



STAND UP FOR TIBET

Tibet Lobby 2017

Background to Ask 1: Meeting the Dalai Lama and the Sikyong

Ask Prime Minister Theresa May to meet the Dalai Lama and the Sikyong publicly when they next visit the UK, and by doing so send a strong message to the Chinese leadership that the UK is serious at finding a peaceful solution to the Tibet issue.

Background – the Dalai Lama and the Sikyong

The Dalai Lama is the most senior figure in Tibetan Buddhism. The 14th and current Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso, who has lived in exile in Dharamsala, northern India, since 1959, when he was forced to flee occupied Tibet. For generations, the Dalai Lama has also been the head of state of Tibet.

The current Dalai Lama gave up his political role in 2011 and since then has been a purely religious figure. He nevertheless remains a strong and charismatic representative for Tibet and advocate for human rights for its people. For the past three decades he has advocated the 'Middle Way' approach as a way of resolving the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The Middle Way proposes genuine autonomy for all Tibetan regions of the People's Republic of China, rather than full Tibetan statehood.

The Sikyong is the democratically-elected political leader of the Tibetan people, fulfilling a role equivalent to Prime Minister. The Sikyong is head of the Central Tibetan Administration, the Tibetan government in exile, based in Dharamsala. The current Sikyong is Dr Lobsang Sangay, who was re-elected to this position in the 2016 Tibetan elections. He fully supports the Middle Way approach.

The importance of meeting the Dalai Lama and the Sikyong

Meeting the Dalai Lama and the highest representative of the Tibetan government in exile will demonstrate the United Kingdom's ongoing commitment to talks between China and the CTA. These talks are a crucial step towards resolving the occupation of Tibet and accompanying human rights abuses.

Chinese pressure on foreign governments

The Chinese government routinely presses governments around the world not to meet with the Dalai Lama or even permit him a visa to enter their country. In 2016 the governments of Slovakia and Mongolia, two countries with extensive trade links with China, were threatened with political and economic penalties after hosting the Dalai Lama. Both governments quickly issued apologies.

Nevertheless, the political and economic consequences can be overestimated. Following meetings between former Prime Minister David Cameron and then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg with the Dalai Lama in 2012, diplomatic relations between the UK and China were reported to be “in the deep freeze”. In fact, trade between the UK and China increased during this period. China requires trade as much as any other country, a point made by President Xi Jinping in January 2017, when he stressed the importance of free trade to China at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Past UK government meetings with the Dalai Lama and Sikyong

Every British Prime Minister since John Major has met with the Dalai Lama. The Sikyong addressed parliament in November 2016, where he was welcomed by the Speaker of the House. A meeting between Prime Minister May and the Dalai Lama and the Sikyong would be a continuation of British policy rather than a break from it.

1 November 2016: The Sikyong gave a briefing at the Houses of Parliament and met with the Speaker of the House of Commons.

14 May 2013: Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy PM Nick Clegg met the Dalai Lama in London.

23 May 2008: Prime Minister Gordon Brown met the Dalai Lama at Lambeth Palace.

2 June 2004: The Dalai Lama addressed the Scottish Parliament.

May 1999: Prime Minister Tony Blair, Secretary of State Robin Cook and Prince Charles held separate meetings with the Dalai Lama in London.

2 December 1991: Prime Minister John Major met the Dalai Lama at Number 10.

Past UK government meetings with other leaders in exile or non-UN states

Meeting the Dalai Lama and Sikyong would also fit a wider pattern of meetings between the UK government and leaders who are either in exile or who head states or territories that do not have full UN membership. The UK government will recognise that, also controversial, meetings with such leaders are crucial to resolving the disputes over the countries and territories concerned.

November 2016: President of Northern Cyprus Mustafa Akıncı received Secretary of State Boris Johnson.

May 2014: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas met David Cameron at 10 Downing Street.

March 2014: Mahmoud Abbas and David Cameron gave a joint press conference in Jerusalem.

June 2013: The Prime Minister of Republic of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi, met Secretary of State William Hague.

December 2010: President of Somaliland Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud visited the UK.

March 2009: Masoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, had a four day visit to the UK, meeting with the Duke of York, David Miliband, Jack Straw, John Hutton and William Hague.

Past meetings between other governments and the Dalai Lama or Sikyong

The Dalai Lama and Sikyong have also held numerous meetings with world leaders in the USA and Europe, all of which retain strong trade or diplomatic relations with China.

Barack Obama met the Dalai Lama four times during his presidency (**2016, 2014, 2011, and 2010**)

23 November 2016: The Sikyong met Canadian MPs including Ms Rona Ambrose, leader of the opposition.

16 October 2016: The Dalai Lama met with the president of Slovakia, Andrej Kiska.

15 September 2016: The Dalai Lama addressed the Council of Europe and European Parliament.

4 March 2016: The Dalai Lama met U.S. Speaker Paul Ryan.

12 July 2015: The Dalai Lama met Claudia Roth, Vice President of the German Parliament.

June 2014: The Sikyong met with Speaker of the House John Boehner, House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, and House Republican Leader Eric Cantor.

14 May 2014: The Dalai Lama met Frans Timmermans, Foreign Minister of The Netherlands.

March 2014: The Dalai Lama and Sikyong delivered opening prayer at U.S. Congress, spoke with House leaders and addressed Members of Congress.

23 October 2013: The Dalai Lama met Donald Tusk, Prime Minister of Poland.

26 May 2012: The Dalai Lama met Werner Faymann, Chancellor of Austria.

27 April 2012: The Dalai Lama met Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper.

12 April 2012: The Dalai Lama met Pratibha Patil, President of India.

11 December 2011: The Dalai Lama met Karel Schwarzenberg, Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic.

9 September 2011: The Dalai Lama met Felipe Calderon, President of Mexico.

6 December 2008: The Dalai Lama met French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

17 October 2007: The Dalai Lama was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by U.S. Congress, in the presence of George W. Bush.

23 September 2007: German Chancellor Angela Merkel met with the Dalai Lama in the Chancellery.



UK policy on Tibet

The UK government's policy on Tibet was last stated in Parliament on 18 June 2015 by Hugo Swire, then Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Mr Swire said, "It is the clear position of the British Government that Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China, and that we do not support Tibetan independence".

The phrase "not supporting Tibetan independence" has crept into the UK policy on Tibet in recent years. Previously, when stating its policy, the UK government has called on China to "recognise the genuine autonomy of Tibet" and "enter into negotiations with representatives of the Dalai Lama". These points seem to be now less in favour, if not dropped completely.

There is no apparent need for the UK government to state it "does not support Tibetan independence" other than to appease the Chinese government, given the policy already recognises China's sovereignty over Tibet. In fact, it may harm the right to freedom of expression of Tibetans, as the Chinese authorities could see it as tacit support for their practice of punishing Tibetans who dare to speak out against China's rule.

Further recommendations

- The UK government should re-commit to calling for immediate and unconditional negotiations between Chinese and Tibetan representatives to find a peaceful resolution over the future of Tibet.
- The UK government should promptly and strongly speak out when other nations are put under economic and political pressure by China not to meet with the Dalai Lama and Sikyong.
- The UK Government should remove "does not support Tibetan independence" from its policy on Tibet. The policy should clearly call on China to allow genuine autonomy for Tibet and call for meaningful dialogue with Tibetan representatives.