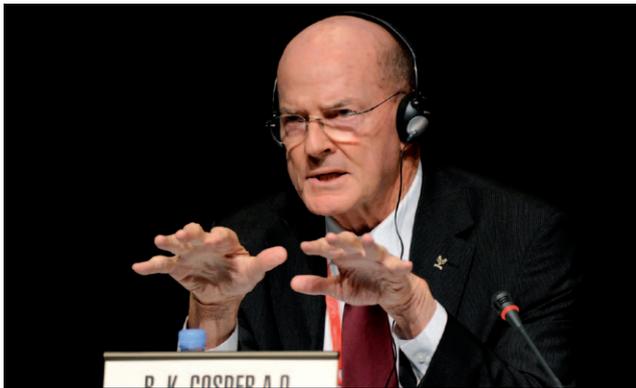




UNIVERSALITY AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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ORIGINAL TEXT IN ENGLISH

One would assume that “universality” would be one of the most celebrated words in the Olympic Charter. I was therefore surprised to find that the word is barely mentioned, appearing only once within the third of the five fundamental principles of Olympism. Out of 16 subjects listed under the chapter “The Olympic Movement and Its Action”, not even under, “The Mission and Role of the International Olympic Committee (IOC)”, is there a reference to “universality”. In fact there is not one reference under the heading of universality in the five chapters of the Charter. This is a surprise to me because I have always believed that the concept of universality in sporting terms was unique and special to the Olympic Movement, in the staging of its Olympic Games and the perpetuation of the Olympic values.

It is not surprising then, that in the Congress pre-briefing I received from the IOC compiled from contributions to the Virtual Olympic Congress on this subject not all contributors shared the same understanding of the term “universality”. It does appear, however, that the term is usually taken by most, to mean enabling the greatest number of athletes and countries to participate in all or any of the sports events on an Olympic programme.

Apart from the concept of athletes from all over the world participating in a wide range of sports at an Olympic Games, others describe universality as giving all countries the right and opportunity to host the Olympic Games and other related events such as the IOC Sessions. African countries are perceived to have been “denied” this under this definition, having not yet hosted an edition of the Olympic Games. Attendant to this argument is the question of whether the selection of a host for both the Summer and Winter Games, should be the subject of a “continental rotation system”. It is believed that this would help ensure that all countries had a greater chance of hosting the Games. This concept of course looks attractive when the IOC as at present, enjoys strong competition from a variety of worldwide Host Cities, but those circumstances have not always prevailed in the past and may not be sustained in the future. I can still recall only one year after becoming a member of the IOC that, at the Session in Athens in 1978, we had only one candidate, Los Angeles, which at that time, as a last resort, gained

provisional approval to host the Games of 1984. Such a procedure also risks not coming up with an Olympic Games location which best serves the athletes, the Olympic Movement and a Host City.

When considering city entitlement or expectation to stage an Olympic Games, it is worthwhile to recognise that much has changed since 1896 in terms of hosting major sporting events, especially since the middle of the last century. Take for example the transition from amateurism to open or professional competition at the elite level, the emergence of commercialisation, especially with the exponential growth in TV, radio and written journalism, and more recently the digital revolution.

The development of regional games and individual Sports Federation World Championships, World Cups and Grand Prix events, has meant that more cities and countries of lesser size, population and attendant infrastructure are frankly now better served in hosting these level of events rather than over-reaching themselves in seeking to host an Olympic Games, which are more suited to larger cities or countries. Cities that have followed this course enjoy the prestige of developing a successful international event and the athletes and teams are still very much admired for their achievements at this still respected level of competition.

Other contributors to this segment of the Congress have also pointed out that universality needs to take account of cultural diversity, ensuring that the Olympic Movement avoids seeking “standard modernisation” or “cultural homogenisation”, much less “Europeanisation” or “Westernisation”. Gender equality also comes to mind when talking of universality, as does the issue of socio-economic balance. For example, much thought is given to the differential in competitive preparation opportunities for athletes or teams who come from developing countries of the world and are often judged to be at a disadvantage compared with those from more advanced economies. It is not that simple. More recent research suggests the lifestyle in the latter is proving to be detrimental to the improvement of public health and is contributing to the downward trend in younger generations actively taking part in sport at the elite level. The recent innovation of the Youth Olympic Games spearheaded by IOC President, Jacques Rogge, is targeted at responding to this concern.

For me, a more contemporary challenge to the pursuit of universality looking ahead, concerns athlete participation in Olympic competition. Under the current concept, the Olympic Games provide a rare opportunity for the best athletes “across the world” rather than the best athletes “from the world” participating at an Olympic Games. This means that while it might be exciting for athletes and teams of lesser merit to take part in the Games, athletes of higher merit are denied the opportunity to gain the highest honour and achieve the most coveted of sporting medals, “Olympic” gold, silver or bronze. But here we come up against the enduring Coubertin philosophy of “the importance of taking part”. Perhaps it is time to review this approach, in a way that universality sustains but the best athletes, and teams “from the world” who vie for Olympic glory at Games time. I do not believe FIFA’s World Cup formula is perceived by its global audience as lacking universality in achieving the desired results for the world’s best.

In fact, most, if not all, teams that take their place at an Olympic Games do so as the result of elimination procedures linked with qualification tournaments. This process ensures that the best teams from the world rightfully gain “Olympian” status and deservedly vie for medals during the Olympic Games. The present Continental representation approach



enabling all 205 National Olympic Committees (NOCs) to gain some sports participation in the Olympic Games, under the banner of universality, however, falls on to the individual athlete sports.

There is a recent IOC analysis of swimmers “without time”, (i.e. swimmers with times outside of qualifying limits for championship competition) participating in the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, which demonstrates that had it not been for the universality inspired IOC “Continental representation formula” (the “wildcard” factor), 82 NOCs’ swimming entrants would not have been entitled to participate. In other words, 135 swimmers would not have been in the pool. It won’t surprise you to learn that in the IOC analysis of athletics in Beijing, 90 NOCs’ athlete entrants would not have been entitled to participate. In other words, 143 athletes would not have been in the stadium. What this means, is that despite the growth of national and regional games and other premier competitions across almost all of the sports on the Olympic Programme, the IOC’s Games entry qualification for a young athlete from across the world with modest experience and talent enables entry onto the Olympic stage, sometimes with disappointing outcomes and the risk of humiliation, to the regrettable exclusion of another more deserving competitor. Their aspirations and achievements as I have already suggested, might better be recognised within themselves and across their home population by achievement of performance records or medals in a more realistic and culturally stimulating regional environment.

The real implication here is that while the IOC claims the Olympic Games to be the elite multi-sports quadrennial event, by comparison with most International Federation World Championship or Cup events, which present their best athletes from the world, the Olympic Games actually comprise quite a long trail of sub-standard athletes who nevertheless gain the prestigious entitlement of becoming an Olympian.

The modification or removal of Continental representation constraints would have the benefit of allowing a number of highly qualified athletes to rightfully take part in the Games, adopting a system followed by some federations where some countries in some sports could have more than the current mandatory three athletes.

All of this has implications for other aspects of the Games, for example, the parade of athletes at the Opening Ceremony, but with proper thought changes could be accommodated, and importantly the spirit of universality would be sustained as it does in so many other international events.

Well on this last observation of mine I should have raised a sufficient degree of Olympic heresy to stimulate your interest in what our panel has to say and you will have the right to ask questions.