

SCOTTISH CROSS PARTY GROUP ON TIBET (CPG)
MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 25TH JUNE 2019 AT 6:00 PM

Attendees:

Linda Fabiani MSP (Chair)
Ross Greer MSP (Vice-Chair)
Dr Martin Mills (Secretary)
Roger Eames (Treasurer)

Dr Lobsang Sangay
David Lloyd Hudson
Professor Mike Lean
Sir Maxwell Macleod of Fuinary

Jenni Campbell
Dr Callum Pearce
Val Robertson
Ron Scrimgeour
Patsy Seddon
Victor Spence
Ritchie Walker

Seven other members of the public.

1. Welcome to the Sikyong

Martin Mills welcomed Lobsang Sangay, Sikyong (president) of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), on behalf of the CPG.

2. Sikyong's address

Lobsang Sangay thanked the CPG for supporting the Tibetan cause. He commented on the challenges of the past six years, following his assumption of the role of Sikyong in 2012 and what he described as the 'separation of church and state' that occurred when the Dalai Lama stepped down as political leader of the CTA. The Sikyong discussed the 'informal' approach he has taken to diplomacy in response to Chinese pressure over his public appearances around the world. He commented favourably on his reception by the US congress, and on the support that the CTA has received from parliamentary groups in Japan and the Czech Republic (respectively the largest in the world and in Europe). He also noted the loss of support from Norway following Chinese economic pressure and commented on how the rise of nationalism in recent years has eclipsed the internationalism and liberalism of the 1990s and eroded support for the Tibetan cause in many countries.

Despite this, he noted that the situation is improving in many areas: countries such as Australia and now the US are reviewing Chinese influence on policy and reconsidering their attitude to the Tibetan cause. The recent protests in Hong Kong have put the issues of democracy and human rights in China back on the agenda, while concerns over the impact of climate change are helping to raise awareness of the Tibetan situation. The Sikyong noted that photographs and reports of meetings like this help to send a message to Chinese representatives and give hope to Tibetans resident within China.

The Sikyong commented that Tibet is currently ranked as the second least free region in the world after Syria, according to the 2019 Freedom in the World report produced by US NGO Freedom House, and stated that journalists have better access to North Korea than Tibet. Despite these challenges, he asserted that Tibetan identity is still strong: while the Cultural Revolution saw the destruction of 98% of Buddhist monasteries within Tibet, the attempt to culturally assimilate Tibetans into China has failed. The past half-century has seen the spread of Tibetan Buddhism across the world – notably represented in Scotland by the Buddhist centre of Kagyu Samye Ling – and a renaissance in Buddhism across the Himalayan belt, while even in Tibet Buddhism has continued to thrive in private spaces despite continued repression. 'After sixty years,' the Sikyong stated, 'spiritually, we won': China is now the largest Buddhist country in the world. Tibetans have won on the spiritual front, he said, and

must now turn to the political front. The Sikyong spoke of looking to Scotland for inspiration in the struggle for independence, and of the importance of dialogue and the non-violent approach: 'we will prove that the good guys can win'. Ending on a positive note, he 'Next time, we will meet in Lhasa'.

3. Questions to the Sikyong

In response to questions regarding relations between the CTA and the current UK government. The Sikyong noted that his visit was to be acknowledged in the House of Commons by the speaker, John Bercow MP, and that he had met with MPs from the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Tibet. When asked if the CTA had considered the Andorra model for independence by seeking national status for Dharamsala from India, the Sikyong noted that this would be impossible as India must accept Chinese sovereignty as a member of the UN. When asked if it was possible for the Sikyong to meet with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, Linda Fabiani answered that while the CTA had tried to organise this it had not been possible due to the current economic uncertainty in the UK.

It was noted that the Fourth World Parliamentarians' Convention on Tibet was held in Edinburgh in 2005 and asked when it would be possible for Scotland to host the convention again; the Sikyong said he would pass this on to the Tibetan parliament. It was also asked why the CTA did not appoint honorary consular representatives for individual countries. The Sikyong answered that the CTA prefers to rely on local Tibet support groups, Buddhist centres and so on as 'de facto ambassadors' of the Tibetan cause. One attendee of the meeting noted that this placed a great burden on ordinary Tibetan refugees, while the Sikyong felt that the unity of the Tibetan refugee community and the 'clarity of the movement' made this a workable approach. He argued in favour of a 'devolved, bottom-up system', noting that a top-down approach would cause problems.

The Sikyong was asked how Tibetans in exile communicate with Tibetans in Tibet. The Sikyong answered that they tend to rely on family networks and broadcasts, particularly internet-based media such as YouTube.

It was noted that increased awareness of climate change would ensure that the Asian water crisis would undoubtedly command media attention in the next year and asked how the CTA hoped to balance their campaigning emphasis on human rights with this. The Sikyong agreed that the environment is a major issue, mentioning mining projects directed towards sacred mountains and noting that 60% of Tibetan self-immolations have been 'environment-related'. He commented on Tibet's role as the 'water tower of Asia', and touched on the possibility that China could redirect the flow of the Brahmaputra River/Yarlung Tsangpo away from India and Bangladesh. He also noted that China has not signed the UNECE 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes (the Water Convention).

When asked why Chinese political and economic pressure on other countries is so effective, the Sikyong gave a two-part answer: first, he argued that Chinese expatriates are overwhelmingly pro-China and help to support the national cause on an international level; second, he suggested that China has a long history of politically winning people over. He cited 'a two-thousand-year legacy of statecraft', mentioning the ancient practice of ransoming members of noble-born families and Henry Kissinger's role in Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to China.

Linda Fabiani asked if either the Sikyong or any of his colleagues maintain any diplomatic involvement with China. He answered that there is no diplomatic contact and that he is considered a persona non grata by China, but that as China is the largest Buddhist country in the world so there are many opportunities for unofficial contact made through Chinese Buddhists visiting India.

Ross Greer asked if, following Norway's reduction of economic support for the CTA, there were any other European states offering equivalent levels of support for the Tibetan cause. The Sikyong noted that both the Czech Republic and Germany have been very supportive and commented that Norway's decision had been based on concerns regarding salmon exports to China—but that this had been a mistake, and there had been no increase in exports. The Sikyong remarked that Norway's main opposition party is much more pro-Tibet, and that the CTA was simply awaiting a change in government.

An attendee of the meeting asked what the CPG can do to aid the Tibetan cause. The Sikyong noted that Linda Fabiani will be leading a delegation of MSPs to Dharamsala, and that in future the CPG could table a motion in the Scottish Parliament either supporting the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach or stating that Tibet was never a part of China. He encouraged the CPG to celebrate the Tibetan international democratic system, and to help raise awareness of major issues relating to the Tibetan cause: the impact of climate change, China's Belt and Road Initiative and their strategy of domination.

Roger Eames noted that a news blackout has been enforced in Tibet and asked whether news was getting out. The Sikyong noted that while China has followed a '0/100' policy of blocking all incoming news and broadcasting only state-approved propaganda out, some news is still communicated through informal networks.

4. Presentation to the Sikyong