Convention. In flowery language, he declared the Games to be ‘a part of the patrimony of human culture’ that ‘contributed to peace’ but was ‘threatened by dangers.’35 The draft convention’s key provision mandated that ‘no government shall undertake or encourage any boycott of the Olympic Games; nor shall it try to influence the choice of venues for the Olympic Games.’36

Samaranch moved quickly to put the idea in motion. After the IOC Executive Board met in Sarajevo in December 1981, Samaranch put Pound in charge of a new Ad Hoc Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Movement. Pound undertook extensive consultations with officials in the Canadian Department of External Affairs (DEA), who were eager to curry favour with the IOC in light of Calgary’s recent selection as host of the 1988 Winter Olympics. DEA experts provided extensive advice, including research material and detailed guidance on how to draft a declaration and how to shepherd it into the General Assembly.37

Although the Canadian experts gave Pound the impression of ‘complete and enthusiastic support’, he seems to have misread polite assistance by a future Olympic host as genuinely eager backing. In fact, internal discussions in the DEA suggest a very different picture than the one Pound sketched out to Samaranch. As one DEA official wrote in internal correspondence: ‘It does not seem to me that the fundamental interests of Canada are engaged’, nor was it likely that the initiative would enjoy broad support at the UN. The official noted that African countries would pose problems because they had used the Olympics for political reasons in the past and would want to keep that option open, while other blocs and regions would not want to confront African countries on an issue that did not involve fundamental interests.38

It is a measure of Samaranch’s and Pound’s grandiose ambitions that they initially hoped to call an independent diplomatic conference that would produce a legally binding convention, along the lines of the international conferences that produced The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. To these brash leaders, forcing governments to allow athletes to attend a sporting event was on a par with negotiating treaties to regulate the conduct of war. In February 1982, Samaranch called on the new UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, at the request of, and accompanied by, Spain’s permanent representative at the UN. The IOC head described a proposal ‘for a global convention banning Olympic boycotts’. The Secretary-General was noncommittal. (A British official at the UN, reporting on what she
heard about the meeting, commented laconically that any such convention ‘would not be worth the paper it was written on’.)³⁹

After consulting with Canadian officials, however, Pound dropped this wildly unrealistic idea. He accepted DEA advice that governments would object to the costs of a convention, that it would involve years of negotiations, and that a legally binding document would likely encounter more resistance than one with merely moral force.⁴⁰ Canadian legal experts also warned that the legal status of the IOC would cause difficulties, given that states did not consider the IOC a subject of international law.⁴¹

The IOC had also considered approaching UNESCO rather than the General Assembly.⁴² Samaranch seemed initially in favour of UNESCO, but Pound was strongly opposed.⁴³ Privately, Canadian DEA officials had told him that UNESCO was ‘unwieldy at best’: ‘Things go in and do not come out.’⁴⁴ Many IOC members also remained worried about UNESCO’s ambitions in sport. As one IOC memo warned, though UNESCO had adopted a non-intervention policy and its director M’Bow had voiced support at the Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden in 1981, ‘the makeup of the UNESCO organization’ meant that it might still hope to replace the IOC with an international governmental body. ‘UNESCO is notoriously in search of funding,’ the authors warned. ‘The thought that it might gain access to the television and other revenues accruing to the IOC would be a considerable temptation.’⁴⁵ In explanatory memos for government consumption, Pound explained that the General Assembly was the more suitable venue because the UN dealt with political problems whereas UNESCO’s mandate was limited to ‘technical’ matters.⁴⁶

There were two remaining paths forward, at least as far as the UN General Assembly was concerned: a resolution or a declaration. A legal scholar explains, ‘there is the feeling that [General Assembly] declarations are of greater significance than ordinary resolutions’ because they are regarded as capable of codifying international law, whereas resolutions are always merely hortatory. (The precise legal status of UN resolutions is a matter of much dispute. For some, they are merely recommendations that cannot be the source of legal rights and duties; for others, the General Assembly can issue statements that have binding legal force.)⁴⁷ Pound convinced the IOC to pursue the weightier declaration. As he reported back to the IOC, it would not be legally binding but might have valuable outcomes: ‘A Declaration would receive worldwide publicity, thereby shedding a favourable light on governments supporting it while ‘creating instantly some pressure (national and international) on a government which might attempt to contravene the provisos of the Declaration, thus contributing to compliance’.⁴⁸ He also noted:

