

UK parliament debates Tibet; government lacklustre in its response

[19 June 2015] On 18 June, the UK Parliament held its first debate on Tibet since the General Election. Though many issues were raised and questions asked of the government, the response received from the Foreign Minister was lacklustre, revealing little beyond the fact that some issues had been "raised" with Chinese counterparts and others would be "monitored". There was almost no criticism of Chinese policies in Tibet; instead, at one point, the Minister actually praised China for its efforts in 'developing' Tibet.

On a more positive note, Mr Swire (Minister of State for the Foreign Office) did call on China to release Tenzin Delek Rinpoche on medical parole. He also encouraged "better governance" of China's mining industry operating in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

In response to questions over the UK's policy on Tibet and a call for the UK to support the Tibetan people's right to self-determination, Mr Swire stated, "The clear position of the British Government that Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China, and that we do not support Tibetan independence." Disappointingly, there was no mention of the UK government seeking "genuine autonomy" for Tibet, which used to be part of the policy.

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Summary of debate

The backbench debate, held in the secondary debating chamber, was led by Fabian Hamilton (Labour MP for Leeds North East and Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet).

Mr Hamilton began with reference to the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta, saying it was timely "to remind ourselves of the practical applications of those values and to illustrate our commitment" by considering the people of Tibet, "whose rights have been violated and abused, and who might expect this Parliament, this country and our Government to speak out for them, to give them the voice that they are systematically denied."

Mr Hamilton said that China, having created the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), "have done everything in their power to undermine that autonomy and to destroy the ethnic and cultural identity of Tibet." He then went on to give various examples including the mass migration of Han Chinese to Tibet, the lack of education in the Tibetan language and repression of religion.

Mr Hamilton stated, "Events in Tibet have global implications, and that by failing to speak out against the political, environmental and economic oppression in the TAR, we risk allowing a bully to influence world events and undermine our values."

A number of political prisoner cases were raised by Mr Hamilton, including those of the Panchen Lama, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche and Thardoe Gyaltsen (the latter was jailed for 18 years for possessing copies of the Dalai Lama's teachings). Mr Hamilton urged the government to speak out and press China on these cases. He also asked, "How can the United Kingdom strengthen its policies on Tibet, so as to take a clear stance on the essential issue of human rights?"

Mr Hamilton noted China's hypocrisy of repressing language and culture in Tibet whilst promoting its own language and culture globally via Confucius Institutes. Mr Hamilton said these Institutes "actively undermine western support for Tibet and Taiwan" and questioned their staffing policies which do not conform to UK and EU employment law.

Environmental issues were also highlighted, including climate change on the Tibetan plateau, the damming of rivers and exploitation of Tibet's natural resources, as well protests by Tibetans on these issues and the forced relocation of Tibet's nomadic population.

China's new Foreign NGO Management Law, currently being drafted, was scrutinised. Mr Hamilton said the law "seeks to restrict the activities of foreign NGOs" which will have a "massive impact" on the work of NGOs in China and Tibet.

Mr Hamilton encouraged the UK government to extend the Chevening Scholarship scheme to help Tibetans refugees enter degree programmes in the UK.

In conclusion, Mr Hamilton said that we should value the Dalai Lama's messages of peace and compassion and "stand up more strongly to the bullying tactics of those who continue to oppress the Tibetan people and vilify His Holiness the Dalai Lama".

Tim Loughton (Conservative MP for East Worthing and Shoreham), during an intervention, highlighted the discrepancy between China's constitution and its actions. "Is it not ironic that the Chinese constitution recognises the diverse culture and heritage of the various peoples who make up the People's Republic of China?" Mr Loughton continued, "China is clearly failing to recognise and protect the culture, heritage and, indeed, language of the Tibetan people, which is being destroyed at the hands of the Chinese Government."

Nic Dakin (Labour MP for Scunthorpe) reiterated China's failings in Tibet by adding, "If China is to be a truly modern state... it needs to step up to the plate and behave in a way that recognises the human rights of others."

