

Olympics chief pleads for more time for China

FT INTERVIEW

Jacques Rogge tells Roger Blitz that confronting the communist state will not yield the desired results

If the International Olympic Committee wants to get the message over that sport should be kept separate from politics, someone had better tell its president.

In the armchair of his Lausanne office, Jacques Rogge is in full flow, discussing Mao, the Cultural Revolution and Europe's colonial record - even the role of the IOC beyond sport as a force for social change.

Mr Rogge has endured a torrid three weeks since protests on the international torch relay in London set off what he later called a "crisis", the biggest in his six-year presidency of the IOC.

Struggling to deflect criticism from human rights groups that he had turned a blind eye to China's crack-down on riots in Tibet, Mr Rogge kept insisting the IOC was a sporting and not a political body.

Now, this Olympic yachtsman appears to be changing tack. Not once mentioning that sport and politics should be kept apart, he concedes in a FT interview that taking politics out of the Olympics was going to be "an eternal difficulty" for the games.

"There will never be a solution whereby the political world or the pressure groups will not try to leverage the games. You cannot stop that because of the

prestige of the games and what they represent for mankind," the president says.

Like most sportsmen, politics barely featured in his upbringing. The 65-year-old Belgian combined a career as an orthopaedic surgeon with an aptitude for yachting that took him to three successive Olympics.

When he was elected IOC president in 2001, three days after the body awarded the 2008 Olympics to China, Jacques Rogge represented for the IOC a clean break from the scandal-plagued regime of his predecessor, Juan Antonio Samaranch.

Mr Rogge has steered the IOC through internal reform, cleaning it of corruption and tightening up on doping control.

He has busied himself with more prosaic matters such as a cap on the number of Olympic sports and the setting up of a youth games.

But the torch relay disaster demands a rethink, and the president is sounding more like one of the Sino-

specialists he consulted in preparation for his talks with the Chinese leadership.

Mr Rogge says while he understands the depth of emotion in the west on China's human rights record, public expectations about the country's pace of change are unrealistic.

"It took us 200 years to evolve from the French Revolution. China started in 1949. At that time it was a country of famine, epidemics, floods and civil war. It had no economy, no health care, no education system and there was 600m of them," he says.

"They had to build that and it was a bumpy road. We all know that there were abuses under Mao and the Cultural Revolution was not a nice period. But gradually, steadily, over 60 years, they evolved, and they were able to introduce a lot of changes."

Back in 1949, Mr Rogge pointed out, the UK was a colonial power. So too were Belgium, France and Portugal, "with all the abuse attached to colonial powers. It was only 40 years ago that we gave liberty to the colonies. Let's be a little bit more modest".

China may not be a role model in the west, Mr Rogge concedes, but "we owe China to give them time".

Mr Rogge says his relations with Beijing are "excellent", although "they have their priorities and we have ours". Sometimes those priorities contradict each other, he admits.

But the relationship has yielded two policy changes by Beijing, the IOC president claims: a media law allowing 25,000 foreign media access during the games, and envi-



Jacques Rogge: taking politics out of the Olympics is going to be an eternal difficulty

Darrin Vanselow

Olympic events

Berlin 1936 Games used for Nazi Aryan supremacist propaganda.

Black US athlete Jesse Owens won four gold medals

Mexico 1968 US sprinters expelled for giving black power salute

Munich 1972 Eleven Israeli athletes killed by Palestinian terrorists

Moscow 1980 Boycott over Soviet intervention in Afghanistan

Atlanta 1996 Bomb killed one person and hurt 110

ronmental measures to tackle the city's chronic pollution problems.

The media law, Mr Rogge contends, will most likely be extended into 2009 - and while there are still loopholes in it, there is little point in bellowing at the hosts for action.

"You don't obtain anything in China with a loud voice. That is the big mistake of people in the west wanting to add their views. To keep face [in Asia] is of paramount importance. All the Chinese specialists will

tell you that only one thing works - respectful, quiet but firm discussion.

"Otherwise the Chinese will close themselves. That is what is happening today. There is a lot of protest, a lot of very strong verbal power, and the Chinese, they close themselves."

OLYMPICS

Interactive map How the torch has been received along its 136,000km trip
www.ft.com/torch