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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Parliamentary Delegation to India

SPEECH

Monday, 7 September 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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<p>Date Monday, 7 September 2009 Page 8836 Questioner Speaker Parke, Melissa, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Ms PARKE (Fremantle) (8.41 pm)—The visit during early July of an unofficial Australian parliamentary delegation to Dharamsala, India, to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament in exile caused a bit of a stir back here in Australia—among both Australians and Chinese officials. It was my experience and that of my fellow delegation members—Michael Danby MP; Peter Slipper MP; and Senators Sarah Hanson-Young, Scott Ludlam and Nick Xenophon—that the overwhelming majority of Australians who contacted us about the trip, including many people in my electorate of Fremantle, were delighted and encouraging. The official Chinese response, as reported, was almost the complete opposite: furious and insistent that this was interference in Chinese internal affairs. We saw this happen again, more recently, in the Chinese response to the showing of a film in Melbourne about the plight of the Uygur people, called *The 10 conditions of love*, and to the appearance of Uygur leader Rebiya Kadeer at the National Press Club.

It is important to state at the outset that our visit to Dharamsala was not in any way anti-China. Indeed, we wish to support China—as we support all countries, including our own—in its progress towards greater respect for human rights and freedoms of speech, movement, religion, culture and language. One of the simplest ways for this progress to continue is for it to re-engage in genuine dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

On those occasions when Chinese officials have attempted to portray the Dalai Lama as an ‘evil splittist’, or when they sought to blame the Dalai Lama for last year’s uprising in Tibet, the only effect has been to reinforce within the global community the sense that China is being unreasonably rigid and antagonistic on this issue. It is my strong belief that the global community is willing the Chinese government to express its strength of character and dynamism through a new, open, and flexible approach to issues like Tibet and to leaders like the Dalai Lama.

For decades, the Dalai Lama has reached millions of people around the world with his teachings on non-violence, compassion, tolerance and universal responsibility. Twenty years ago, when he received the Nobel Peace Prize, he noted the inspiration he had received from Mahatma Gandhi’s program of non-violent action for change. On 10 December this year, the Dalai Lama will be in Melbourne for a celebration of the 20th anniversary of his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Tibetan community in exile, and the Dalai Lama’s 74th birthday was on 6 July. It was therefore an auspicious time for the Australian delegation to visit Dharamsala. I described the visit in an article published in Crikey on 22 July as follows:

India has played graceful host to the Tibetan community in exile since 1959 when Indian Prime Minister Nehru invited them to stay in Dharamsala, also known as Dhasa (a mixture of ‘Little Lhasa’ and Dharamsala). The town, in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh at the foothills of the Himalayas, is laid out on narrow ridges and festooned with colourful Tibetan prayer flags. Upon arrival, we were met by the Speaker and Deputy-Speaker of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, and the Tibetan Prime Minister, all learned and articulate yet extremely humble people.

Over the next 6 days, in addition to an enlightening one and a half hour meeting with the Dalai Lama, we had an intensive series of meetings with other high-level lamas and Tibetan parliamentarians in exile. We also met with recently arrived refugees from Tibet and with human rights NGOs representing women, youth, students and political prisoners. The delegation was treated to a fantastic cultural dance and music performance by the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts and visited the Nor-bulingka Institute of Tibetan Art and Culture. We were moved by our visit to the Tibetan Children’s Village which houses and educates orphans and refugee children. The school mottoes are ‘others before self’ and ‘individuals can make a difference’. The Tibetan Children’s Village managed to be simultaneously the saddest and the happiest place we had seen. Happy because the children are welcomed and loved within this exiled community; sad because many have been sent from Tibet for their protection into the care of the Dalai Lama—some never to have contact with their families again. Many of the kids’ drawings depict some of the difficult and terrible circumstances that they have experienced.

We visited the Tibetan library and archives containing ancient manuscripts smuggled out of Tibet for safekeeping, and the Institute of Tibetan Medicine where we learned that the first ever international medical conference was held in Tibet in the 8th century.

What we saw was democracy enhanced by spirituality. We saw both the careful preservation and the joyful celebration of Tibetan culture and language. We also saw the quiet hope and determination of these people to return home to Tibet. The visit was an extraordinary window to the Tibetan world and we were welcomed at all levels, leaving us humbled and inspired.