Opposition response

Patrick Grady (MP for Glasgow North) responded on behalf of the SNP. Mr Grady noted the work of the Cross Party Group for Tibet in the Scottish Parliament. He said the Scottish Parliament "very clearly condemned human rights abuses" following a debate on Tibet in 2014. He also stated that one of the four guiding principles in the Scottish government's engagement strategy with China was "respecting human rights and the rule of law, supporting China's process of modernisation and internal reform, and the need to balance the demands of economic development with social justice."

Kerry McCarthy (Labour MP for Bristol East) responded to the debate as Shadow Minister to the Foreign Office. Ms McCarthy began by stating that "China must recognise that a more authoritarian approach [on Tibet] will not strengthen its sovereignty; it will only diminish its moral authority."

Ms McCarthy noted the human rights abuses that China continues to undertake in Tibet, which attempt to undermine the Tibetan identity. In particular, Ms McCarthy said the recent self-immolations are "a harrowing indictment of human rights in Tibet". She added, "Criminalising bereaved relatives is not preventing the self-immolations. The solution is dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives and an end to repressive practices."

Ms McCarthy said the UK must "work constructively with China" but that "we cannot let that work inhibit us when it comes to universal principles of human rights."

The upcoming State Visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in October was questioned by Ms McCarthy. She asked, "Was the decision to invite the President a response to agreement from the Chinese Government on any areas of concern?"

The Shadow Foreign Minister also asked questions regarding media and diplomatic access to Tibet, mining operations in Tibet and if Tibet was part of the international climate dialogue.

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 began by noting the UK's position on Tibet. "The clear position of the British Government is that Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China, and that we do not support Tibetan independence."

Before any acknowledgment of the serious Tibetan human rights cases or China's ongoing repression of Tibetan culture and religion, Mr Swire had the audacity to praise China. As if reading direct from a Chinese propaganda leaflet Mr Swire said, "I am pleased to report that rapid economic growth has raised living standards across China and has improved access to a range of social and economic rights. In Tibet, investment in education, healthcare and employment has led to a doubling in life expectancy since the early 1950s."

Only after praising the Chinese government did Mr Swire state the UK's "long-standing concerns" over ethnic minority rights, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of expression, all of which Mr Swire said "should be protected under the Chinese constitution".

Mr Swire noted the case of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche was raised during the UK-China Human Rights Dialogue in April. He then took the opportunity to "urge the Chinese authorities to ensure that, while detained, all such people have access to adequate medical care or, in severe cases such as Tenzin's, are released on medical parole."

The Foreign Minister expressed the government's belief that "meaningful dialogue" is the "best way to address and resolve the underlying differences between Tibetan communities and the Chinese Government" and pointed out this was raised during discussions with the Chinese Government. However, Mr Swire failed to inform the chamber on China's response, as was the case when he mentioned the raising of other issues.

Mr Swire said the government "continue(s) to press for access to the Tibetan autonomous region" (for media and diplomats) and supports calls "for the relevant authorities to facilitate a meeting between the Panchen Lama and independent international observers".

In response to questions on concerns over mining in Tibet, Mr Swire stated, "We... encourage the adoption of better governance in the extractive industries. It is important that high standards are applied throughout China, including in the Tibetan autonomous region, and by Chinese companies operating internationally."

On Confucius Institutes, Mr Swire said the government is "not aware of any evidence to suggest that they are compromising those principles in the UK, but we remain alert to any impropriety or allegations of impropriety".

[Read full transcript of the debate](#)

Tibet Society would like to thank Fabian Hamilton MP for securing the debate on Tibet and making an impassioned and strong speech in support of Tibetan rights and freedoms. Thanks also to Tim Loughton, Nic Dakin, Patrick Grady and Kerry McCarthy for their contributions.

Tibet Society will continue to promote Tibet with MPs and lobby the Foreign Office and relevant government departments on issues affecting Tibetans. In our role as Secretariat of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet, we will be working closely with key MPs throughout this parliamentary session. We will inform Tibet supporters of key lobbying opportunities over the coming weeks and months.

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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