

Cross-Party Group on Tibet

Wednesday 15 February 2023, 6 pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Ross Greer MSP (RG), Collette Stevenson MSP (CS)

Non-MSP Group Members

Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren (EBR), Roger Eames (RE), Linda Lunan (LL), Martin Mills (MM), Ritchie Walker (RW), Tenzin Choekyi (TC), Jill Sudbury (JS), Tenzin Kunga (TK)

Apologies

Apologies were received from Rhoda Grant MSP, Mercedes Villalba MSP, Ron Scrimgeour and Mark Watson.

1. Welcome

RG welcomed everyone and explained that this meeting would be replacing the previously scheduled AGM.

2. Approval of Minutes – 22 June 2022

Minutes of the June 2022 meeting were approved.

3. Matters Arising

AGM

It was agreed that RG would continue as Chair/Convener. It was noted that Mercedes Villalba wished to step down and agreed that CS would replace her. CS requested that the position be Vice-Chair rather than Co-Chair. It was also agreed that EBR would continue as Secretary and RE as Treasurer.

The Secretary's review of the previous year and the Treasurer's report were accepted. The minutes of the previous AGM were also accepted.

Sikyong's Visit

A meeting with the Lord Provost of Edinburgh has been provisionally scheduled for 3pm on Thursday 27 April. This will take place in the Lady Provost's room in the City Chambers. The Council Leader, Cammy Day, has also been invited (by the Lord Provost).

A meeting with MSPs will also take place at Holyrood on Thursday 27 April. RG is still working on the details.

EBR will contact the Office of Tibet to confirm whether the evening event at the Asia Scotland Institute has been confirmed. An in-person meeting of the CPG will then be arranged to fit in with the timings of other events.

RE has arranged a meeting with the Lord Provost of Aberdeen on Friday 28 April. His office has requested a mid-afternoon meeting. MM also has an event scheduled at the University of Aberdeen, starting around 6pm.

Festival of Politics

EBR had been in touch with the parliamentary events team and said that there was no specific theme for this year's festival. Preference would be given to CPGs who had not hosted any events last year but all groups were welcome to submit proposals.

RG suggested an event looking at the issues of surveillance and privacy in the context of human rights and the UK / Scotland's relationship with China. This might reference the current issue of DNA collection in Tibet, the use of Chinese surveillance equipment (Hikvision) in Scotland and the presence of Chinese police stations in Scotland. EBR will draft a proposal and circulate to the group. The deadline for submission is Friday 17 February.

4. Update on key campaigns

Colonial Boarding Schools

EBR noted that the petition to G7 leaders had been successful and the colonial boarding schools in Tibet were discussed at the meeting of foreign ministers which took place 3-4 November 2022 in Germany. Human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang were briefly mentioned in the statement which was issued publicly after the meeting. (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/g7-foreign-ministers-statement/2561876>)

A significantly more detailed statement was released on 6 February by UN Special Rapporteurs - Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Farida Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on the right to education, and Alexandra Xanthaki, Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights. The statement concluded by noting that the experts had sent a communication to the Government of China on 11 November 2022 and remain in contact with them. ([https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/china-un-experts-alarmed-separation-1-million-tibetan-children-families-and#:~:text=GENEVA%20\(6%20February%202023\)%20%E2%80%93,%2C%20UN%20experts%20warned%20today](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/china-un-experts-alarmed-separation-1-million-tibetan-children-families-and#:~:text=GENEVA%20(6%20February%202023)%20%E2%80%93,%2C%20UN%20experts%20warned%20today))

There had also been an article in TIME magazine as well as other political statements issued.

It was agreed that it was still worthwhile drafting a letter from the CPG. This would be sent to Angus Robertson, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture. It would outline the key issues and request that he raise the matter with the Chinese Consulate in Scotland. EBR will draft the letter and circulate for discussion.

TK noted that the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in Westminster had recently shown interest in the issue, particularly the TIMES magazine article. He also informed the group that Dr Gyalo, the researcher behind the original report on Tibet's colonial boarding schools, would be visiting the UK around 27 March and he will let the CPG know when more details are available.

Succession of the 14th Dalai Lama

This was the topic of the presentation given by Kate Saunders at the informal meeting in October 2022. A recording of the presentation and subsequent discussion is available in the CPGT shared folder on Google Drive, along with a copy of the recent report. RG and CS agreed to review the report with a view to determining what, if any, action can be taken by the Scottish Parliament.

DNA Testing in Tibet

EBR had recently sent around an email about the global week of action on the issue of DNA testing in Tibet. The week was successful and has now concluded but the issue has not been resolved and the petition remains live. (<https://actions.tibetnetwork.org/en-UK/ThermoFisher-TibetanDNA-UK>)

RG agreed that the CPG could send a letter to Thermo Fisher offices in Scotland. EBR will draft this and circulate for discussion. RE noted that it was important to spell out clearly the nature of the problem in any communication. Issues highlighted during discussion of this issue included surveillance, privacy, consent (lack thereof), how the data was used, the implicit threat to relatives of those tested, the scale of the data collection, the failure to communicate results and the forced testing of young children.