Besides, as a practical matter, if we are in the position of having to enforce any provision on a legal basis, it will mean that we will have already lost the struggle to prevent political interference with the Olympic Games.⁴⁹

The key provisions of the declaration centred on securing governmental agreement not to prevent athletes from participating in the Games and to recognize the IOC’s prerogative to choose host cities strictly on the basis of fitness to host a sporting event. An early version of the declaration made this point with the language ‘that selection of host cities should have no other implications’ (beyond the sporting) – an absurd contention given that selection of Olympic hosts came with an array of political implications.⁵⁰ But by removing grounds to criticize host cities on political grounds, the proposed declaration would reinforce the illegitimacy of boycotts.
The proposal, which went through many drafts, exemplifies how the IOC conceived of the moral and political significance of the Olympic Games in the 1980s. Written in the formal style of a General Assembly resolution, an early draft began with a lengthy preamble stating the principles and precedents from which the declaration followed and then moved to the declarative statements:

The General Assembly,

RECOGNIZING that the International Olympic Committee is the non-Governmental international organization governing the Olympic Movement.

NOTING the provisions of the Olympic Charter regarding the principles and organization of the Olympic Games

ENDORSING in particular, the following aims of the Olympic Charter

To promote the development of those physical and moral qualities which are the basis of sport

To educate young people through sport in a spirit of better understanding between each other and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better and more peaceful world

To spread the Olympic principles throughout the world, thereby creating international goodwill

To bring together the athletes of the world in the great four-yearly sport festival, the Olympic Games

AWARE that the International Olympic Committee allow no discrimination within the Olympic Movement on grounds of race, religion or politics

DESIROUS of preserving the Olympic Games as a celebration of the aims and objectives of the Olympic Movement, to be organized and held in the best possible conditions and with the widest possible participation

DESIROUS ALSO of protecting the celebration of the Olympic Games from the possible adverse consequences of international tensions

DESIROUS ALSO of facilitating participation in the Olympic Games by athletes and officials from all of the national Olympic committees of the world

RECOGNIZING ALSO that selection of host cities for the Olympic Games by the International Olympic Committee is based solely on the ability of such cities to organize the Olympic Games,

DECLARES

(1) THAT member states shall recognize and protect the celebration of the Olympic Games which shall be governed by the provisions of the Olympic Charter

(2) THAT free and unhindered access to Olympic sites and venues be granted to Olympic athletes and officials during the Olympic Games and for a reasonable period prior to and immediately thereafter

(3) THAT no person be discriminated against in the Olympic Games by reason of race, religion, or politics

(4) THAT member states shall refrain from any action in relation to the Olympic Games for purposes other than furthering the aims of the Olympic Movement described in the Olympic Charter
(5) THAT member states shall acknowledge and protect the autonomy of the recognized National Olympic Committee in its territory, in accordance with the provisions of the Olympic Charter.

(6) THAT member states shall respect the mandate of the International Olympic Committee to select the host cities for the Olympic Games as provided for in the Olympic Charter.

It was unmistakably an anti-boycott initiative. Senegalese IOC member Kéba Mbaye later described it as a way to get governments to renounce ‘any hostile attitude toward the Olympic Games’ as ‘the best way to avert the danger of boycotts’. Evaluations by Foreign Ministries labelled it exactly that. But for public relations reasons Pound tried, with little success, to pitch it differently:

not as a response to past actions, but rather a forward-looking proposal designed to achieve a long-standing objective of the IOC. It really represents a common interest of all athletes, states and the Olympic movement in having old principles reaffirmed by a supreme policy-making body as proof of an international entente on this point.