Our delegation has returned to Australia with a number of goals. Among other things, we would like to engage with Chinese community and government representatives on the subject of Tibet and visit Tibet to see for ourselves the situation on the ground. If the Tibetan people are as happy as the Chinese government says they are, there should not be any objection to our visiting and verifying.

We will advocate for the release of Tibetan political prisoners, including filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen, whose distraught wife we met in Dharamsala. Dhondup was detained in March 2008 on grounds of inciting separatism, after interviewing Tibetans in Qinghai about their views on the Dalai Lama, the Beijing Olympics and the Chinese government. His footage was later turned into the film *Leaving fear behind*. We will also seek the release of the Panchen Lama, the second-highest ranking lama after the Dalai Lama in the Gelupga sect of Tibetan Buddhism, who has been kept in 'protective custody' since 1995 when he was six years old by the Chinese leadership, who took it upon themselves to name another six-year-old boy as the Panchen Lama. We will also do our best to inter-act with and support the Tibetan community living in Australia, for whom Tibet must feel impossibly far away.

I am very grateful to the Tibet Information Office, the Australia-Tibet Council, the Tibetan Parliament in Exile and to all the Tibetans in Delhi and Dharamsala who met with us and shared their stories, philosophies and hopes. And I felt blessed to have met with the Dalai Lama, one of the great modern leaders and advocates in the cause of peace.

At the conclusion of the visit to Dharamsala I travelled under my own arrangements to visit some UNICEF health and education projects in the Indian state of Rajasthan in my capacity as Chair of the UNICEF Parliamentary Association. I visited an Aganwadi community centre, managed through assistance from UNICEF, the Rajasthan government and community groups, where mothers bring their young children to be weighed and to receive nutritional supplements. The children also receive some elementary education at the centre—while Mahatma Gandhi smiles at them from a photo on the wall. Education for these kids is first about getting fed, recovering from malnutrition and warding off anaemia. In Rajasthan 44 per cent of children under three years are under-weight and 79 per cent are anaemic.

I then visited the Sare sub centre, a small health clinic in the mountains some distance from Udaipur, where the government of Rajasthan, with the support of UNICEF, is taking proactive steps to address the high infant and maternal mortality rates in the area. A nurse-midwife lives full time at the subcentre; therefore being available 24 hours a day to assist with safe delivery and newborn care for the local tribal women, who must trek many kilometres in mountainous territory to go there.

Finally, I visited the State Institute for Educational Research and Training, which oversees curriculum and text-book development and teacher support and training. Among other projects, UNICEF is assisting the institute with its adolescent anaemia control program by providing iron and folic acid supplements for school-going girls. I was impressed with the institute's clever development of teacher training materials involving everyday items and waste products that may be easily procured at no or low cost to a school. I also appreciated the constant message in the curricula and on posters throughout the community health and education centres I visited which advocated against child marriages. It was incredibly heartening to see women and children in extreme poverty being assisted and empowered in very practical ways by grassroots projects managed collaboratively by UNICEF, the Rajasthan government and community centres. The Millennium Development Goals were brought to life before my eyes. I am grateful to UNICEF Australia, UNICEF India and the Rajasthan government and to the health and community workers and their clients, who are among the most disadvantaged women and children in the world, who were kind enough to meet with me. I admire their courage and determination in the face of tremendous hardship.

In Delhi it was fascinating to visit the parliament of the world's greatest democracy, with the giant statue of Mahatma Gandhi at the entrance. It was interesting, too, to learn that it had adopted electronic voting back in 1964. Why is the Australian parliament so reluctant to make this leap to a more efficient system? My trip to India was only 11 days long, which, as I noted in the Crikey article, was hardly enough time to gain more than a passing sense of this country, of its multitudes and myriad riches. I was glad, however, for the opportunity to make this engagement with a nation and regional neighbour that will be of such significance to Australia and to the world in the years to come. As I noted on 18 August in my presentation of the report by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade into Australia's relations with India as an emerging world

power, the ties between our countries go beyond the oft cited notion of 'cricket, curry and Commonwealth' to a much deeper and more meaningful relationship which will be vitally important as we face challenges together, including poverty, climate change, financial instability, regional security issues and terrorism.