

DEALING WITH ASIA: NATIONAL INTERESTS AND DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to the Asia Society, New York, 25 September 1991.

The collapse of Soviet communism, and the Soviet Union as we have known it, have given rise to a great deal of speculative commentary about how quickly the same forces will work themselves out in the remaining non-democratic countries of Asia. What has not been so widely examined is the more difficult issue of what democratic Western societies such as the United States and Australia can and should do to help that process along. It is that issue which I would like to address today.

In doing so, I want to look at why we should be interested in helping along the causes of democracy and human rights; what our objectives should be in doing so; and how we might most productively go about addressing them, given the great sensitivities involved. We in Australia - living as we do squarely in the Asian region, and with cultural values that are sometimes asserted to be at odds with those widely prevailing in the region - often have to wrestle with these kinds of issues. It may be helpful to share some of our recent experience with you, including in particular that of a recent human rights delegation we sent to China.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that the spread of democratic rights is well and truly under way in Asia, whatever the contribution from the West to this process may, or may not, have been in the past. The Philippines was in 1986 a text-book case of restoration of democratic rights. In

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South Korea and Taiwan there has been progress to democratic, representative government along with strong economic growth; the combination has been a useful counter to those in the region who still want to argue that economic development should not be put at risk by democratic experimentation. In India, we continue to see how democracy in Asia can send down roots strong enough to withstand the centrifugal forces of ethnic, religious and social divisions. In

Mongolia we have seen how the democratic impulse can flower in the most unlikely of environments.

In China and Burma, by contrast, it has been a case of as many steps backward as forward - although the severity of the repression found necessary in both perhaps serves only to indicate the strength of the underlying democratic forces. It is difficult, nonetheless, to be other than confident, particularly in China, that the passing from the scene of the present corps of ageing leaders will result in an affirmation of the democratic impulse. The medium term outlook is similarly reasonably optimistic for Vietnam. There, political repression has significantly eased - but it has to be acknowledged there has been no significant political liberalisation yet to match the very significant steps which have been taken toward economic liberalisation.

Foreign policy is about nothing if not the advancement and protection of a country's national interests, and if countries like the United States and Australia are to set about helping to promote the further spread of democratic and other human rights in Asia or elsewhere, there have to be good national-interest reasons for us doing so. In practice I do not think these are hard to find.

In the first place, it is certainly arguable that the spread of representative government is helpful in the pursuit and maintenance of international peace and security. The evidence is that democratic governments just do not go to war with each other - with two minor exceptions (involving Finland and the allies in 1941 and Lebanon and Israel in 1948), they have never done so. Perhaps this is because democratic governments are obliged to state clearly and, on the whole, honestly to their citizens, and thus the world, what their national interests are and how they propose to achieve them. Some commentators (e.g. Owen Harries) have recently cautioned against pushing this argument too far - pointing out that, among other things, there have not been until recent decades many democracies against which to test the thesis! But for all that it does seem, to reverse a fine piece of American idealism, that it is not so much a question of making the world safe for democracy, as of democracy's making the world safe.

A second good reason for encouraging the more widespread acceptance of democratic and other human rights is simply that it is good for economic development - both in the country concerned and, by extension, for a world economy which needs all the new growth centres it can find. Democratic rights are not only reconcilable with economic development, but on all available

international evidence, are extremely helpful in achieving it. Sustained, mature economic growth is not possible without urbanisation, education, labour mobility, full and open communication, and the ability of individuals to participate in the range of decisions that affect their own lives. Economic development is about informed choices. Governments need to know what policies will succeed with investors, entrepreneurs and labour. With freedom of information and choice comes efficiency. And these things entail, sooner or later, freedom of political as well as economic choice: autocratic and totalitarian structures are invariably, and conspicuously, ill-at-ease in managing market economies.

A third good reason for societies like ours advancing democratic values in other countries is simply that it helps consolidate those values in our own. One can hardly preach what one is disinclined to practice. But more than that, liberal, democratic societies such as the United States and Australia should not feel bashful about expressing in their foreign policies those values which are at the heart of their sense of being as societies. We do this partly because a safer, more prosperous and more humane world will serve our security, economic and other interests. But we do it also simply because governments and their electors expect it of themselves.

But this, of course, brings us to the heart of the debate. In the hard-nosed pursuit of our economic and strategic interests, and in the articulation of values important to us, should we criticize the system of government of another country? To the extent that we believe that change is in the interests of that country itself - e.g. on economic grounds - do we have the right to tell another country where its own national interests lie? Certainly there are a great many people in Asia who would say that we do not. In Asia, perhaps more than elsewhere - the home of old, sophisticated and very non-European civilisations - there is a perception that the democratic and other human rights propagated by the United States, Australia and others for so long derive from a very different cultural and historical background. And there is a tendency to resent the propagation of these so-called Western values. This is a view that one encounters much more widely than just in the remaining communist countries like China and Vietnam (although I have to say that I have found one of its most robust advocates to be Chinese Premier Li Peng, who asked me, as he no doubt has others, what use was the right to vote for someone sleeping on a New York grating, and what were human rights if they did not embrace shelter and subsistence?).