As the declaration went through various iterations, other aspirations were modified or narrowed. Although the original terms of reference for the Ad Hoc Commission included obtaining recognition of the IOC as an international non-governmental organization, the Commission quickly decided not to seek de jure recognition of the IOC by the UN due to the ‘serious political risks’ it would pose to acceptance of the declaration. It was Pound’s view that NGO status would carry ‘certain obligations which could be dangerous for the IOC’, perhaps opening it up to political challenges. The Ad Hoc Commission concluded that the declaration would in any case amount to de facto recognition of the IOC.

Other changes narrowed the scope from protection of the ‘Olympic movement’ to protection of the ‘Olympic Games’. References to the Olympic Charter were deleted due to concerns that governments might question the Charter’s provisions and lobby to change them. Language used in a 1977 UN resolution against apartheid in sport was copied in order to link the purposes of the UN with those of the Olympics. Hoping to win over African states, the provision noted that the Olympic Games prohibit ‘discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or politics’ and called on member states not to discriminate against anyone ‘in the Olympic Games’ on those grounds.

The lobbying process reveals both the power of the IOC and the limits to that power. When Samaranch asked to meet, UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar agreed. Samaranch believed that the Secretary-General and his legal advisers supported the draft declaration. Yet, the Secretary-General refused to introduce the declaration as an agenda item, insisting that it would have to be done by a member state. To be successful, the declaration in fact needed to be put forth by a diverse group of co-sponsors, preferably including states in each regional and ideological bloc.

The IOC’s weakness was revealed when Samaranch wrote to all IOC members, heads of national Olympic committees, and selected heads of government to request support: often, he could not get any response at all. Lacking direct contacts with most governments, the IOC asked national Olympic committees to approach their respective foreign ministries. In cases where direct relations existed, the IOC sometimes approached governments, as Pound did in Canada and Samaranch in Spain. Samaranch also lobbied for the proposal in his travels around the world, meeting with national Olympic committees and with heads of state when possible. And, of course, friendly governments were leaned on to enlist other
supporters. Even when directed at national Olympic committees, these entreaties were often ignored. The process revealed the gulf between the IOC and national governments at the outset of the 1980s. Samaranch and Pound consistently overrated their influence over politicians. A few months into the process, Pound wrote to Samaranch in apparent surprise, ‘There is a perception that the sport ministers are not as influential as the foreign ministers’ at the UN.  

Pound seems to have paid little heed to the warning of Canadian officials that ‘there is really nothing to be offered to governments, but rather only certain prerogatives to be taken away.’ He did, however, take note of repeated warnings that came from many governments: that once a draft declaration was submitted, it would be out of the IOC’s control and could be subject to amendments that might make the final result unpalatable. Still, his advice to Samaranch in late 1981 concluded: ‘We should proceed on the basis that most governments would like to find a way, within recognized international mechanisms, to prevent political interventions and disruptions from affecting the Olympic Games.’  

The assessment was grossly off the mark. Of the five regional blocs at the UN, only the Soviet and East European bloc was willing to press forward with the issue. The USSR refrained from expressing strong support, perhaps wary of the obvious element of self-interest in light of the 1980 boycott. The Politburo would eventually order a boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, but that decision was made much later and is unlikely to have influenced the Soviet position on the IOC initiative in 1982. Most likely with Soviet approval, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania agreed to support the declaration. Unfortunately for the IOC, Eastern bloc enthusiasm made the initiative less appealing to Western European countries, which erroneously interpreted the effort as communist-inspired.

Underlining the IOC’s European orientation and weak roots in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (it still had few members from these regions), Pound found it nearly impossible even to communicate with most of these governments. After nearly a year of work, he reported that ‘the position of many leading African and Arab states is not clear, even at this time. It has proved to be more difficult than anticipated to obtain responses from such governments.’ In December 1982, at the end of months of intensive efforts by Samaranch personally, Pound’s tally of responses from governments was almost entirely blank, with ‘no reported contacts’ from the vast majority of countries, including in Africa. Among African countries, only the governments of Tunisia, Senegal, and Liberia communicated support. In Asia, only India and Indonesia were in favour, but Indonesia refused to co-sponsor the initiative because of its membership on the UN Special Committee on Apartheid. Japan and the PRC were ‘reportedly sceptical’. Responses from other governments were simply not forthcoming. The silence was partly due to a reluctance to speak up before a consensus among regional partners had emerged, but a core problem seems to have been a basic inability on the part of the IOC to reach the relevant government officials outside of major Western countries.

