

UK's policy on Tibet comes under attack during parliamentary debate

[11 December 2014] On 10 December 2014, Human Rights Day, the issue of Tibet and freedom of expression was debated in the UK parliament. During the debate, the ongoing repression in Tibet and political prisoner cases were raised. MPs also criticised the UK government's policy on Tibet and its relationship with China. The government's response was considered 'weak', offering no indication it was willing to take a more robust approach on Tibet and human rights, and worryingly seemed to use language that would appease, or even pander to, the Chinese government.

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Summary report

Fabian Hamilton MP led the debate and outlined the main issues of concern on freedom of expression in Tibet. He also highlighted the political prisoner cases of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche and imprisoned Tibetan musicians Lolo, Kalsang Yarphel and Pema Rigzin. Mr Hamilton noted, "There is no doubt that the Chinese government use a mix of systematic oppressive measures, propaganda and disinformation to stifle free expression and to present a positive image of their actions in Tibet to the outside world."

Mr Hamilton called on the UK government "to challenge China's policies in Tibet, in particular where the Chinese government are flouting international standards on human rights and civil liberties" and to "strengthen policies towards China and Tibet, and to be more robust, with a clear stance and directive regarding human rights, civil society and democratic rights".

Tim Loughton MP added, "The climate within the Tibetan autonomous region can be likened to that of a military occupation." Mr Loughton called on the UK to be a "critical friend" of China, and stressed the need for "transparency of dialogue" with China. He said, "When speaking freely in the House [of Commons], we must say loud and clear that the Tibetan people's struggle is a struggle for democracy and free speech in which all of us have an interest."

Kate Hoey MP noted the threat the Chinese government's Confucius Institutes have on freedom of speech in the UK and around the world. Ms Hoey called on the government to take a tougher stance with China on the issues of Tibet and human rights and asked, "What dreadful thing would the Chinese government have to do in order for our government to start standing up to China?"

Jim Shannon MP referred to religious persecution in Tibet, saying it is "politically motivated and consciously implemented [by the Chinese government] as a policy to realise political aims." He said, "We must do all that we can... to persuade China to change its oppressive ways in its bid for political support."

Martin Horwood MP noted the Tibetans' peaceful approach to seeking a solution continues to be "met with incredibly aggressive language and a heavy-handed and oppressive response from the Chinese authorities". He also questioned whether the UK's policy on China was "too focused on trade, investment and the economic benefits" and asked, "Do we need a more sophisticated and developed policy towards China?"

The opposition responded via Kerry McCarthy, calling on the government to raise Tibet "as an issue of concern" in all forms of engagement with China. Ms McCarthy added the government needs a "more strategic engagement that allows the UK to raise human rights concerns and to meet the Dalai Lama without fear of being frozen out".

Foreign Minister Hugo Swire began his response by acknowledging the issue of Tibet deserved more attention and suggested a further debate. Mr Swire also confirmed that the case of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche had been raised with Beijing and urged "consideration of parole on medical grounds".

However, the rest of Mr Swire's response lacked real conviction and detail. There was no indication of any move towards strengthening policy towards Tibet, with Mr Swire simply reiterating the government's policy of recognising Tibet "as part of the People's Republic of China" and adding, "We do not support Tibetan independence."

Mr Swire noted that the UK had raised human rights issues during the UK-China human rights dialogue, at the United Nations, through the EU and in the Foreign Office annual human rights report. However, there was no detail as to what had been raised and, more importantly, China's response to these concerns.

In response to criticism on the UK's trade policy with China, Mr Swire said he "utterly rejects" the notion that "there is a binary choice between human rights and investment in doing trade with China". Such a statement seemed to indicate a lack of understanding of the asks being made, i.e. to integrate human rights measures into trade deals.

Mr Swire referenced the UK's National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights saying, "Our overseas business risk guide for China provides information on key risks, including human rights risks." Perhaps unsurprisingly, he neglected to mention the guide's current lack of substantial information regarding the human rights situation in Tibet.

Following the debate, Fabian Hamilton met with Tibetans and supporters in attendance. Supporters aired their frustration at the government's response calling it "weak" and an "exercise in PR".

