

TIBET: AN INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION

LONDON, 7 JULY 1990

REFLECTIONS ON TIBET AND THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLES

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A JOURNEY AMONGST PEOPLES

I want to share with you five reflections which entered my consciousness with power as I took the long journey to this rostrum. Some of you will have shared some of the same experiences with me.

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The first came to me on the plane which bore me from my native land to this consultation. I am not sure whether prolonged flying causes an altered state. I do not doubt that sleeplessness, which tends to accompany flying, provokes a heightened vulnerability to thoughts which otherwise escape the conscious mind in the busy workaday world. In this state, I looked down at our blue world - now coloured black, with little stars of light. The flight path could not have been more apt for our meeting. There was Burma - fresh from elections, asserting the right of its peoples to freedom and democracy. There was Bangladesh, born out of a desire of a people to be distinct. There was the great mother India - blessed refuge of the outcast. On the right of the plane's wing, I knew there was Nepal, struggling for freedom from autocracy but safe in its identity. There was Kashmir and the Punjab where some were now asserting a right to be separate. And over the great mountains was the mysterious plateau of Tibet. Somewhere down there in the gloom was Lhasa. Down on that cold plain there were millions of robust Tibetans - ignorant, for the most part of our meeting. Yet resolutely desirous of being themselves, together. Group rights and group identity are, we are discovering, powerful forces not easy to eradicate.

Onwards the plane travelled. Through lands where the assertion of the rights of peoples has, in the past two years begun to reach its apogee: Afghanistan - which resisted the second power of the world and drove it out. Azerbaijan,

which asserted its ancient identity. Armenia, homeland of a scattered people. Down there the Kurds, divided between three nations, seemingly never to find their place in the sun. Onwards through Russia, a giant of a peoples, belatedly stirring. On the left wing of the airplane were the peoples of Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, artificially divided, and Czechoslovakia. Then the 'plane took its circle route through the Baltic States whose lives have many parallels to that of Tibet. Lands with a long history, absorbed into a great nation out of fear of that nation concerning the vulnerability of small, powerless peoples to the predatory neighbours. The strong absorbing the weak for a time - trying to win and woo; but failing to overcome because of the abiding, unquenchable desire of the people to be identified as a group, feeling powerful links in common.

So my journey here yesterday morning was an instruction in the topic of our consultation. Let us always remember that we are dealing here with a great issue of the decade. It is greater even than the issue of Tibet. It is the stirring of an assertion of the rights of peoples. That is the genus. Tibet is but a startling species. In our concentration on the issue of Tibet we should not for a moment forget the implications of what we discuss here for other peoples deprived by oppression of the right of self-determination of peoples and neglected by an indifferent world. Tibetans, Kurds, Palestinians, the people of Hong Kong bargained and traded away without an act of

self-determination. No wonder the United Kingdom Government will not show its face at this consultation. An aged imperial power has negotiated away the rights of nearly six million subjects in Hong Kong to a modern expansionist power. It has done so without a democratic vote. Have we learnt nothing from Tibet? Have we learnt nothing from the travails of this century?

FOR THOSE WHO TREASURE FREEDOM

My second reflection came upon me as I walked to the Press Conference in the House of Lords yesterday morning. Admittedly I was somewhat jetlagged: coming, as I did, straight from the plane. But I cannot describe for you the power of the impact of my first journey through Westminster Hall, which I had to traverse to get to Lord Ennals' appointed room. This is the very hall in which, from medieval times sat the Judges of the King's Bench, working busily away, and in public, devising and refining the common law. This is the Hall in which King Charles stood his trial and was condemned to death by the authority of Parliament - the representatives of the English peoples. In faraway Australia I am a humble successor to those Judges and a beneficiary of the democracy which these works secured. So this was where it all began - at Westminster. A system of law - of justice under the law - a government of laws not of men. Imperfect, yet a precious legacy of a quarter of humanity. The thoughts that rushed to my mind as I looked around the Hall were articulated later in our opening

ceremony by Lord Ennals. They apply to many of us - not just those who share the bounty of the common law. You will recall that Lord Ennals said: "Those who treasure their freedom, should be resolved to secure the freedom of others - of the people of Tibet". Yet if we look around, most of our fellow citizens - and many of our leaders in the lands said to be free - are completely indifferent. We should ask not for whom the bell of oppression and subjugation tolls. It tolls for every one of us.