Western countries were for the most part sceptical of the effort. Canada was supportive, at least at first, because of Calgary’s upcoming hosting of the Winter Games; Spain was helpful presumably because of the connection to Samaranch. But even lobbying Western countries with which the IOC had more developed lines of communication, the IOC’s lack of UN experience showed. Despite the advice from the Canadian DEA, the IOC approached the effort wrong-footedly. They tried to lobby the Western Europe and Others Group in New
York (WEOG) to support the declaration, when WEOG’s mandate was limited to procedural issues such as elections. When the WEOG group discussed the IOC proposal in July 1982, the first order of debate was whether to even take up the matter, given that it was outside its jurisdiction. In the end, they told Samaranch (‘firmly but politely’, as the British put it) that he had addressed himself to the wrong forum.73

Samaranch’s letter did prompt the WEOG to engage in a preliminary discussion of the proposal, but most of the delegations were opposed. The Netherlands objected on the grounds that the declaration ‘asks governments to accept beforehand the criteria used and the decisions taken’ by the IOC and that it would foreclose ‘all possibility of (peaceful) expression of views in the international community via sports contacts and events’. The Dutch were also concerned that issues around sport and politics would be subject to contentious public debate. The Dutch government warned the IOC that opening up the issue to discussion in the UN General Assembly, ‘a political body par excellence’, might well result in outcomes that were counterproductive for the IOC.74 Other countries worried that South Africa and Israel, perennial targets at the UN, would be brought into the discussion in what one observer called ‘an unhealthy way’.75

When the matter was discussed by UN delegations in September, it provoked concern. The British reported that ‘all our [European Community] partners have reservations’.76 Belgium, the UK, and the Nordic countries had reservations about the operative paragraph banning discrimination, presumably because of its restriction on discrimination on political grounds. All of these governments wanted the option to restrict sports contacts for political reasons.77

By this time, the Canadians had ‘cold feet’. Not only were they unwilling to co-sponsor the declaration to put it on the agenda, but they were no longer sure they could even vote for it.78 In August, the Canadian UN mission in New York had received instructions from Ottawa to work towards getting the declaration on the General Assembly’s agenda. The mission questioned these instructions, suspecting that the proposal came from the DEA’s Minister and the Sports/Cultural Affairs group, without due consultation of the political side. They called the proposal ‘ill thought out’ and advised that it would be unwelcome to those of Canada’s allies that had sat out the Moscow Games. They warned that it was likely to be ‘hijacked’ by the Arabs and the Africans. They correctly predicted that different instructions would be forthcoming soon.79 When the supportive Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mark MacGuigan, resigned to take up another position, the initiative was left without a backer at the DEA.80

The United States registered opposition that was entirely predictable on two grounds: the country had just led an Olympic boycott and the Reagan administration was hostile to the UN in general.81 The Bureau of International Organization Affairs in the Department of State told the British that the United States was prepared to vote against the declaration because operative paragraph 3 (prohibiting political ‘discrimination’) was unacceptable. In contrast to the IOC’s strategy towards other countries, the United States Olympic Committee (the USOC) appears not to have approached the State Department for support. The IOC knew it would not be able to get US support and hoped only for US non-opposition.82

The British were strongly opposed to the effort. The British delegation in New York described themselves as ‘not enthusiastic’, advised against taking the lead ‘in any way’, and warned that the whole process would be ‘difficult and time-consuming’. A British representative in New York noted, perceptively, that ‘the IOC probably have little experience
of the way the UN works and do not therefore realise how easily their draft could be hijacked, e.g. by the Africans and/or the Arabs, with Soviet connivance. Their soundings showed many countries without a position; Brazil, Japan, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the US in varying states of opposition; and only France and East Germany in favour.