Tibet Society welcomes the government's call for medical parole for Tenzin Delek Rinpoche and for acknowledging the need for further debate on Tibet within Parliament. However, we are disappointed at the lack of any substantial move

towards strengthening policy towards Tibet. We are also concerned that the government's response contained language that may have been aimed to appease or pander to the Chinese government.

Tibet Society will work with Mr Hamilton and other supportive MPs to follow up on matters raised and will continue to press the UK government for a more robust and substantial policy towards Tibet and human rights.

Full Report

On 10 December 2014, a 90-minute adjournment debate, titled "Tibet and Freedom of Expression", was held in the UK Parliament. The debate was led by Fabian Hamilton MP, the chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet. It was the first debate on Tibet held in the UK Parliament since December 2011.

MPs that spoke during the debate were: Fabian Hamilton (Lab, Leeds North East), Tim Loughton (Con, East Worthing & Shoreham), Kate Hoey (Lab, Vauxhall), Jim Shannon (DUP, Strangford) and Martin Horwood (Lib Dem, Cheltenham). Kerry McCarthy (Lab, Bristol East) responded for the opposition, as Shadow Minister for the Foreign Office, and Hugo Swire (Con, East Devon) responded for the government, as Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office whose responsibility includes Tibet and China.

Other MPs in attendance included Gregory Campbell (DUP, East Londonderry), Lady Sylvia Hermon (Independent, North Down), Cathy Jamieson (Lab Co-op, Kilmarnock & Loudoun) and David Simpson (DUP, Upper Bann).

Fabian Hamilton MP

Fabian Hamilton MP (Lab, Leeds North East) began his speech by recounting some of his personal experiences, including visiting Tibet and Dharamsala and his meetings with the Dalai Lama, before outlining the main issues of concern on freedom of expression in Tibet. Mr Hamilton highlighted the Tibetan political prisoner cases of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche and imprisoned Tibetan musicians Lolo, Kalsang Yarphel and Pema Rigzin.

Mr Hamilton stated, "There is no doubt that the Chinese government use a mix of systematic oppressive measures, propaganda and disinformation to stifle free expression and to present a positive image of their actions in Tibet to the outside world. Since peaceful demonstrations spread across Tibet in 2008, the Chinese authorities have adopted a harsher approach to suppressing dissent."

He continued, "In its current approach, which can be more accurately characterised as totalitarian, the [Chinese] state recognises no limits to its authority, imposes a climate of fear, and strives to regulate every aspect of public and private life to crush all forms of dissent against Communist party rule."

Mr Hamilton concluded with a number of requests of the UK government that "will help the cause of Tibet and allow Tibetans the right to free expression". The asks included calling on China to "engage in a broader and more substantive dialogue with Tibetan representatives" and for the UK government "to strengthen policies towards China and Tibet, and to be more robust, with a clear stance and directive regarding human rights, civil society and democratic rights."

Specifically, Mr Hamilton called on the UK government "to challenge China's policies in Tibet, in particular where the Chinese government are flouting international standards on human rights and civil liberties" and to "prevail on the Chinese leadership to end the military build-up and to limit the dominance of the security apparatus in Tibet".

Mr Hamilton asked the government to take the lead in the EU on the Tibet issue, to initiate a scholarship scheme in the UK for Tibetans, to provide funding for a BBC Tibetan service and to explore the possibilities of cultural exchanges with Tibetans.

Finally, Mr Hamilton urged the government "to call for medical parole for Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, who is serving a life sentence and is seriously ill".

Tim Loughton MP

Tim Loughton (Con, East Worthing & Shoreham) followed Mr Hamilton in the debate. He noted "that the situation [in Tibet] has been getting worse over the past six years, since the Beijing Olympics." He added, "There have been severe security crackdowns and restrictions on freedom of expression, religion, movement and assembly. The climate within the Tibetan autonomous region can be likened to that of a military occupation... [The Chinese government] strive to regulate virtually every aspect of public and private life in order to crush any form of dissent against Community party rule."

