

MPs, Tibetans and Tibet supporters in round-table discussion

[19 March 2014] On 12 March, Tibetans and Tibet supporters met members of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet (APPGT) during the Tibet Lobby at Houses of Parliament in London. A lively round-table discussion was held with questions being asked of MPs and a discussion on a variety of topics relating to the Tibet issue and parliamentary processes.

Members of the APPGT in attendance included Fabian Hamilton MP (Chair of the APPGT), Kate Hoey MP, Tim Loughton MP and Mark Pritchard MP. Other MPs also attended the drop-in session, including Kerry McCarthy MP, Kevin Brennan MP and Andrew George MP. The meeting was organised by Tibet Society and chaired by Philippa Carrick, CEO of Tibet Society.

Below are notes from the drop-in session. These notes are to provide a flavour of the meeting and are not meant as an official record.

Notes from Tibet Lobby Drop-in Session

2-4 pm, 12 March 2014, IPU Room, Houses of Parliament

Fabian Hamilton MP (Lab, Leeds; Chair of the APPGT) - Welcomed everyone and introduced the session. Mr Hamilton referred to his visit to Tibet in 2006, calling it a "life-changing experience". He said, "The campaign to give self-determination to the Tibetan people is not aimed at Chinese people but at the Chinese government," and noted that the Chinese government "has a way of distorting history". He spoke about the lack of freedom for Tibetans in Tibet to practice their religion, adding, "Tibetans in exile would love to return to a free Tibet where His Holiness the Dalai Lama can lead them spiritually." On political prisoners, Mr Hamilton noted the case of filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen, who produced the ground-breaking documentary filmed in Tibet, *Leaving Fear Behind*, and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for "subversion". There are currently grave concerns for his health. Mr Hamilton said he had been honoured to host Dhondup Wangchen's wife, Lhamo Tso, at his home in 2011 during her tour of the UK to promote her husband's case.

Kevin Brennan MP (Lab, Cardiff) - Referred to Ven. Lama Lobsang, a monk and former political prisoner, who lives in his constituency. He spoke about how moved he was to hear of his time in prison and his experiences of repression.

Ven. Lama Lobsang (Tibetan monk and activist) - Spoke about his time in prison where he lost one eye through repeated shocks from an electric prod. "China needs the United Kingdom just as much as the United Kingdom needs China", he said. He also thanked the interest taken by Members of Parliament in the Tibet issue and expressed his gratitude for the assistance that he personally has received in the UK.

Fabian Hamilton MP - Expressed his view for the need to "stand up to bullying" from the Chinese government. He referred to Chinese diplomatic pressure during the Dalai Lama's visit to the UK in 2012. Leeds City Council was due to fund a business convention with the Dalai Lama as a special guest, but Chinese diplomats visited the council and warned that China would withdraw from using Leeds as its training base for the Olympics. The Council promptly withdrew their funding and logos from the convention. However, if the Council had consulted others before taking this decision they would have discovered that the Chinese Olympic team had no alternative training venues available to them, and that this was, in fact, "an empty threat". Mr Hamilton then asked the rhetorical question, "Why should we be frightened of upsetting what is effectively a dictatorship?"

Question from the table - What is the difference between the US and UK with respect to handling visits by the Dalai Lama? Fabian Hamilton MP recalled attending the ceremony to present the Dalai Lama with the Congressional Gold Medal in 2008. There was a general acknowledgement that this was a significant event with powerful implications, including a greater public respect for the Dalai Lama.

Comment from the table - China's increasingly sophisticated mechanisms to control Tibetan Buddhism was noted, particularly since the introduction of President Hu Jintao's soft power strategy. An example of this strategy being the emergence of government controlled NGO's (GONGO's) such as the China Association for Protection and Development of Tibetan Culture.

Comment from the table - It was noted that Tibetan history books were being removed from some university libraries. Frederick Hyde-Chambers (Chairman of Tibet Society) commented on the "assertive diplomacy" of the Chinese government where "nothing is too small".

Comment from the table - Northampton Council has raised the Tibetan flag every year on 10 March for 15 years without a negative impact on the town's economy. Previously, the council had received a letter of protest every year from the Chinese Embassy, but this year no such letter had been received.