In a carefully worded attempt to deter the IOC from going forward, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advised the chairman of the British Olympic Association – in a letter drafted at the highest level in order to help repair damaged government-sport relations after a public dispute over the 1980 boycott – that it simply was not possible to keep sport and politics separate in all cases, as for example with sporting contacts with South Africa. ‘In exceptional circumstances, therefore, the UK government would want to be able ‘to offer advice’ to British groups about whether or not to participate in particular sports events. Thatcher also warned of the dangers of amendments that would make a final declaration ‘bear little resemblance to its original’. Finally, she wrote, the UN campaign might lead to the possibility that the IOC would, ‘however perversely, be accused of seeking further to politicise sport’. (The IOC was indeed trying to politicize sport, but its blinkered definition of politicisation as something only governments could do blinded it to this fact.) In internal discussions, the British Foreign Office rated the measure ‘ill-advised’ because of the risk African countries would ‘hijack’ the declaration to insert language from the UN resolution adopted each year on apartheid in sports, which the UK consistently voted against.

A number of countries were concerned that the proposed declaration would be interpreted as a criticism of their participation in the 1980 boycott. The declaration was without doubt an effort to make future such choices more difficult. In Pound’s many reports to Samaranch, he never mentioned this basic point: that the IOC was asking governments to make a significant sacrifice. As one British official wrote, ‘clearly, [Her Majesty’s Government] could not give carte blanche to another body (in this case, the IOC) to determine its actions in particular circumstances’, and the British bristled at the suggestion that the IOC was the ‘sole arbiter’ of the values of the Olympic Games. (The Netherlands further objected that the IOC was not ‘the paramount sporting body in that it has no power over the most “important” of world sporting festivals, the “World Cup” of football.’) The French worried about the resolution becoming a political football and argued that the Olympic ‘principle’ was so important that it should not be subject to political votes of any kind; if there were to be a declaration, it would need to be one adopted by consensus. But Pound, ignoring these basic points, claimed broad-based enthusiasm.

Despite his optimism, he was forced to set the initiative aside in late 1982 due to the inability to find a single non-communist government willing to co-sponsor. Pound and Samaranch tested the waters again in early 1983. The new plan was to have India spearhead the declaration, presumably because it was a nonaligned country that would seem disinterested. But the global political situation was quickly turned unfavourable. Conflict in the Middle East meant that the likelihood of the declaration being used as a vehicle for other political agendas was greatly increased, and the IOC halted efforts to pursue the declaration early in the year.

A more substantial effort was undertaken in 1985, with the IOC freshly recharged with indignation over the Soviet boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Games. The 1985 draft, now downgraded to the more modest status of resolution rather than declaration, was considerably streamlined. Its preamble reiterated the same moral values of the Games, but now with a longer list of anti-discrimination measures that now read: ‘without discrimination of any
kind, based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origins, property, birth or other status. The declaration itself, however, called simply to ‘grant free and unhindered access’ to the Games to all athletes and officials. To pass this much more modest measure, the IOC drew up plans to ask the UN Secretary General to speak of the Olympic Games as ‘an important humanitarian’ event in his report to the General Assembly and to enlist a number of major countries to lobby him on behalf of the declaration. They were instructed to emphasize that the Olympic Games fostered the UN’s general aim of promoting peace. Perez de Cuellar told Samaranch that there was a strong possibility the resolution could be adopted unanimously without even a vote, but Cuba unexpectedly objected. Spain, as the resolution’s major backer, then chose to withdraw rather than risk difficulties in bilateral Spanish–Cuban relations.

In the end, then, the IOC could not even get a bare-bones resolution passed. As in 1982 and 1983, foreign ministries were often puzzled and pessimistic. As New Zealand’s Prime Minister David Lange wrote to a sport official in 1985, it was ‘just as well’ that the current effort was failing. ‘I frankly don’t believe that it is realistic to expect the world’s most politicized forum to adopt a resolution calling for politics to be kept out of the Olympic Games’, Lange wrote. ‘I have real doubts about the wisdom of the IOC’s opening itself up to United Nations involvement – some might say meddling – in its affairs, even if only in indirect ways.’