De-Twinning

EBR briefly summarised the campaign being conducted by Hongkonger groups to get UK cities that are currently twinned with Chinese cities to reconsider those relationships. Hongkongers and Tibetans recently met with Sheffield Council and were given the opportunity to present a petition and letters during a council meeting. The council confirmed that they would incorporate these into an upcoming review of their international relationships.

Scottish cities that are currently twinned with cities in China are: Edinburgh, twinned with Shenzhen and Xi'an, Glasgow, twinned with Dalian, and Perth, twinned with Haikou. In addition, Angus is twinned with Yantai and Fife is twinned with the province of Gansu. EBR asked whether the de-twinning campaign was something that the CPGT could support. RG said it was good, practical action and definitely the kind of campaign the CPGT should be involved in. It was agreed that EBR would get a status update from the Hongkongers and find out what kind of support/assistance would be most useful. LL noted that she had concerns about her local area, South Ayrshire, having a "friendly city agreement" with Liaocheng in China. RG confirmed that friendly city agreements were essentially the same as twinning agreements.

5. Update on news from Tibet

TC gave a detailed presentation on the current situation in Drago County and also presented Tibet Watch's report: Desecration of religious and cultural heritage in Drago County. A copy of the report and TC's slides are available in the CPGT shared folder.

During the subsequent discussion, it was noted that there were similarities with what had previously happened in Larung Gar. TC noted that Wang Dongsheng, the newly nominated Party Secretary of Drago, had previously overseen the destruction in Larung Gar. MM and JS both noted that there was something very familiar about the series of events in Drago and asked whether TC had noted a pattern of similar incidents elsewhere or had any information about a possible motive for targeting Drago specifically. There were also questions about the timing of events (MM commenting that they seemed rushed), about whether this was locally instigated or happening on orders from Beijing, about how the site had been chosen and about whether there had been a re-education programme for local monks.

TC explained that it was hard to answer all of this because of the severe restrictions on communication and the difficulty of accessing verified information. However, she noted the general

policy of sinicising Tibetan Buddhism and said that, while this was a Tibet-wide policy, the tactics and other specifics of implementation often depended on the local politicians. She also talked about the monastery management committee programme and how the monks from Drago now had nowhere to go. She also explained that the students would be unable to access Tibetan education in state schools. Finally, TC mentioned that the late Akong Rinpoche, the co-founder of Samye Ling monastery in Scotland, had helped towards the preservation of Drago Monastery in the form of financial contribution.

EBR asked what Tibet Watch and Free Tibet would like the CPGT to do in response. TK said it was important for governments to acknowledge that the situation in Tibet is an unresolved conflict. He requested a message of solidarity on 10th March which specifically mentioned Drago. It was also agreed that RG and CS would discuss putting forward a motion to raise awareness amongst other MSPs.

CS and RG thanked TC for the presentation.

6. AOB

EBR asked how everyone felt about continuing with online meetings and/or moving to in-person. JS asked whether hybrid meetings were possible and RG confirmed that they were. It was agreed that the next meeting would be hybrid.

RG shared details of the review carried out by police forces in England and Wales examining the use of Chinese cameras and other surveillance equipment. He asked whether anyone was aware of Police Scotland having reviewed the use of Hikvision equipment. He said he would look into whether a Scottish review could be set up. (<https://news.sky.com/story/british-police-forces-shot-through-with-chinese-surveillance-cameras-watchdog-warns-12811305>)

7. Next Meeting

This will take place on Thursday 27 April, to coincide with the Sikyong's visit. The exact time will be confirmed near the time.

Action Points

- EBR to complete AGM paperwork and submit to the clerks.
- EBR to get an update from the Office of Tibet re the Sikyong's visit and liaise with RG/ MM/ RE re arrangements for meetings.
- EBR to draft a proposal for the Festival of Politics. All group members who wish to input to do so before Friday 17 February. (Complete)
- EBR and CS to draft a letter to Angus Robertson re the colonial boarding schools in Tibet.
- TK to update the CPGT once he has more detail on Dr Gyalo's visit.
- RG and CS to look at the recommendations in the report on the Dalai Lama's succession.
- EBR to draft a letter to Thermo Fisher and circulate.
- EBR to get an update on the de-twinning campaign and liaise with RG/CS re action.
- EBR to discuss 10th March with Scottish Tibetans and update the CPGT.
- RG and CS to discuss a motion on the situation in Drago.
- RG to look into requesting a police review of Chinese surveillance equipment.

Meeting ended 7:45 pm