

The Olympic Truce, historic and universal; for all the peoples



As London prepares to stage the Olympic Games and the rest of the world prepares to watch, the Olympic Truce, a vital key to the age-old Olympic story and as relevant to faraway countries as to London is in danger of being trampled on in the cause of commercial priorities. This must not happen.

The Olympic Truce strand of London 2012 started with great promise. The government's much-lauded mission for the Games to give a tangible Olympic Truce legacy to future Olympic host cities promised all this to wide applause. Alas, recent delaying tactics by the IOC and LOCOG, the London Games organisers, warn us that this may be no more than another chimera. How did it go wrong and can we retrieve the situation?

The IOC reminds us that during the Olympic Truce of the ancient era, athletes could travel unhindered through the lands of traditional enemies to and from the Olympic Games. For nearly a century in the modern Olympiad, the Truce played no part although the 1948 torch relay was dubbed the Relay of Peace. Its first torch bearer, a Greek soldier, ripped off his uniform before starting.

In 1993, the UN General Assembly welcomed the IOC's appeal for an Olympic Truce, to mobilise youth in the cause of peace. Seven years later, the IOC set up the International Olympic Truce Foundation and its operational arm, the International Olympic Truce Centre based in Athens to 'promote further the ideals of peace and understanding through sport'. In the Olympic Village at the 2004 Games in Athens, the flags of the United Nations and the Olympic Truce flew together for the first time. At last, the Olympic Truce had a universally recognised symbol as shown here. That is, until London 2012.

Encouraged by government, LOCOG set out to promote the Olympic Truce in the well-conceived *London 2012 Inspire* programme. Civil society could link events and projects to the Games through the promotion of the principles of the Olympic Truce as a core element of its culture and education programmes. Only a small number of projects - for reasons never explained - would be recognised as part of the Truce strand of its *Inspire* programme. A number of energetic social integration and reconciliation initiatives from all parts of the country have qualified. These will contribute to the Olympic Truce legacy, to be passed to future host cities. So far so good but only LOCOG-recognised initiatives will be so listed and none of these may use the recognised Olympic Truce symbol. They must be content with the *London 2012* symbol with the *Inspire* suffix. As a result, they appear as a disparate collection of initiatives without uniting identity. Separately, LOCOG's *Get Set* programme targeted the UK's 20,000 schools. Its website shows the work of 200 of these – not bad - but it is unclear how many have participated as LOCOG has no comprehensive recording mechanism.

Despite this effort, there remain enormous lacunae in LOCOG's UK Olympic Truce programme. The sole registered faith group, the London Boroughs Faiths Network, is a small volunteer-based group. The only Olympic Truce identifying symbol it may use is the London 2012 symbol which was never intended to link to the Truce unlike the well-established symbol shown above. Thus, without a

recognisable uniting symbol, its activities lack relevance to the Olympic theme. The recent Vigil of Prayer held at St Martin in the Field church in central London to mark the start of the Olympic 100 Days of Peace suffered the same fate. This should not be so.

And where are the contributions from England's Mayors and Lord Lieutenants and Scotland's High Sheriffs and Conveners? And from the devolved government of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland? It is understandable they view the Games as London-centric but why has central government and LOCOG not sought their support for the Olympic Truce. After all, it is as applicable in their regions as it is in London? And there's more. Inexcusably, the Olympic Legacy Company makes no reference to the Truce. Central government cannot be proud either. The Department of Education abdicated responsibility to LOCOG as far back as 2010. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport, government's lead Department for the Games, makes no reference to the Truce beyond noting the passing of the traditional UN General Assembly resolution in October 2011. The Department of International Development which every day initiates programmes in reconciliation and nation-building must identify with LOCOG's totally inappropriate *International Inspire* programme and not the Olympic Truce. By giving priority to branding London 2012, the ethos of the Olympic Truce is being trampled.