Although the IOC’s proposed resolution was an attempt to transcend the Cold War divide, antagonism between the Soviet and the Western blocs made the UN a difficult place to manoeuvre for NGOs new to its labyrinthine bureaucracy. The 1990s, which ushered in a new, idealistic international order, proved more hospitable for the IOC. Using the civil wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Olympic connection to the Bosnian city of Sarajevo, Samaranch secured UN approval of the concept of an Olympic Truce: a halt to hostilities during the Olympic Games. The IOC developed cooperation agreements with UNESCO, the UN Environment Programme, the UN International Drug Control Programme, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organization, and the UN Children’s Fund. In the last 25 years, the IOC’s UN diplomacy has been remarkably successful, as the organizations have reaped mutual benefits from buttressing each other’s moral credibility.

It is possible to claim that the IOC did finally succeed in reaching that 1982 goal. In 2014 the UN General Assembly passed a lengthy resolution on ‘sport for development and peace’ that included a provision supporting ‘the independence and autonomy of sport as well as the mission of the International Olympic Committee in leading the Olympic movement’. The IOC called this recognition a ‘historic milestone’, declaring in a press release that it ‘clearly implies that full participation at sporting events is encouraged, and that in turn boycotts are incompatible with this UN request for respect of the values of sport’. But an implication is a far cry from a commitment, and even though boycotts seem to have lost their appeal, they are still discussed when political controversies arise around host cities and countries – and they will continue to be a threat, entirely unhindered by any UN resolutions.

Notes

political pressures around the 1980 Games, linked to but also distinct from the Afghanistan-related boycott effort, see: Umberto Tulli, ‘Bringing Human Rights In: The Campaign against the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games and the Origins of the Nexus Between Human Rights and the Olympic Games’, *International Journal of the History of Sport* 33, no. 16 (October 2017), 2026–45.


12. See, for example, Personal and Confidential Letter, Pound to Samaranch, 13 November 1981, 12, Canada Archives.

13. Samaranch was also deeply surprised by the media outcry over the Salt Lake City bidding scandal that erupted in 1988. It took him some time to grasp that the IOC’s moral authority was easily breached. Kevan Gosper with Glenda Korporaal, *An Olympic Life: Melbourne 1956 to Sydney 2000* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000).


16. He was said to have met with 50 heads of state in his first two years. ‘Samaranch's Campaign’, *Continental Sports* no. 1 (15 April–15 May 1982), 9, in UN Declaration on the Protection of the Olympic Games, File 55-26-OLYMP-UN, Cultural Affairs, Department of External Affairs, Archives of Canada, Ottawa [hereafter: ‘Canada Archives’].

17. In 1985, two international legal experts prepared a long report for the IOC, suggesting, among other things, that IOC host contracts require obligations of host *countries*, not merely host cities. See Simma and Vedder, ‘Suggestions for Improving the Legal Position’.


29. Personal and Confidential Letter, Pound to Samaranch, 13 November 1981, 10, Canada Archives.
30. ‘Points à Soulever avec Dr. Waldheim’ [c. 1981?], E-RE02-ONU/003, UN Files, International Olympic Committee Archives, Lausanne, Switzerland [hereafter ‘UN Files, IOC Archives’]. I was unable to determine whether the meeting took place.


37. Some of the Canadians involved believed that Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau had originated the idea for a UN declaration during a June 1981 lunch with Samaranch, but this view appears to have been mistaken. Telegram, ‘Draft UN Declaration on Olympic Games’, 14 July 1982, National Archives of Canada. Pound noted merely that the idea had been ‘discussed’ at the lunch: Pound to PM Pierre Trudeau, 7 July 1982.


