

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, CANBERRA
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INTRODUCTION OF HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

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Hon Justice Michael Kirby
President of the International Commission of Jurists

On a blue day in this nation's capital, with summer marching in, I welcome your Holiness yet again to this rostrum.

It has fallen to me, as an Australian citizen and as President of the International Commission of Jurists, to introduce you. Never in life have I felt more redundant.

His Holiness was born in July 1935 in North Eastern Tibet to a peasant family. His life would have been so different had he not been recognised at the age of two as the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. He then began his long journey which brings him today before the Australian people. As the 14th Dalai Lama, he is probably the longest continuing holder of a high office in the world today.

He began his education at the age of six, graduating at the age of twenty four. But this education was interrupted in 1950, when he was fifteen, by the entry into Tibet of the Chinese Army fresh from its victories in the Chinese Revolution.

The Dalai Lama sought to cooperate with China. In 1956 on the 2500th anniversary of the birth of lord Buddha, he visited India and sought to reach an accommodation with China in meetings with the Indian Prime Minister Nehru and the Chinese Premier Chou En-lai. However, in March 1959 a rising of the Tibetan people took place. The Dalai Lama left Lhasa and sought sanctuary in India with 87 000 Tibetans.

The International Commission of Jurists reported the events leading up to the uprising and the Dalai Lama's exile. It found many abuses of basic human rights. So have many delegations since. The Commission has recently sought permission to return to Tibet to report on the present situation. Its requests so far have been fruitless.

The Dalai Lama promulgated a democratic Constitution for Tibet in 1963. In 1987 he proposed a five point peace plan to China. In 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace. This is his third visit to Australia. The interest in what he has to say is as intense as it is sustained.

You may be surprised, Your Holiness, at the fuss your visit seems to have made in some quarters. After all you are a regular visitor, an acknowledged Buddhist teacher and leader, a Nobel Laureate and an historical figure.

Some Australians have said: let those who criticise your visit stop interfering in Australia's internal affairs. As a free people we will have in our home who we will.

For myself, I think that such an attitude is too negative. Instead, we should see the robust controversy that has accompanied your visit as the living proof of freedom in action. In Australia, we debate such things out in the open- nowhere more than this in this National Press Club. We hope that this example of free expression will spread to other societies which do not yet enjoy it. That is the promise of universal human rights and the tide of history.

In the meantime, the law and Constitution of this country protect fully the rights of those who criticise your Holiness's visit. Let them argue their case on its merits and they will be heard.

But it also protects the rights of the many supporters in Australia of your Holiness' instruction. And it also presumes to defend your right to speak to us as you will.

I invite the Dalai Lama to address us.