The best answer to all these questions and criticisms is the language of the UN documents that make up the International Bill of Rights - the UN Charter itself, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966. All of these, without significant divisions as between different categories of rights, have been overwhelmingly endorsed by the international community.

These various instruments make it clear beyond dispute that the will of the people should be the basis of the authority of government, and that this will should be expressed in periodic elections based on universal suffrage and the secret ballot. They also make clear the need for protection of basic rights of expression, association, movement and integrity of the person. While there can and will be argument at the margin about how these various rights should be applied in practice, and with what qualifications, they are all universally applicable rights about the existence of which there can be no reasonable argument. It is difficult to suggest that one is unconscionably interfering in a country's internal affairs when the subject of discussion involves universally accepted values of this kind.

There is certainly no credible argument that can be made on the basis of cultural relativism - namely, the notion that what is good and valuable depends wholly on what is accepted as such in a particular prevailing cultural environment. What some governments articulate as the democratic rights 'appropriate' for their societies are generally not the sort of democratic rights with which all their citizens are content. It is always an instructive exercise to ask not governments, but those denied the rights in question, for their opinion. Indeed, my own experience, in discussions over the years with Asian colleagues and friends from a variety of cultural backgrounds, is that the fundamental, universal nature of the rights set out in the Universal Declaration and related documents is not - when one finally gets down to it - really denied.

All that adds up to the conclusion that fundamental democratic and other human rights of the kind contained in the International Bill of Rights are worth pursuing for their own sake and for the sake of the people of the countries in question - and that a good case can be made for the interests of democratic countries like ours being so engaged. But all that said, there is still a very real question of how best those values should be pursued.

In the first place, it is extremely helpful if any approach made on these questions

occurs within a larger context of engagement with the country in question - so that the approach does not come across as a one-issue obsession, but takes its place as one of a number of dialogue issues. Diplomatic initiatives, defence policy, economic strategies, development assistance, immigration policy, cultural relations, information activities and human contacts generally all inter-react with each other: the task of foreign policy is to ensure that these different dimensions in a bilateral relationship inter-react in a mutually reinforcing way rather than rubbing counter-productively against each other.

Secondly, while in dealing with Asian countries we should not deny our own history, or in any way subordinate our own national values and culture, there is every good reason for making some adjustments of style. It does make sense for Australians and Americans to moderate some of the brashness we might routinely deploy in encounters with each other. It is not a matter of moderating our commitment to the matters of substance involved; rather simply a matter of learning the business of normal neighbourhood civility. The object of raising these issues is not, after all, to appease some domestic constituency of our own or to give us a warm inner glow of self-satisfaction: it is to try and work change on the ground. And nobody listens, let alone being moved to act, when irritated or offended by the way in which a point is being made.

Thirdly, it is a matter of constant emphasising the universality of the democratic and other human rights being pursued. There is an immense attachment among nations to the principles of non-interference in each other's affairs, and to the integrity of national sovereignty - putting it bluntly, to countries minding their own business. But human dignity is inalienable and unchangeable - and that reality is reflected in the United Nations human rights documents of which I have spoken, which have been accepted by the overwhelming majority of the world's nations. It is not a matter of the West 'exporting' democracy: to put it in these terms is to start behind the eight-ball in winning the war of perceptions. It is a matter, rather, of our taking every opportunity to remind those who may have forgotten of the nature of the principles and obligations to which they subscribed in signing the UN Charter and related instruments. It is also a matter of recognising and admitting that we ourselves are all too often considerably less than perfect examples of the application of fundamental human rights to all of the citizens of our own countries, offering our own practices to outside critical scrutiny, and striving to improve them.

One finds, in fact, wide acceptance in developing countries of the universality of

the economic, social and cultural rights enshrined in the International Covenant of that name; the scepticism is rather about the rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. There is some disposition to say that these latter are not universal rights at all, but just an exercise in the imposition of inappropriate Western values - including the emphasis on the individual rather than the collective good - on societies where they have no place. But more often these days the point is made in terms of priorities: political and civil rights may be all very well, the argument goes, but they are meaningless to the starving man. An escape from poverty through economic development is the necessary prerequisite for the application of those rights to participate fully in the political process, to express opinions and freely associate and move about and the like.

In responding to this kind of argument one can only say again and again that the economic success stories of Asia and elsewhere have overwhelmingly been in the non-totalitarian countries, that there is simply no incompatibility in theory or practice between economic development and political freedom, and that advanced economic development depends ever more on a country having in its human resources the kind of flexibility and mobility that comes only in a totally free society.

The final point I would make about how democratic and related values should be advanced by countries like ours in Asia and elsewhere is a corollary to the point about universality. It is crucial that we be absolutely consistent from country to country in making our arguments and representations. Any disposition to adjust one's sights according to the current friendliness of the country in question, or whether its authoritarianism is of the right-wing rather than left-wing kind, is absolutely fatal to our own credibility. Australia tries very hard to honour these principles in our own dealings, both on general policy issues and in relation to specific cases of reported human rights breach: as to the latter, for example, we raised last year 460 human rights cases involving groups or individuals in 82 different countries extending right across the spectrum of our relationships.