39. Maeve Fort, UK Mission, NY, to E. J. Sharland, Cultural Relations Department, FCO, 23 February 1982, FCO 13/1486, UK Archives. The press took little notice of the effort, which was given but brief mentions in some newspapers. The AP, for example, reported that the IOC had approved a draft UN declaration to protect the Games from boycotts. ‘IOC Seeks UN Backing in Depoliticizing Games’, International Herald Tribune, 31 May 1982, clipping, Canada Archives.


41. Memo, S. Slosar, Legal Affairs Division, 6 November 1981, Canada Archives.

42. Burke, ‘Peace’.

43. Personal and Confidential Letter, Pound to Samaranch, 13 November 1981, 7, Canada Archives.


45. Ibid.
46. Letter, Pound to Jean de Beaumont, 22 June 1982; Untitled list of questions and answers, [1982], Canada Archives.


49. Personal and Confidential Letter, Pound to Samaranch, 13 November 1981, 10, Canada Archives.

50. Minutes of the Meeting of the IOC Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Games, Rome, 5.

51. Draft Declaration on the United Nations, 8 February 1982, E-RE02-0ONU/008, UN Files, IOC Archives.


54. Minutes of the Meeting of the IOC Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Games, Rome, 10.


56. Minutes of the Meeting of the IOC Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Games, Rome, 2.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.


63. Telegram, 'Draft UN Declaration on Olympic Games', 14 July 1982, Canada Archives.

64. Telex, Pound to Samaranch, 1 September 1982, B-ID04-PROTJ/001, Ad Hoc Commission Papers, IOC Archives.

65. Memo to File, 'IOC – International Convention'.


69. Meeting of the Ad Hoc Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Games, New Delhi, 23 March 1983, 7, B-ID04-PROTJ/005, Ad Hoc Committee, IOC Archives. Report by the Ad Hoc Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Games regarding the Status of Project and Recommendations, Presented by the Chairman, Mr. Richard Pound [sic] to the Meeting of the IOC Executive Board in Los Angeles, 18, 19, 21 January 1983, 5, B-ID04-PROTJ/005.

70. On the IOC’s Eurocentrism, see e.g. Beacom, *International Diplomacy*, 43, 44.

75. Jan Staubo, IOC Member, to Samaranch, 27 September 1982, B-ID04-PROTJ/004, IOC Archives.
76. Letter, J. E. Holmes to Downing Street, 17 September 1982, FCO 13/1487, UK Archives.
84. Handwritten tally appended to Sharland to Hall, FCO 13/1487, UK Archives.
85. Letter, Thatcher to Denis Fellows, 30 September 1982, FCO 14/1487, UK Archives.
91. Letter, Samaranch to Pound, 7 December 1982, Confidential; Samaranch to Jaskaran Singh Teja, Additional Secretary, UN and Europe, Ministry of External Affairs, 7 December 1982, B-ID04-PROTJ/001, Ad Hoc Commission Papers, IOC Archives.
92. Meeting of the Ad Hoc Commission for the Protection of the Olympic Games, New Delhi.
93. Telex, Samaranch to Samuel Pisar, 12 April 1985, B-ID04-PROTJ002, Ad Hoc Commission Papers, IOC Archives.
96. Letter, David Lange, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Tay Wilson, NZ Olympic and Commonwealth Games Association, 10 October 1985, E-RE02-ONU/005, UN Files, IOC Archives. Lange was both Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.
98. The partnership began in the 1990s and has tightened in recent years. In 2009, the IOC became one of a handful of NGOs with permanent observer status at the UN. In 2014, the IOC and the UN signed an agreement to strengthen collaboration. After IOC President Jacques Rogge stepped down from that post, he was named Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Youth Refugees and Sport. See ‘Cooperation with the UN’ at www.olympic.org/cooperation-with-the-un (accessed 21 October 2017). On sport for development and peace, for example, see Ingrid Beutler, ‘Sport Serving Development and Peace: Achieving the Goals of the United Nations through Sport’, in Steven J. Jackson and Stephen Haigh (eds.), Sport and Foreign Policy in a Globalizing World (London: Routledge, 2009), 11–21.


Acknowledgments

The author thanks Steven Jensen, Umberto Tulli, and Jack Davies for helpful advice.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant [DP170100291].

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