

# Cross-Party Group on Tibet

Tuesday 30 January 2024, 6:00pm

Minute – Initial Meeting

Present

MSPs

Ross Greer MSP, Collette Stevenson MSP

Invited guests

Merce Monje Cano (UNPO), Dr Fiona McConnell (University of Oxford)

Non-MSP Group Members

Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren (EBR), Tenzin Choekyi (TC), Roger Eames (RE), Cameron Garrett (CG), Drukthar Gyal (DG), Linda Hendry (LH), Martin Mills (MM), Valerie Robertson (VR), Jill Sudbury (JS)

Apologies

Apologies were received from Mercedes Villalba MSP, Rhoda Grant MSP, Jenni Campbell, Tenzin Kunga, Mike Lean, Ron Scrimgeour, Sonam Frasi, Lochoe Samten, Linda Fabiani and Mark Watson.

## 1. Welcome

RG welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted apologies. RG also welcomed the guest speakers: Merce Monje Cano (Secretary General of UNPO, the Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organisation) and Dr Fiona McConnell (University of Oxford and UNPO Advisory Board).

## 2. Approval of Minutes – 27 April 2023

Minutes of the April 2023 meeting were approved.

## 3. Election of Officers

The office bearers were elected as follows:

- Collette Stevenson, Co-Convener – proposed by RG, seconded by MM
- Ross Greer, Co-Convener – proposed by CS, seconded by MM

- Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren, Secretary – proposed by MM, seconded by RG
- Roger Eames, Treasurer – proposed by RG, seconded by EBR

## 4. Chair/Secretary's Review

EBR had circulated a written review to group members with the agenda. The key points were as follows:

The CPGT held three meetings during the 2022/23 session. The first meeting was a non-quorate meeting held on Thursday 27 October 2022. This included a presentation on the succession of the 14th Dalai Lama from well-known Tibet researcher, Kate Saunders. The first formal meeting was held on 15 February 2023 and included the AGM. The meeting also discussed the Sikyong's visit, the Festival of Politics, colonial boarding schools in Tibet, DNA testing in Tibet, de-twinning of UK towns with Chinese towns, the latest news from inside Tibet. The second formal meeting took place on Thursday 27 April. On this occasion the CPGT hosted a visit from Sikyong Penpa Tsering, President of the Central Tibetan Administration. RG initially hosted two drop-in meetings between 2pm and 4pm, which were attended by ACH, EBR, LS and SF from the CPGT as well as by several additional MSPs. A short, formal session was held at 5:30pm, which was chaired by RG. The sole agenda item was a presentation from the Sikyong followed by Q&A.

RG asked EBR and CS what their highlights from the previous year were and both mentioned the Sikyong's visit. RG highlighted the Financial Times interview with the Sikyong (<https://www.ft.com/content/1268a5de-1344-419b-a893-6d9feecdc5d>).

EBR noted that she had received a question from RS via email asking whether the CPGT should write to the Presiding Officer to ask for a more detailed explanation of their decision not to meet with the Sikyong, given that the Westminster Speaker had done so. RG confirmed that a letter had already been drafted and would be circulated to CS and EBR for review.

RG also noted it was an achievement that the CPGT was still active and thanked all the members for making this possible.

## 5. Treasurer's Report

The opening balance for this session is £230.02. RE thanked the group members who had provided donations over the course of the year. The Accounts were passed unanimously with thanks to the treasurer.

## 6. Matters Arising

It was agreed that the previously suggested letter to Angus Robertson regarding colonial boarding schools in Tibet was still relevant and should be finalised.

It was agreed that MM would draft a briefing paper on the Dalai Lama's succession. EBR and JS offered to help.

EBR noted that the international campaign on DNA testing had been successful and Thermo Fisher had recently announced an end to all sales of DNA testing kits for use in Tibet.

RG noted that CG had conducted further research into the use of Chinese surveillance equipment in Scotland and that the Scottish Greens would soon be in a position to publish the findings.

During the discussion about report publication, it was agreed that the CPGT should coordinate with Tibet Watch in order to avoid any publication clashes.

## 7. Campaign Update

EBR provided a brief update on China's Universal Periodic Review, which recently concluded at the UN. The advocacy work conducted by Tibet groups around the world over the last few years had resulted in a significant increase in the number of nation states speaking up for human rights in Tibet. 21 governments directly mentioned concerns over human rights in Tibet, resulting in a total of 25 recommendations. This is more than double the 11 recommendations on Tibet issued by nine states at China's last UPR in 2018, and a massive increase on the four states that raised Tibet at China's first UPR in 2009.

## 8. Tibet News Update

TC provided a summary of interviews which Tibet Watch had conducted over the past year with 13 recently arrived refugees from Tibet. The number of new arrivals from Tibet has been very low over the past decade or so and opportunities to carry out substantive interviews are rare. So far, Tibet Watch is the only organisation to have published content from interviews with the latest group of arrivals.

TC noted that the interviews had included detailed testimonies of torture and other detention conditions. She was unable to share personal details of any of the interviewees but noted that the youngest interviewee was eight years old.

Most of the key issues arising from the interviews were linked to education:

- Children in colonial boarding schools are losing their ability to speak their mother tongue and addressing their parents in Chinese on the few occasions when they allowed to visit home.
- Children of people who are known to have been involved in protests are being discriminated against at school.
- The simplest Buddhist symbols are forbidden in Chinese run schools, including the blessed red threads that many Tibetans wear.
- Groups that exist to promote or protect the Tibetan language are being classed as "underworld forces" and included in the crackdown on supposedly subversive activities. This includes a prohibition on tutoring in Tibetan language.
- Restrictions on monasteries mean that trainee monks are having to study in secret or use subterfuge to access a monastic education.

In addition to the education concerns, it was noted that nomadic displacement is still widespread and many Tibetans are being forced to install apps on their phones that facilitate government surveillance. Tibetans are also being forced to participate in border patrols.

## 9. UNPO Presentation

MMC provided an introduction to UNPO's work and some of the issues faced by member nations. Notable points included the involvement of Tibetans (Lodi Gyari) and Uyghurs in the founding of the organisation. Michael Van Walt, who serves as international law advisor to the Dalai Lama, was also involved and remains on UNPO's Advisory Board.

## 10. AOB

EBR noted that 10<sup>th</sup> March coincided with Mother's Day this year, which might make it more difficult for some people to attend any events. She added that she had not yet spoken to the Tibetan community about what they wanted to do this year and would revert to the group with details once she'd been able to have that conversation. RG and CS agreed to provide a video message for use either online or at an event.

MM suggested inviting someone from the Norwegian Tibet Council to speak at the next meeting and tell us how they succeeded in convincing the Norwegian government to speak up for Tibet at China's UPR for the first time. This was unanimously agreed.

## 11. Action Point Summary

- EBR to complete annual registration form with details of elected officers.
- RG/CG to circulate letter to PO.
- EBR and CS to draft letter to Angus Robertson re colonial boarding schools.
- MM to draft briefing paper on Dalai Lama's succession (JS and EBR to help).
- RG/CG to circulate details of surveillance research once available.
- MM to invite representative from Norway Tibet Council to next meeting.
- EBR to circulate details of 10th March activity once agreed with Tibetan community.
- EBR to circulate the date of the next meeting once agreed with RG and CS. It is expected to be in May.