

**SPORT
AND GEOPOLITICS
PROGRAMME**

PASSING ON THE TORCH: Grassroots Opposition to Olympic Bids through the case of No Boston Olympics 2024

Interview with Chris DEMPSEY /

**Co-Founder of No Boston Olympics,
Co-Author of *No Boston Olympics: How and Why Smart Cities Are Passing on the Torch.***

Conducted by Estelle BRUN / Research Associate at IRIS

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GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY



No Boston Olympics was a grassroots organisation which originated from local citizen opposition to the Boston bid for the 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games. In July 2015, the United States Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) eventually abandoned the Boston 2024 bid.

IRIS: Boston has a very powerful sports culture with local teams excelling notably in baseball, basketball, American football, and ice hockey. It is also home to numerous universities with an equally lively college sports culture. Considering the role of sports in Bostonian culture and identity, why were most Bostonians opposed hosting one of the most popular mega-sporting events?

CHRIS DEMPSEY: Boston is the best “sports town” in the United States. We love our sports teams and have celebrated many championships over the last two decades. We take great pride in hosting the Boston Marathon, the oldest competitive marathon in the world, whose initial running in 1897 was inspired by the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. This love for sports contributed to Bostonians *supporting* the 2024 Summer Olympic bid when it was first proposed. Support remained safely above 50 percent as the bid advanced through the United States Olympic Committee process in 2014 and into 2015. But Bostonians began to turn against the bid as they learned more details about the enormous costs associated with the Games and the secretive, anti-democratic bidding process embraced by the IOC, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOC), and the bidders. As proud as we are of our sports teams, we are equally proud of our place as the birthplace of the American Revolution and the cradle of American democracy. We don’t like public decisions to be made without sufficient public input, and Boston 2024’s initial refusal to support a referendum was just one example of a bidding team that disrespected the democratic process. The costs were also a concern. In the United States, the federal government provides substantial support only for ensuring the security of the Olympic Games. It does not support the costs of Olympic operations, venues, or related projects. That meant all the financial risk of cost overruns fell squarely on state and local taxpayers.

IRIS: In 2017, Paris became the host city of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games and Los Angeles, another US city, was set to organise the 2028 edition. Why was LA 2028 or Paris 2024 bids successful when the Boston one wasn't?

CHRIS DEMPSEY: The 2024 bid from Boston beat out the bid from Los Angeles in the United States Olympic Committee's initial process, which concluded in January of 2015. The USOC was drawn to Boston's location on the East Coast of the United States, one of the most valuable television time zones in the world, home to nearly half of the population of the country. Boston is a telegenic city, and would have provided a beautiful backdrop to the Games. The USOC was also attracted to Boston's great universities, including Harvard and MIT. Only after the bid collapsed in July 2015, did the USOC turn back to the losing Los Angeles bid. One of Los Angeles's advantages is that it is a much larger metropolitan area than Greater Boston, and it has more facilities already built and at the ready. The LA bid in 1984 was remarkable in that the bidders built very few venues, and they avoided building the most expensive ones. LA's 2024 bid was similar. As more and more cities – including Rome, Hamburg, and Budapest – dropped out of the race for 2024, the IOC was left with just two bidders: Paris and Los Angeles. Fearing that even fewer bidders would “show up” for the 2028 auction, the IOC made an unprecedented “double award” to Paris 2024 and Los Angeles 2028. My own assessment is that the Paris bid was a “traditional” bid, and we've seen that Paris has had the construction delays and cost overruns that are typical of Olympic projects. The LA 2028 bid is less conventional, and may be able to avoid the worst excesses of other bids.

IRIS: In 2018, after Calgary bid was pre-selected to host the 2026 Winter Olympics, a referendum in which the popular vote largely opposed the hosting of the Games led to the formal end of the bid. Grassroots opposition organised around the No Calgary Olympics movement. What role has No Boston Olympics played in opposition movements to other cities' bids? How is grassroots opposition to hosting mega-sporting events going to evolve in the next few years, according to you?

CHRIS DEMPSEY: The No Boston Olympics team has become part of an informal network of opponents in bid cities. I've had the opportunity to help citizens in Rome, Hamburg, Budapest, Calgary, and Denver. We only engage when we are invited by residents of those cities who have questions about the Games. It's not for me as a Bostonian to decide what is right for other cities, but if I can be helpful in sharing the lessons of Boston with others, I am glad to do so. The IOC is on a big losing streak when it comes to Olympic referenda – in the last decade, citizens have almost always voted down bids when they are put to a vote. This has forced the IOC to change its approach, though I think the revisions it has promised in recent years have mostly been window dressing, not substantive reforms. In the case of the 2032 Olympics, the IOC has discarded its traditional auction process entirely, in favour of identifying Brisbane as the “preferred host” of the Games. This is at least in-part due to the powerful influence of Australian IOC Member John Coates, who serves as chair of the IOC Coordination Commission. Coates's connections to Australian politics provide the IOC assurance that this is a “safe” bid that is unlikely to be thrown off course. But it still raises important questions about whether citizens of Brisbane will have a say in this decision, and what risks and costs Australian taxpayers may have to bear. ■

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