PRESUMPTION OR COVERAGE

My third reflection struck me at the opening ceremony when the specially precious participants in this consultation rose amongst friends to identify themselves group by group. We, who take our identity and relative control over our group interaction for granted, were suddenly confronted by human beings such as ourselves - in the very same room - who do not have that same control. Tibetans, Wigar (East Turkestan people) in China, Mongolians. And a shiver of emotion could not be suppressed when the two brave representatives of the democratic movement of China itself rose. Two amongst millions. What a presumption, you might say. What courage - and what a flame of the human spirit, I reply. It is the self-same flame kept alive in India by Ghandi and Nehru. For Pakistan by Jinnah. For Czechoslovakia by Havel.

PRINCIPLE AND POLITICS

President Havel provides my fourth reflection. We have

come to expect of this poet philosopher leader, a superior creativity in everything he says and writes. It must be a strain to be brilliant and far-sighted every moment of the waking day. Yet he seems to be so. Havel did what our leaders have not done. In his capacity as President he saw the Dalai Lama. He made common cause. Principle was more important than politics. And his message to us - in our little conference - was penned by him - not by a faceless speechwriter. "I was told of an old Tibetan monk ... " he began. His tale was of sacrifice ending in triumph. President Havel's life is such a tale. As a human being, I can be proud of it. What is it that Havel and His Holiness the Dalai Lama have in common? You might call it a certain spiritualism, humanity, a concern with human freedom, an empathy to the humblest fellow creature. Amidst gloomy thoughts, we can derive resolution from the ultimate triumph of people like Havel. If a suppressed people have the good fortune to find a leader of rare gifts (and the Tibetans certainly have) the discovery of the pebbles which will lead to the path of self-determination is not so difficult.

AN EERIE MELODY FROM FAR AWAY

Finally, amongst these reflections, there was that eerie song at the conference dinner. At the various tables, Tibetans, secular and religious, joined in this celebration of their language, culture and will to be identified together. The mood of the vast Tibetan plateau enveloped us in a London dining hall. I closed my eyes, for the power of

music is mysterious. Who are these people, I asked myself - I confess in momentary anger - who would try to wipe out this precious variety of human diversity? Diversity upsets some people. But diversity is the protectress of freedom. Now we get worried about the extinction of rare birds. There are whole vast conferences on the elimination of species of whales. Books are written about the destruction of rainforests and the loss, forever, of rare flora and fauna. All worthy, worthy causes. But the absorption in another of a whole people - what a presumption. What a wrong. But back home, our fellow citizens turn to the football, watch Dallas or go about their lives in blissful ignorance of an endangered people.

LESSONS OF DAILY EVENTS

With these thoughts stirring in my mind, I went up to my solitary bed. I found it hard to sleep. I turned on the radio. The strong, reliable sound of the BBC was describing the events of yesterday, as we gathered in our meeting. President Bush describing the NATO communiqué as "historic". Economic news - the ultimate triumph of Karl Marx is how much of our news is now economic - as if we lived by pounds alone. Then there was the tale of the Albanians stirring - flocking in their thousands to the embassies in Tirana. More relevantly for us, there was the story from across the border in Yugoslavia. In Kosovo to be exact. Kosovo - a place of the greatest historical, emotional and spiritual importance for the Serbian people. Of battles long ago. The cradle of

their culture. The centrepiece of what it is to be Serbian. But now - by shifts of peoples - populated by a majority of ethnic Albanians. The Albanians have declared their independence within Yugoslavia. Some demand a separate Republic of Kosovo. To Serbians, this is unthinkable. It is as if Lhasa, with twice as many Han Chinese as Tibetans now, were to assert the right of self-determination as against the original Tibetan people.

We can all agree on the right of peoples to self-determination. As a legal theory it was a core idea of the United States War of Independence. It was an Allied war aim of the last world wars which insistent Presidents of the United States extracted from reluctant Allies. It became the fulcrum of the United Nations' Charter which is founded on the will of "the Peoples of the United Nations". It is common to the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Human Rights Covenants. It is binding international law. We can all agree on this.

