



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

5 June 1980

*Jean M. Howell*

Thank you for your letter of 21 May about British participation in the Olympic Games.

I assume that your letter represents your views and those of individual sportsmen and women who have approached you rather than those of the Opposition. When the motion of 17 March urging athletes not to go to the Moscow Games was debated in the House of Commons and was supported by a majority of members from both sides of the House, the Opposition Front Bench advised abstention.

I notice that you are critical of editors who take a different view from you. But political editors in this country, unlike those in the Soviet Union, are free to express their own views. If any have chosen to support the Government's policy on the Olympics, they are, after all, only expressing an opinion shared by a majority of the House of Commons.

I have read your letter carefully and see nothing in it that has not been debated very fully in the House and elsewhere. You again raise the question of trade with the Soviet Union. Unilateral measures designed to curtail trade with the Soviet Union would serve no useful purpose. They do not hurt the Soviet Union but would hurt British firms and British people. That is why, as Ian Gilmour made clear to the House on 17 March, we have not tried to stop ordinary trade nor all ordinary contacts, including sporting contacts. We have acted against special events and special forms of trade, and artificially subsidised rates of credit. We have made plain many times our opposition to the subsidised sale of EC agricultural products to the Soviet Union and have consistently opposed all such sales, including the latest sale of subsidised butter.

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I find it difficult to understand your unwillingness to accept that there are times when sports and politics cannot be separated. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has created such an occasion. At the very time when they are playing host to the Olympic Games, the Russians are cynically and brutally waging war on a neighbour. Only last week reports appeared in the press of the killing of more schoolchildren and the herding of others with electric cattle prods. Moreover, as I am sure you know, the Soviet Union has never regarded sport and politics as separate. There, sport is an arm of government policy, and the Olympic Games in Moscow is seen by the Russians as a political event of major importance. I am also sure that the value the Soviet Government places on success in sport is well understood by athletes in this country. Even as early as January, there were those, including another public critic of my last letter to the British Olympic Association, who complained that drug-taking and 'shamateurism' in Soviet sport were destroying the Olympic movement.

I offer no apology for pressing the Government's case with sporting organisations and athletes. We feel very strongly that the Soviet Union is not an appropriate host for the Olympics in the present circumstances. Nor do I consider it wrong for the Government to make public its opinions about sports matters. It is not only the sportsmen and sporting federations who have freedom of action and the right to free speech. Valuable as the Olympic Games are, they cannot take place without regard to the real world about them. The absence of the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany, and now Japan, undoubtedly reduced the true value of the competition this year in sporting terms. Athletes from these countries and from the many others expected to be absent from the Olympics, won over a third of all the medals in 1976. I understand they could have been expected to do as well in 1980.

The Government has not campaigned against the Olympic movement. It is the Soviet Union that is cynically disregarding and devaluing Olympic principles by hosting the Games in present circumstances. As you say, the Olympics represent the highest in sporting achievement. But the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan stands in complete antithesis to this high ideal of the free pursuit of human excellence by the individual. A boycott by individual countries - mostly, as you say, from Africa - of the 1976 Olympics did not destroy the Olympic movement.

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Nor will it this year.

Finally, I have advised British sportsmen and women and their sporting federations that it would be against British interests and wrong for them to compete in Moscow. Athletes have the same rights and the same responsibilities towards the maintenance of peace as other citizens of this country. Our advice will not change; it is up to athletes to decide in the light of that advice. They must ask themselves whether it is right to go to Moscow against a background of bombed and burning villages in Afghanistan. Nor can they justify their participation by pointing to alleged Government inaction in other areas. This is a decision which they alone can make and for which they alone must be responsible to their consciences in the future.

Yours sincerely  
Raymond Stobart

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