

Draft Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Scottish Parliament, Committee Room 3, 5th December 2018

Present

John Mason: MSP for Shettleston
Murdo Fraser: MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife
John Jones: Free Tibet
Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren: Free Tibet
Alexander Kerr: Officer for John Mason MSP
James Fraser: Release International
Yolanda Matro: Focolare Movement
Patricia Batista: Focolare Movement
Teresa Costello: Focolare Movement
Martin Dore: Christian Solidarity Movement
Anne Edwards: Church of Latter Day Saints
Evelyn Liston: Church of Latter Day Saints
Kieran Turner: Evangelical Alliance Scotland
Anthony Horan: Catholic Parliamentary Office
Frances Hume: Interfaith Scotland
Oliver Lane: Dundee Interfaith
Alan Kay: Interfaith Scotland
Jamie Spurway: Interfaith Scotland
Brian Miller: Baptist Union of Scotland
Alan Meldrum: Open Doors
Martin Mills: Scottish Centre for Himalayan Research
Nigel Fraser
Patricia Findlay: Scottish Interfaith

Apologies

R Charles Warren
Rev. Malcolm Macleod
Right Rev Susan Brown
Ephraim Borowski
David Robertson

Quorate

John Mason MSP and Murdo Fraser MSP were both in attendance, making the meeting quorate.

Welcome

John Mason MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting and this was followed by round table introductions.

Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were noted - as it was not quorate, there was no need to approve them. In addition, the minutes of the meeting from February 2018 were approved, subject to the amendment that the meeting was described as 'inquorate' when in fact it had been quorate.

General meeting

Eleanor gave a brief summary of the history of Tibet. She then described the two organisations, Free Tibet and Tibet Watch. Free Tibet set up as a campaigning organisation in 1987. In contrast, Tibet Watch focuses on research but does not get involved in campaigning. It is committed to getting information out of Tibet, something which is very difficult. That information then informs the campaigning work of Free Tibet.

Tibet should be the 10th largest country in the world. It was divided into three provinces following the Chinese invasion. Contrary to the narrative that China puts forward, Tibet was an independent nation prior to the invasion. In 1950 Chinese troops came into the country, purportedly to liberate the population. After fears that the Dalai Lama would be assassinated there was a national uprising which was suppressed by the Chinese military. The Dalai Lama went into exile, followed by around 100,000 Tibetans. The Dalai Lama later received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to keep the resistance peaceful.

Protests erupted again in 2008 because of the Olympics being held in Beijing and the related Chinese Government promises that Human Rights would be respected and improved. People in Tibet reacted with anger because they saw no improvements despite the government rhetoric. 227 Tibetans were killed during the suppression of protests. There may well have been more deaths, but these are the numbers that were confirmed.

Following the uprising and its response, we observed a change in the usual pattern. After the protest, people consistently protested in a range of ways, rather than in short periods of protest followed by relative inactivity. The government response to protest is still very severe. Prison sentencing is long for anyone who even shouts slogans against the government. Despite this, Tibetan people follow their own culture as a means of protest, for example by speaking only Tibetan words, wearing traditional Tibetan clothes or celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday – resulting in people protesting by having picnics. The Dalai Lama is still an enormously important figure in Tibet even though he gave up his official power by going into exile and his office is now a purely religious one.

John Jones

Tibet is not just one of the most closed places but also one of the most oppressed places in the world. Human rights monitors are not allowed access to the territory. 2.5 million rural Tibetans were forced from their land and forced into urban environments where they have no relevant skills and live in poverty. It is illegal to discuss Human Rights, fly Tibetan flags, shout slogans etc. Torture and imprisonment are used against those perceived as protestors. Very severe sentences are imposed, using loose wording of the crimes involved. Tibetans do still learn the language in school but the pattern we see is of the language being relegated to the equivalent of French in UK schools.

Monasteries are now run by the Chinese government, with many restrictions imposed on them. For example, they have placed limits on the numbers of monks who can stay in the monasteries. They must demonstrate their loyalty to the Chinese leadership, through displaying photos of leaders, the Chinese flag etc. This all monitored through CCTV in the monasteries.

There have been extensive campaigns of demolition in the area, with the homes of many Tibetans bulldozed to the ground. The organisation commissioned satellites to get proof of the demolitions forcibly conducted by the Chinese government.

Beyond Belief Campaign

Eleanor explained their campaign, Beyond Belief. It involves the issue of the succession of the Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhism believes in reincarnation, the leaders who reincarnate are referred to as 'Tulkus'. Certain reincarnations are listed as 'approved' by the Chinese Government, which is especially surprising given the position of the Chinese Government to be entirely secular. The Dalai Lama is not on the approved lists, because he is disapproved of by the government. Normally when a Dalai Lama dies there would be a search for a young boy and they would follow certain traditions to identify the right child. The Chinese government is trying to take control of this process. A child has been recognised by the Dalai Lama and was then kidnapped by the Chinese authorities. Another child was then put in place by the Chinese government who had been groomed by the authorities. Tibetans have mixed feelings about this child - they recognise that he is a monk, but they do not accept him as the genuine Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama has hinted that he might not reincarnate, and that his line may just end.

Free Tibet has been running a campaign for some years to raise awareness among the public of this issue. The campaign argues that regardless of our own spiritual beliefs, religious freedom is a human rights issue. They seek further support to their campaign that it should be down to the Tibetans to choose their next religious leader. National governments are often hesitant to criticise the Chinese government, especially when their economies are affected. The Chinese authorities hate to be embarrassed. If we can get governments to say in advance that they will not recognise a Chinese imposed Dalai Lama then there is a reasonable prospect that the Chinese will not push through with it, in order to avoid the humiliation of not having their choice recognised. The protests against an imposed Dalai Lama would likely be unprecedented and almost inevitable violent response could result in huge loss of life.

Brief dialogue and discussion with the presenter

Various participants made inputs on related issues. There was discussion of the situation for Catholics in China, and for Christians generally, particularly in relation to the recent pressure on the 'house church' phenomenon. The common theme of oppression of freedom of religion was raised by a number of participants. Oppression of the Muslim Chinese in the region North of Tibet and also of the profound importance of Buddhism to Tibetan culture was also discussed. A comparison was made to the current movement in Scotland to remove religious worship in schools.

A question was asked if it is the right approach to the Chinese government to discuss only Tibet, rather than the broader issue of religious freedom? Eleanor spoke of the merit of questioning China more broadly, but replied that their organisation's remit is to focus on Tibet.

The suggestion was put forward that people should boycott Chinese goods if they want to have an impact. A brief discussion of practical steps looked at more local ways of causing embarrassment to the Chinese government. Eleanor spoke of a hope to get more signatures to support their statement on Tibet. John Mason suggested the group could sign up to the statement and could engage members of the group, and Interfaith Scotland to gather more support.

Date of Next meeting

The next meeting will be held in February and will also be the AGM. Participants will be informed of the exact date by email.

Action Points

It was suggested that the group read over and consider signing the statement that Free Tibet have put together as part of their Beyond Belief campaign, looking at the issue of the Dalai Lama succession. John Mason advised that an email would go around the group inviting people to read over and sign the statement. The suggestion was also put forward that the group should sign a statement with a broader remit, perhaps in relation to religious freedom.