But who are a "people" for this purpose? Who decides what territory shall be delineated, within which the right to self-determination of peoples will be tested and ascertained? The gerrymander is not only a phenomenon of Tammany Hall and debased local politics. Draw the border of the Kurds here - and they are in a minority. Draw the boundary for the plebiscite there and the Armenians are swallowed up in other races. Delay the act of self-determination too long - and by resettlement the Tibetan

peoples will be outnumbered by the imported Chinese workers and families. These Chinese are not wicked people. They are, for the most part, hapless victims of the policy of their government. They are also a "people", most ancient and civilized. They also have a right to their own self-determination.

WHO ARE A "PEOPLE"

That is why the subject matter of my distributed paper is both important and urgent. Already, it is suggested that the composition of the people of pre-1950 Tibet has changed. In Kham Province, more than 50% of the people are now estimated to be ethnic Chinese. In the Tibet Autonomous Region, as it is called, the Chinese and Tibetan peoples are roughly in balance. In Lhasa, with so many officials and military, and so many Tibetans having fled, the ratio of Chinese to Tibetans is said to be 3:1.

We cannot say that only Tibetans may have self-determination. It is a right which belongs to all peoples, as such. Who are then a "people" for this purpose? An international meeting of experts in UNESCO last December (which I chaired) offered a description of their characteristics. It is set out in detail in my distributed paper. The description has four chief components. They are:

1. Common identifiers - established links of history, language, race, religion, territorial connection and economic ties;

2. Numbers which are sufficiently large to provide a measure of identifiable cohesion;
3. The established will to be identified as a people; and
4. Institutional links.

The Tibetan people qualify as a "people" for international law on each and every one of these grounds. They are therefore entitled to exercise the people's right to self-determination. Yet they are denied it. And the most worrying aspect of the refusal to grant it to them is that time is not on the side of Tibetan identity.

Presumably the Chinese government and its officials in Tibet knows this. Our recognition of the fact should heighten our sense of urgency to translate the fine words and promises of international law into action, without delay. There is no international sheriff to bring China into conformity with international law. We can only rely on reform from within China and the pressure of world opinion to secure that reform. The leaders of the current ruling group in China are very old. But even when they pass, reform is not assured. The history of China from ancient times has been autocratic. It may take decades of education and links with the enlightened world to secure a change of view. This is an uncertain prospect. As to pressure, the newly liberated peoples of the Soviet Union's territories and ex-allies must become the catalysts for the pressure of effective world opinion. Those who have regained their group

identity and the right of peoples must seek to secure it for others, now denied. And we must never despair. We must take heart from the real achievements, some of them with good analogies for Tibet, which have been achieved in the last decade, as palpable expressions of the will of peoples. Intellectual leaders and lawyers must speak up; for the power of enduring ideas can never be underestimated.

THE URGENT PROBLEMS

In my paper I list several problems which Tibetans, and supports of Tibet, must face squarely:

- * The shifting composition of the people in Tibet is the most urgent;
- * The avoidance of narrow nationalism and parochialism is also important, as the Dalai Lama himself constantly teaches. Tibet and China must live together and their relationship as members of the international community of peoples is for them to establish with each other;
- * The ways of an ancient people are not impervious to change. Tibet must demonstrate its commitment to freedom and human rights. A return to some of the old ways is unthinkable. The reforms and modernisation provided by China must be acknowledged where they have been beneficial;

* The rights of other peoples in the territory of Tibet must be conceded if Tibet is to win the wholehearted support of champions of liberty. The democratisation of Tibet is not a step in the destruction of its culture. It is a precondition to the survival of that culture in modern times; and

* Tibet and Tibetans and those who support them should extrapolate from their experience to the experience of other peoples denied self-determination. There are special parallels with the people of Hong Kong - soon to be another Autonomous Region of China. There should be common cause with those peoples - many of them also refugees. The best we can hope is that the injection of nearly 6 million people who have known a high measure of freedom, will remould China of the 21st century. Times will change. In John Wesley's prophetic words "These things shall be".

RETURN OF THE NEW MOON

Can we hope that that will be so? What were those haunting words of the Tibetan song last night which transported us from a chilly London evening to the rugged plain half a world away?

1 This moon will go away
The new one will come back
Once again there will be a chance
to see this auspicious moon.