If this was solely a domestic issue, LOCOG might get away with this deception. The complication is the participation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) which seeks to project the Truce through its embassies worldwide. Football matches have been set up, local youth gang warfare tackled and ambassadors encouraged to pursue reconciliation initiatives but under what flag? The Union Jack? Impossible. The LOCOG *Inspire* mark? No, as it is meaningless outside the UK. The FCO encourages all projects to use the *Storify* facility on its little-seen webpage but without the universally used symbol, these efforts have no impact, no more so than our many ambassadors' regular blogs. LOCOG's policy here, which Whitehall has up till now obeyed, is hard to follow as it has sought to create a legacy for Sochi (2014) and Rio (2016). Clearly, these cities will not use the London-centric *Inspire* mark so why force it upon our hapless ambassadors?

With an over-compliant government as partner, it has been for civil society to show that LOCOG's policy is wrong. In December, members of the FCO's Olympic Truce Stakeholder Group argued for greater use of the Olympic Truce symbol. For months, LOCOG engaged delaying tactics, finally promising a new 'Truce' word mark for its Truce Inspire projects. But its use may only feature on the FCO's Olympic Truce webpage and only then by the few registered civil society member organisations! There are no plans to invite others. Thus, far from agreeing to the wider use of the Olympic Truce symbol, LOCOG has further ring-fenced it. This is totally unsatisfactory as it has no international recognition. Sochi and Rio will now take no incentive from London to re-introduce the twelve year tradition started in Athens. The much applauded original idea of a clear international legacy route-map which all future Olympic Games hosts could follow is lost to the *amour propre* of the London organisers and the rights of the London 2012 commercial partners.

How much is LOCOG toeing the IOC line? Even though the International Olympic Truce Centre, an IOC creation, is more than ten years old, it does not have the freedom to put together powerful sustaining strategies to promote the concept and ethic of the Olympic Truce. If it had this freedom and exercised it, this would be welcomed worldwide by those working in the fields of conflict prevention and post conflict reconciliation. For the moment, the IOC seeks to retain the right to promote the Olympic Truce even though its own homepage hardly refers to it. Further evidence of its indifference to the Olympic Truce was shown at the XIII Olympic Congress in Copenhagen in 2009. Fifty-five recommendations were agreed but not one mentioned the Olympic Truce. True,

we should recognise that IOC members have been chosen for their interest in sport not peace but it is in their name that the International Olympic Truce Foundation, chaired by Jacques Rogge, shows up so badly. The Foundation seldom meets and has taken no bold decisions. Those delegates to the UN General Assembly who endorsed the Olympic Truce in 1993 should have asked more searching questions of the IOC on how it might use such a precious tool in the cause of peace.

What must the International Olympic Truce Foundation do now? It is time to generate that same sense of generosity and vision which led to the original truce thousands of years ago. Against the backdrop of intense physical competition, it should revive the spirit of *ekecheiria*, the holding of hands. For the agreed Truce period, a week before to a week after the Games, the true Olympic Truce symbol should be 'released' for use by all, in all lands. Without personal gain, we could all explore how we can use this window in time to promote peace.

The analogy of the traditional Christmas tree is instructive. This conveys its message of universal goodwill without fuss and without a rival. And by universal understanding, when the Christmas period ends, the trees are removed. Like the Christmas tree, the Olympic Truce symbol does not need the protection of an army of lawyers as do the symbols of the IOC and the UN. Nor should we associate the legitimate rights of the Olympic Games commercial partners with the pursuit of a Culture of Peace. However fleeting the Olympic Truce period might be, like the corridors of peace used by UNICEF for mass inoculation programmes, it can also lead to success. The Olympic Truce, the spirit of *ekecheiria*, is a Global Common, for all of us to breathe, to share and to enjoy. The International Olympic Truce Foundation should be urged to gift this valuable symbol to all peoples for the period of the Games, casting off its commercial identity but retaining its age-old ethos. By this decision, the International Olympic Truce Centre can then plan its strategy for each subsequent Olympic Games. Such a decision would be a truly great step towards building a historic legacy that can be passed on to future host cities.