Mr Loughton called on the UK government to stand up for Tibet. He said, "We need to adopt the guise of a critical friend and be in dialogue with China. We have much to benefit from trade and engagement with China, but it does not serve that cause or the cause of democracy that we hold so dear in this place if we turn a blind eye to the blatant suppression of the rights of millions of people who happen to live in part of what is China."

Mr Loughton also referred to the "escalation of surveillance", propaganda and censorship within Tibet, as well as the mass migration of Han Chinese to Tibet and the burgeoning tourism industry. He added a cautionary note that the "tentacles of the Chinese government" spread beyond its borders via Confucius Institutes, which impose restrictions on topics such as human rights and Tibet. He stated, "We must seek out, expose and resist such censorship of our freedom to speak out."

Mr Loughton concluded, "We need transparency of dialogue and to be able to speak freely. When speaking freely in the House, we must say loud and clear that the Tibetan people's struggle is a struggle for democracy and free speech in which all of us have an interest."

Kate Hoey MP

Kate Hoey (Lab, Vauxhall) stated, "We must be clear that none of our warm words about working closely with China seems to be having any effect whatever."

Ms Hoey called on the government to investigate the matter of Confucius Institutes in the UK and the threat they pose to free speech. Ms Hoey noted there at least 24 in the UK, the highest number of any foreign country outside the USA, and that, "In order for a university to receive Chinese money, the Chinese do not want any mention of Tibet or any criticism of anything that is happening."

Ms Hoey called on the government to take a tougher stance with China on the issues of Tibet and human rights. She asked, "What dreadful thing would the Chinese government have to do in order for our government to start standing up to China? What would have to happen for us to start calling in the Chinese ambassador and doing things that make a difference."

Jim Shannon MP

Jim Shannon (DUP, Strangford) noted, "Every aspect of Tibetan life is under siege from a Chinese leadership determined gradually to eradicate a whole culture."

Amongst the issues he raised, Mr Shannon focused on the lack of religious freedom in Tibet and China's brutal "patriotic education campaign", where monks and nuns are forced to denounce the Dalai Lama and pledge allegiance to the State or face severe punishments. Mr Shannon said, "Religious persecution in Tibet is... politically motivated and consciously implemented as a policy to realise political aims."

Mr Shannon concluded, "We must let the Tibetans know that they are not struggling in vain or suffering in silence. We must do all that we can — at Westminster, in Brussels and on the world stage — to persuade China to change its oppressive ways in its bid for political support."

Martin Horwood MP

Martin Horwood (Lib Dem, Cheltenham) praised the Tibetan government in exile's continued policy of seeking a non-violent solution to the issue of Tibet and people of Tibet who have "consistently advocated peaceful change and dialogue with Beijing". Mr Horwood noted such peaceful opposition continues to be "met with incredibly aggressive language and a heavy-handed and oppressive response from the Chinese authorities".

Mr Horwood questioned UK's policy towards China. He asked, "[H]ave we had a sophisticated enough policy towards China? Has that policy simply been too focused on trade, investment and the economic benefits of our relationships with China?... Do we now need to wake up to some of the worrying developments: abuses of human rights, suppression of freedom of expression, and aggressive stances towards — in the case of the people of Tibet — some of the most vulnerable and disempowered people in the world? Do we need a more sophisticated and developed policy towards China?"

Mr Horwood concluded, "[T]he current situation, in which the international community appears to be showing a rather aimless indifference towards the plight of the people of Tibet, simply cannot go on."

Opposition response

Kerry McCarthy (Lab, Bristol East) responded to the debate as Shadow Minister to the Foreign Office. Ms McCarthy concurred that the issue of Tibet should be debated in Parliament more often and called on the government to raise Tibet "as an issue of concern whenever our government have dealings with China, be it a trade mission meeting or another form of engagement".

Ms McCarthy expressed concern over China's crackdown on the arts and cultural diversity and the number of Tibetan musicians recently imprisoned. She raised the issue of China's criminalisation of self-immolations and the introduction of the "intentional homicide" charge which has seen more than 40 Tibetans imprisoned and one Tibetan sentenced to death. She also referred to environmental considerations, illegal mining in Tibet, the impact of climate change and forced migration.