Question from the table - What possibilities are there for engagement with the 100,000 plus Chinese students studying in the UK on the issue of Tibet? A discussion ensued as to how such engagement would proceed in light of under-resourced Tibet groups. A suggestion was proposed to galvanize existing Tibetan communities and networks.

Padma Dolma (Students for a Free Tibet UK) - Noted the importance of lobby days for keeping Tibet on the political agenda and remarked that the annual Tibet Lobby in the UK was "the most consistent" lobby internationally. Ms Dolma referred to William Hague's statement last year on the importance of standing up for universal human rights. "I think that we should always be clear in the United Kingdom about our belief in universal human rights and never be afraid to give our advocacy for those rights. That includes relations with China." (William Hague, 3 September 2013)

Philippa Carrick (CEO of Tibet Society) - Emphasised the significance of Ministers and MPs making such statements, particularly as they "feed-back to Tibetans in Tibet".

Kerry McCarthy MP (Lab, Bristol East; Shadow Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs) - Sparked a discussion of business ethics and spoke of the need to identify companies with UK connections doing business overseas and to create a common agreement on the "guiding principles" of doing business. A general discussion of the division of trade and human rights in diplomacy ensued with suggestions to:

- identify businesses represented in the delegations of diplomatic trade missions to China and brief them in advance on current conditions
- galvanize public interest in the ethics of doing business with China.
- campaign to align human rights with commercial interests to ensure the implementation of best practices.

Ms McCarthy also said that a number of Chinese environmentalists had reported they had not been allowed access to Tibet.

Alistair Currie (Campaigns and Media Officer, Free Tibet) - Discussed the example of InterContinental, an international chain of luxury hotels, who have "not been forthcoming" about their business approach in Tibet, even though their website claims a sensitivity to such issues. Fabian Hamilton MP referred to a meeting he had with representatives of

InterContinental, whom he said “seemed ignorant” of the human rights situation in Tibet but claimed they had “a clear set of values and principles” operating vis-a-vis their investments in Tibet, a comment that was met with some skepticism from the table.

Comment from the table - The Chinese government does not respect countries that are critical of China. This sparked a remark from Kate Hoey MP (Lab, Vauxhall) who said she was “getting tired of being so nice about it all”.

Tim Loughton MP (Con, East Worthing and Shoreham) - Spoke about his long engagement with the Tibet issue. He noted he was 16 when he first attended a Tibet demonstration. He concurred that there was a need to stand up to China’s threatening behavior, “Because if you give them an inch, they take a mile.” He said, “China asserts all sorts of shady influence.” He used President Obama as a positive example of such assertiveness and added, “We should continue to expose China’s hypocrisy and bullying tactics.” He lauded the “tenacity and energy of Tibetans who have made it across the border to India and who continue to dedicate their lives to the Tibetan cause”.

Question from the table - What is the best way for constituents to lobby MPs to take action on Tibet, particularly those who seem to take no interest? Kate Hoey MP responded by suggesting that constituents try to discover the reasons why their MPs are not supporting the Tibet issue. Are they simply too busy with other matters or do they have ideological differences? She said that MPs who sign Early Day Motions (EDMs) may get asked about that issue by the press and so hesitate to sign on topics on which they have not been properly briefed, suggesting the need to keep MPs informed of developments in Tibet.

Tim Loughton MP - Pointed out the challenge of an organised effort from such a “fragmented group” as the Tibetan diaspora. Kate Hoey MP concurred with this and urged the Tibet support community to get Tibet groups together under an umbrella.

Andrew George MP (Lib Dem, West Cornwall and Isles of Scilly) - Pointed out that, unlike many other issues, the Tibet issue is “cross-party”.

Comment from the table - The debate on Tibet in 2011 in Westminster Hall, the second chamber of the House of Commons, was noted. A general discussion ensued as to the possibility of a debate being held in the main chamber of the House prior to summer recess. MPs present agreed to pursue the matter with the Backbench Business Committee.

Further reading:

[Read about the All Party Parliamentary group for Tibet](#)

[View photos from Tibet Lobby 2014 \(via facebook\)](#)

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