

Chinese Ambassador confronted over Tibet at Labour Party Conference

[27 September 2010] During a fringe meeting at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester, the Chinese Ambassador to the UK was directly challenged by Tibet Society to look into the case of Dhondup Wangchen and urge the Chinese government to release him as a gesture of goodwill.

The fringe event "Why China and Britain need a stronger partnership?" was hosted by the recently appointed Chinese Ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, with former Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Prescott and Mark Hendrick MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on China. Tibet Society's Campaign Co-ordinator, Paul Golding, and Tibetan activist, Tsering Passang, went along in the hope of raising Tibet during the meeting.

Disappointingly but unsurprisingly human rights were barely mentioned during the keynote speeches, with Lord Prescott only touching upon the issue when referring to human rights as one of the areas the UK and China disagreed on. Instead the focus of the evening was UK-China economic relations, with much backslapping over Labour's role in increasing trade between the two countries whilst in government. Climate change was also briefly raised, with an acknowledgment that China will play a key role in the success or failure of any future global agreement.

When Tibet did receive a mention it was during Ambassador Liu Xiaoming's speech, where he took the opportunity to raise the 2008 readjustment of the British government's century-old position on Tibet whereby Britain now recognised Tibet as being part of China. The Ambassador stated this had, "cleared the way for sound China-UK relations". In fact the 2008 Ministerial Statement issued by David Miliband had also emphasised the British government's belief that long term stability in Tibet could only be achieved through respect for human rights and greater autonomy for Tibetans; however the Ambassador chose not to mention this, or refer to a further comment in the Statement that said, "No government which is committed to promoting international respect for human rights can remain silent on the issue of Tibet."

The Chinese government however make an art of being silent on human rights, with the Ambassador's only comment in his speech being, "On the issue of human rights, the two sides have also chosen dialogue over confrontation to enhance mutual understanding and defuse differences." A great example of platitude.

Following the speeches there was a Q&A. Tsering Passang grasped this opportunity to redress the balance when he stood up and told the assembled MPs, party officials and party members that, as a Tibetan, he naturally had political differences with the Ambassador and also held deep concerns about China's human rights record, especially in Tibet. Tsering asked the Ambassador to look specifically into the case of filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen who was arrested in 2008 and sentenced to six years imprisonment. He went on to request the Chinese government to release Dhondup as a gesture of goodwill since Dhondup had done nothing more than film Tibetans giving their opinions about life in Tibet.

The Ambassador was visibly surprised he had been asked such a question and responded by saying that he did not personally know of the case, but added that, "if [Dhondup] had been arrested then he must have done something wrong". This reply exemplifies China's complete disregard of the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty', and clearly illustrates the bias and difficulties encountered by Tibetans and human rights defenders in receiving a fair trial under the Communist regime.

The Ambassador then reverted to safe ground and promulgated propaganda about China being "a force for good in Tibet", regurgitating the oft-quoted examples of, "Tibet being a serfdom prior to 1950"; "poverty and short life spans were commonplace prior to Chinese control", and pointed to the vast development China had instigated in Tibet in recent years. Afterward a number of attendees came over and thanked Tsering for raising the issue of human rights.

On behalf of Tibet Society, Tsering and Paul followed up this exchange by approaching Ambassador Liu and directly asking whether he would follow-up Dhondup's case if Tibet Society sent him more details. After an initial hesitation, he

shook hands and said that one of his staff would handle the request. Tibet Society will now follow up by writing to the Embassy and the Ambassador. We will also encourage Lord Prescott and Mark Hendrick to do likewise.

Tibet Society is inviting Lord Prescott and Mark Hendrick to meet Dhondup Wangchen's wife, Lhamo Tso, during her visit to the UK in October when she will be addressing MPs at an All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet meeting at Westminster.

Tibet Society had a stand at the Labour Party Conference, held 26-30 September in Manchester, which gave out information on Tibet Society's work, collected signatures for Runggye Adak and highlighted the campaign for Dhondup Wangchen. Many MPs, Party officials and Party members visited the stall during the week, including Gareth Thomas MP (Shadow Minister for International Development), Stephen Twigg MP (pictured right), Baroness Kinnock (Opposition Spokesperson for Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Baroness Scotland and Julie Morgan (former MP and previous member of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet).

Tibet Society, the world's first Tibet support group, was founded in 1959. Funded by its members, it has been working for over 50 years to seek justice for Tibet through parliamentary lobbying, campaigns and actions. Help keep Tibet alive by joining Tibet Society today. (Annual membership £20; Overseas £32; Life £400).

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