

Emerging Discourses: Olympic Bids

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Tasked with writing a positive response to the question posed on whether cities should bid for and host the Olympic Games today, I realized almost immediately that such a position, despite my enthusiasm towards the Games in general, is a losing endeavour. It has become clear, via a variety of different metrics, that the public at large has rejected the Olympic Games and the financial costs associated with putting on such a mega-event. The Calgary 2026 bid referendum in November 2018 is just the most recent example of a city telling its government not to spend tax-payer dollars on an event where the costs clearly outweigh the benefits.

Thus, what I am proposing to do with this piece is not to argue that the benefits actually outweigh the costs, but to imagine how we might be able to reduce the costs in such a way that cities and their governments may find the opportunity to host the Olympics Games far more favourably again. To make this task even more difficult, I will proceed with such an undertaking with the goal of making the Olympic Games more attractive in its current state of it being a city, and not an entire country, that is charged with hosting the Games. The FIFA World Cup model has proven attractive, in order to geographically spread the financial burden of hosting, instead of solely placing it on one metropolis, but the International Olympic Committee (IOC) sees itself in a different cosmopolitan-ethic, with which having a city rather than a country host the Games is more compatible. Thus, I suppose I am attempting to please both sides of this debate, in a way. So, as the adage goes, if both sides disagree on my prescription to the problem/question, I think we may be onto something...

1) THE IOC SHOULD PAY FOR 100% OF THE BID COST.

One of the biggest issues that the IOC has at the moment is with the bid process itself and the financial burdens it places on governments who likely will not even get the chance to host the Games. The dynamic that is occurring is, essentially, the IOC is asking for governments to host their Games and then making them pay for just the chance to do so. I believe that the IOC taking the step of providing governments who are interested in hosting the Games with a set-amount of money (say 30 million) to bid for the games would mean that more cities and governments would be willing to put their name in the ring. Moreover, by taking financial responsibility of the bidding process, the IOC would be in the right to be far more selective in who they allow to bid on a Games. "Only serious applicants may apply," would no doubt be placed on the Call-for-Bids posting.

Additionally, one of the major issues that is hurting the integrity of the bid-process is corruption found within both the bid committees and IOC decision-makers. To take a more apathetic approach to the issue of corruption in Olympic bidding, why such action raises the ire of the public is that the money being used, or wasted, by such a corrupt process is ultimately tax-payer dollars. If the money being spent, corrupt

or not, is IOC dollars instead, the issue may not irk the tax-payer so much and perhaps, even members of the IOC may take the corruption charges more seriously.

2) THE BID-PROCESS AND DECISION SHOULD TAKE PLACE BETWEEN 10 TO 15 YEARS BEFORE THE GAMES ARE HELD.

While the IOC taking over the financial burden of the bid is one step to making hosting the Games more attractive, it would be expected that, once selected, the host city and government would be expected to find ways to fund the Games themselves. Of course, the majority of the cost of the Games is in the building of new facilities and infrastructure. Currently, the time between host-selection and the opening ceremonies is seven years. As the Games have gotten larger and larger it has become clear that there is an enormous financial burden on host cities, resulting from the tight time constraints. Giving a host-city a decade or more to fund and build the required sites where the Games will be played will allow municipal and national governments more time to raise money or spread it around to ease the budgetary pressure. More time will also give host-cities the ability to course-correct on original plans if problems arise, or better ideas and concepts are made available, without possibly having to pay more in order to make the changes on a fast timeline.

3) THE IOC CAPS THE AMOUNT THAT HOST-CITIES CAN SPEND ON THE GAMES AND ASSUMES MORE OF THE RISK OF BUDGETARY OVER-RUNS

I will admit that this idea is perhaps the most idealistic, and thus implausible, but if the IOC is able to put in a mechanism where host-cities are allowed to spend only a certain amount of money, then cities would be much more willing to at least consider hosting the event as cost-certainty will be in place. One of the issues here is that oftentimes, host-cities like to use the Olympic Games to put 'themselves' on the map as a global city. This was most certainly the case with Beijing in 2008 and Sochi in 2014. The IOC would have to put in place strict accounting practices to ensure that government money is being spent within budget. Perhaps the organizing of the Games could be done through the IOC? The host-city would give the IOC the money to build the venues and infrastructure for the Games upfront and then it is the IOC that ensures the building of the venues in a timely manner. Such an agreement between the governments and the IOC would give cost-certainty to the host-city and transfer much of the financial insecurity to the IOC whose Games are being hosted in the first place. The IOC would have more 'skin-in-the-game,' so to speak, and would thus have more of an interest in ensuring things are built within a reasonable budget, if not on-time as well.

4) THE PROGRAM OF THE GAMES IS REDUCED TO A CORE AMOUNT OF EVENTS, WITH AN ADDITIONAL AMOUNT OF EVENTS ADDED BY THE HOST-CITY.

Part of the reason why the cost of the Olympic Games has ballooned is the issue of gigantism within the Olympic program itself. There are simply too many events to host with a reasonable budget. Part of the

reason why this has occurred is the IOC's attempt to broaden the Olympic umbrella in an increasingly globalized world. What this proposal seeks to do is expand upon an idea already in practice at the Games. Currently, at every Games, the host-city committee is allowed to stage demonstration sports, which are not yet accepted by the IOC but may have some cultural (or economic) appeal for the people and culture of the host-city. Why not expand this concept for the entire Games themselves? In this proposal, there would be a certain amount of 'core' events that are to be played at every Games, regardless of city. The number could be something like 50 or 75 events across a number of different sports. The host city would then select an additional 25 to 50 events, from within or outside of the Olympic sports, for which athletes will compete for medals. This could mitigate costs of building structures for host-cities, which would have a hard time finding use once the games are over. For example, if ski-jumping is not very popular in North America, a host-city would simply not include it in their Olympic program. But in an Asian or Scandinavian bid, that event would be included.

The IOC would have control over the 'core' events in order to keep the traditional events deemed important to the Olympic culture alive, but giving host-cities a significantly larger say in the program would also be seen as an incentive to host the Olympic Games. As was already stated above, one of the reasons why cities (and countries) want to host the Games is to show their athletic prowess on the world stage. In such an arrangement, host-cities and countries could create a program that allows their Olympic teams a better shot at winning medals and finishing respectably in the medal tables. This would be a significant political benefit to hosting the Games, for any country.

In conclusion, what has been presented here are four ideas that I believe could help the IOC and the Olympic Games become more attractive to cities and governments who may want to become Olympic hosts. The purpose of this piece was to look further forward to find solutions to the problems that face the IOC today regarding the lack of enthusiasm by governments and their citizens to host the Games. Ultimately, the common theme among all or most of the proposed changes here is that the IOC needs to assume more financial risk in the event that they both conceived and for which they take credit. Until that happens, I don't see things changing much, which is a shame because the idea that underpins the Olympics, I still believe, is an honourable and worthy one.

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Emerging Discourses, Olympic Bids and Mega-Events

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