

An Audience with the Dalai Lama

Julie Morgan MP

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This summer, I had the great privilege of meeting the Dalai Lama.

At the end of a packed couple of months in my constituency of Cardiff North, I spent four days in Dharamsala in northern India as part of a cross-party delegation of MPs, hoping to learn more about the Tibetan cause.

Before my visit to the Dalai Lama's residence in Dharamsala, I knew some basic facts about him and about the campaign that he has led on behalf of the Tibetan people.

I knew, for example, that the Dalai Lama is considered by Tibetan Buddhists to be the living incarnation of compassion in the world and that, in his struggle to free Tibet since his exile from there in 1959, he has stuck unwaveringly to a policy of non-violence. I also knew that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 and that it would be hard *not* to be impressed by such a man – by someone who has so wholeheartedly preached non-violence *and* practised it. And he has done so with great optimism – not only does he suggest that we should “Be kind whenever possible,” but that “...it is always possible”.

I also knew that, politically speaking, the issue of who “owns” Tibet is a controversial one, at least for the Chinese government. China invaded Tibet in 1950 and has ruled there ever since, even though there is much disagreement about whether Tibet's incorporation into China is legitimate. Tibetans see their country as an occupied territory; the Chinese do not.

And now, having visited northern India myself and learned more about the Tibetan situation, I would have to say that I think that the Tibetan cause is a just one and that we need to take urgent action to secure self-rule for Tibet.

The cross-party delegation of MPs I was with formed part of an exchange programme facilitated by The Tibet Society in the UK. Earlier this year, six Tibetan MPs from the Tibetan Parliament in Exile (which sits in Dharamsala) visited Westminster in order to learn more about the UK parliamentary system and to strengthen the links between our two parliaments.

In Dharamsala, we saw for ourselves how Tibetan democracy and culture is clearly thriving, but also how great hardship is being suffered by Tibetans who have had to flee from Tibet or who are facing marginalisation in Tibet itself under Chinese rule. Those who do escape from Tibet, including many children, usually do so in winter when the borders are harder to police and the 20 day trek over the snowy Himalayas in freezing temperatures is treacherous. Many arrive in very poor condition, often with frostbite, but still consider the journey worth making.

The importance of preserving a national identity is something that I think many people in Wales should be able to identify with. Language, culture heritage and religious tradition are things that many Welsh people hold very dear. So imagine for a moment Wales being invaded by another country and having its language, culture and religious traditions threatened. Then imagine having to send your children far away just so they can learn about their own culture. Imagine perhaps never being able to see them again. This is the fate that many Tibetans have suffered.

Over the years, thousands of Tibetan children have been separated from their families and sent out of Tibet by their parents so that they can really “be” Tibetan. They often end up at a Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) in India. The one we visited was very well-run and educates orphaned and destitute children in exile. At the moment, over 16,000 children live in TCVs in India. There is no doubt that the children are extremely well cared for in the TCVs, but what struck me most is just how sad this situation is – parents and children are being separated from each other and this must cause a great deal of heartache for all concerned. In the nursery, I was told that one child cried for a month when she arrived there.

What Tibetans want is not independence from China, but autonomy – the freedom to shape their own social and educational systems, to practice their own religious philosophy and to pass on their own culture. To those of us in Wales, this sounds very like devolution, doesn’t it? And for both the Tibetans and for the Chinese, I would say that this seems like a very reasonable and sensible way forward. It’s hopeful that the two sides are talking at the moment, but matters appear to be at something of an impasse.

We were fortunate to have an audience with the Dalai Lama for almost two hours and we discussed the current situation in Tibet and what we in the UK can do to help the Tibetan cause. Meeting someone who is such an icon was somewhat unreal, but in person, the Dalai Lama is very approachable and comes across as a lovely man – someone who is very serious about gaining Tibetan autonomy, but someone who is also very warm and has a wonderful sense of humour. As we left, he stood on the steps of his residence, beaming and waving at us, and said, “See you again soon!” I certainly hope that this will be possible. It was an honour and a delight to meet him.

We discussed ways in which we as MPs could give support to Tibet’s non-violent campaign for freedom and self-determination – and it is this which is most striking about the Tibetan struggle. The commitment to non-violence by the Dalai Lama is incredibly impressive, but disappointingly, this has often meant that the Tibetan cause has not received the publicity that it might. It is a sad fact that violence often receives more attention than non-violence.

Yes, the Dalai Lama is a Nobel Peace Prize winner and yes, he is a much respected figure in the world, but I think that we need to raise much more awareness about the hardships that ordinary Tibetans are facing and how we can all help secure a just future for Tibet.

We should pay much more attention to this peaceful struggle.

If you would like more information about the Tibetan situation or would like to investigate how you can help through The Tibet Relief Fund, please visit The Tibet Society website at www.tibetsociety.com