Let me spend a few minutes in conclusion putting some of these principles into a little sharper focus by describing what we in Australia have been trying to do recently with China on human rights matters. The shocked disappointment that so many of us felt with the savagery and suddenness of retreat into autocracy with Tiananmen in 1989 led many countries to make China the principal focus of efforts to ensure the observance of human rights in Asia. Both Australia and the

United States moved quickly to impose economic and political restrictions in 1989 in response to the crack-down on democracy that followed the massacre. And in the United States the issue of sanctions is still very much a live one.

But, rather than persist with this approach, which seems to produce at best limited returns, the Australian Government has tried more recently a somewhat different tack. In a visit to China I made in April this year, I negotiated with my counterpart Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, a ten-day visit to Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Tibet by what we chose to call a 'Human Rights Delegation'. The Chinese side preferred throughout to call it an 'Australian Parliamentary Delegation to Discuss Matters of Bilateral Interests including Human Rights' - of such small accommodations is diplomacy made!) The object of the delegation was not so much to report on the total human rights situation now prevailing in China - there have been libraries written on that subject, and we knew our delegation could add in the time available only marginally to the stock of available knowledge. Rather it was essentially to engage the Chinese side - in as many different institutional settings, and with as wide a range of officials as possible - in a constructive dialogue on human rights issues, and to lay the foundation for a continuation of that dialogue in the future.

I did not believe for a moment at the time, and do not now, that the Chinese Government's willingness to host such a delegation was unconnected with its concerns about the MFN debate then being waged in the United States Congress. Unquestionably China wanted to be seen to be doing something on human rights questions, and no doubt considered a visit by a delegation from a country like Australia a reasonably soft option in this respect. Although I knew I risked some domestic criticism along the lines that we were just playing into Chinese hands (and I received it), I saw the opportunity to get a genuine dialogue started as simply too useful and important to responsibly ignore. Let me explain how I think that, in the event, that judgment was vindicated.

Our delegation - which made its visit in June - and has just reported through me to the Australian Parliament - was a very high-powered one. It consisted of three senior Parliamentarians from across the party spectrum (including as delegation leader the Chairman of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade); three Chinese linguists, including a professor of jurisprudence, a former Australian ambassador to Beijing, and a Tibetan scholar; and senior officials from the Human Rights Branch of my Department, and the independent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The delegation's

Chinese hosts discovered very quickly that intended monologue presentations were very quickly subsumed by spirited questioning and debate: this was possibly the most inquisitive single group of foreigners to arrive on Chinese soil since Marco Polo, and was a good deal more knowledgeable before its arrival!

During the course of its visit the delegation urged the Chinese Government to ratify the major international human rights instruments. It discussed frankly with the Chinese authorities the extent of political freedoms, the fate of political dissidents caught up in the crack-down after the Beijing massacre, the human rights situation in Tibet and other concerns. It made representations about nearly two hundred prisoners of conscience, mostly arrested after the pro-democracy demonstrations and the disturbances in Tibet over the last three years, and it obtained for the first time a response on some of these cases.

Despite the enthusiasm and liveliness with which it approached its task, the Australian delegation did its best not to take a confrontational stand in its discussions with the Chinese authorities - and by all accounts, that did not happen. Before and during its visit it took care to understand the Chinese legal, judicial and correctional systems. It took account of, although without accepting at face value, the Chinese perception that Western notions of human rights were not based on Chinese social and historical conditions. It listened carefully to the arguments advanced by the Chinese on the importance of economic rights and the right of a state to restrict political activity, but took every opportunity to say in return that these arguments did not stack up against the universal United Nations principles to which China had subscribed, and were in any event not persuasive on their own terms.

During some very difficult discussions, the delegation argued that political and civil freedoms, with the physical and intellectual flexibility and mobility they involve, were compatible with China's goals of economic and social modernisation. They suggested to the Chinese that a less repressive social and political environment could enhance economic growth and stability. In the end, the delegation managed to conduct a substantive dialogue to the satisfaction of both sides. The Chinese Government - among whom there are elements now unquestionably receptive to the kind of argument made by the delegation - indicated its willingness to keep open this channel of communication and to receive another visit next year formed in the same way on human rights matters.

We need to put these achievements in context. Democratic rights will certainly

not develop in China overnight, although events in Moscow have hopefully made their achievement ever more inevitable. Our efforts to encourage the observance of democratic and other human rights in China must take the long view. But at the very least, by accepting the delegation and engaging in intensive dialogue with it, the Chinese Government has accepted that human and democratic rights are a proper subject for discourse in its bilateral relationships, and have a legitimate place on the international agenda.

I hope that other countries around the world who share our values will build on this Australian experience and set in train dialogue processes of their own, on the basis that the cumulative impact of these kinds of exercises can often amount to much more than the sum of their parts. The approach we adopt to advancing human rights necessarily has to be tailored to the particular circumstances of each particular country with which we deal, but I am absolutely persuaded that our national interests, and the national interests of the countries in question, are thoroughly well served by making these efforts.

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