On the issue of trade with China, Ms McCarthy questioned whether "human rights in Tibet have been reflected in the advice the UK offers British businesses, and whether the UK uses its trading links with China to address those concerns". She added, "We need a much more strategic engagement that allows the UK to raise human rights concerns and to meet the Dalai Lama without fear of being frozen out."

In conclusion, Ms McCarthy noted the lack of access to Tibet, for the media, NGOs and even for the British Embassy and urged the government to pursue the possibility of future visits to Tibet.

Government response

Hugo Swire, the Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office whose responsibility includes Tibet and China, responded on behalf of the government. Mr Swire opened his response by acknowledging the issue of Tibet deserved more attention and suggested a further debate.

"The subject commands such interest right across the House that it deserves rather more than an hour-and-a-half Westminster Hall debate, and it would be good if we could return to the subject."

However, despite MPs consistently calling on the government for a more robust approach to China on the issue of Tibet, the overall response received from the Foreign Office Minister was disappointing both in its lack of detail and conviction.

Mr Swire reiterated the government's policy on Tibet, "We regard Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China. We do not support Tibetan independence." Mr Swire added, "We have a strong relationship with China, and we understand that, for China, Tibet remains a sensitive issue."

In a seemingly generalised statement, Mr Swire said, "... [W]e seek to ensure that all citizens, including Tibetans, fully enjoy their rights under the Chinese constitution."

Mr Swire noted that the UK had raised human rights issues during the UK-China human rights dialogue, at the United Nations, through the EU and in the Foreign Office annual human rights report. However, there was no detail as to what had been raised and, more importantly, China's response to these concerns.

On a more positive note, Mr Swire did confirm that the case of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche (serving a life sentence on false charges) had been raised with Beijing and urged "consideration of parole on medical grounds".

In response to criticism on the UK's trade policy with China, Mr Swire said he "utterly rejects" the notion that "there is a binary choice between human rights and investment in doing trade with China".

Earlier in his response, Mr Swire, even seemed to follow the Chinese government's ploy of spouting propaganda about "significant economic investments... in Tibetan areas" and "improvements in the standard of living, health care and life expectancy" when confronted with human rights issues.

Mr Swire referenced the UK's National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights saying, "Our overseas business risk guide for China provides information on key risks, including human rights risks." Perhaps unsurprisingly, he neglected to mention the guide's current lack of substantial information regarding the human rights situation in Tibet.

Such statements seem indicate a lack of understanding of the asks being made of the UK government, i.e. to incorporate measures into trade deals to encourage China to improve its human rights record, not to boycott trade outright. Nor are

Tibet support groups against the development of Tibet, rather they want to see Tibetans consulted and become an integral part of the development of their own country.

Tibet Society acknowledged in debate

During the debate, Fabian Hamilton MP acknowledged and thanked Tibet Society for its work and its help in preparing for the debate.

Tim Loughton MP also added his thanks saying, "I pay tribute to the Tibet Society and in particular to Philippa Carrick. It does fantastic work in keeping the flame of hope lit and the flag flying for the Tibetan cause in this country and beyond."

Post-debate

Following the debate, Mr Hamilton spoke to Tibet supporters (pictured right) who had attended the debate. He explained that though the Minister's response was disappointing, there was now an opportunity to follow up on the issues raised and press for responses to the questions which were unanswered in the debate.

Supporters commented on their disappointment in the government's response saying it was "weak", "lily-livered", "an exercise in PR" and perhaps most damning of all, "pandering to the Chinese government".

Tibet Society welcomes the government's call for medical parole for Tenzin Delek Rinpoche and for acknowledging the need for further debate on Tibet within Parliament. However, we are disappointed at the lack of substance in the majority of the Foreign Minister's answers, which mostly seemed to just repeat previous statements. We are also concerned that some of the language may have been used to appease the Chinese government and deflect any future diplomatic furore.

Tibet Society will continue to work with Fabian Hamilton, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet and all supportive MPs to follow up on the questions and points made during the debate and press the UK government for a more robust and substantial policy towards Tibet and human rights.

Links: [Transcript of debate](#) | [Watch debate \(video, 90 mins\)](#)

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 £24; Family £36; Life £500.

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