

Cameron calls for political reform in China but fails to mention Tibet

[24 November 2010] On 9 November, British Prime Minister David Cameron arrived in China for a two-day visit which primarily focused on trade deals. Although Cameron publicly raised the issue of political reform whilst in Beijing, he failed to make any specific reference to Tibet, human rights or political prisoners.

During a visit to Beijing University, Cameron praised China's recent economic progress which he hoped would lead to "a greater political opening" in order to guarantee China's "prosperity and stability". On the second day of the visit, Cameron is believed to have privately raised human rights in a meeting with Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, and the case of Liu Xiaobo, the jailed dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winner, at a banquet. However, it is not known how strongly these points were made.

Whilst Tibet Society welcomes David Cameron's call for political progress in China, we are disappointed that he failed to publicly raise the Chinese government's human rights record and its repressive policies in Tibet.

This first trip to China as Prime Minister presented a tremendous opportunity for David Cameron to reiterate the importance the British government gives to human rights and show his support to all those seeking justice and freedom in China, including the Tibetan people. A statement emphasising the British government's position on the need for greater autonomy in Tibet and its support for meaningful negotiations between China and representatives of the Dalai Lama would have built on the publicly expressed concerns William Hague had raised on Tibet when he visited Beijing in July. Instead the Prime Minister allowed economics to publicly appear to be the over-riding factor in the relations between the two countries, with human rights only being discussed behind closed doors.

Prime Minister Cameron, accompanied by Britain's largest-ever delegation to China including four cabinet ministers and 43 business leaders, called the trip a "vitally important trade mission". The British government is aiming to double the bilateral trade with China by 2015 to more than \$100 billion, including \$30 billion per year in British exports. Britain is China's third largest trading partner in the European Union and the largest EU investor in China. Meanwhile, China is the sixth largest investor in Britain in terms of the number of investment projects.

On meeting David Cameron, Chinese President Hu Jintao said that cooperation between China and Britain was stronger than competition because the two economies were compatible with each other. Hu urged the two countries "to make good use of the development opportunities". Premier Wen Jiabao also encouraged closer economic ties and encouraged British businesses to invest in western regions of China [which would include Tibet], where he said, according to the state-run news agency Xinhua, "unlimited business opportunities are hidden". In addition, Xinhua reported that David Cameron "also reaffirmed that his country will stick to backing the one-China policy".

Given the timing of the visit, Cameron could have, at the very least, made a public call for the release of Liu Xiaobo, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Chinese dissident and advocate of genuine Tibetan autonomy. By failing to even mention Liu Xiaobo's case Cameron let a unique opportunity to speak out about human rights slip. The Chinese government can rest happy that yet again it appears the British government's true priority in "engaging" with China is economic trade; human rights again remain marginalised instead of being an integral part of engagement. As a Guardian editorial said, "The greatest casualty of Mr Cameron's policy, however, is the fear that his voice - our voice - as a defender of human rights may be diminished."

Tibet Society calls upon David Cameron and the British government to not just pay lip-service to the call for political reform in China, but to publicly support a process which will allow real democracy for all citizens in China, including Tibetans. As a first step the British government should demand the Chinese government to release all political prisoners, implement legal processes ensuring fair and transparent trials, and enter into meaningful and substantial negotiations with the Dalai Lama.

Reports

Guardian editorial: Cameron in China: Speak truth to power (10 November)

AP (in the Guardian): UK's Cameron urges Chinese political reform (10 November)

BBC: David Cameron urges China to embrace democracy (10 November)

Xinhua: Chinese President: China-Britain co-op outweighs competition (10 November)

BBC: David Cameron raises human rights in China talks (9 November)

Xinhua: Premier Wen, British PM Cameron meet, pledge closer bilateral ties (9 November)

Also see:

Tibet Society: Hague speaks up for Tibet during China trip (14 July)

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