

Setting a Path for the Future: Tibet Advocacy in Canada 2016-2019

Meeting Report

September 26, 2015
Montreal, Canada



Meeting participants gather for a group photo

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to better coordinate the political advocacy efforts of the Tibetan community in Canada, the Board of Directors of the Canada Tibet Committee (CTC) invited representatives of Tibet Associations from across the country to join them for a one-day discussion in Montreal. The purpose of the discussion was to inform our Directors about the points of view and priorities of Tibetans living in Canada and to seek feedback on proposed objectives for a new three year strategic plan designed to lead the CTC forward after the 2015 federal election.

The draft text of the strategic plan was circulated to participants one month before the meeting and a revised version based on comments received served as the meeting discussion document. The meeting agenda combined consideration of the draft plan with guest presentations on related issues. The meeting prioritized time for discussion and debate. This report is a summary of the guest presentations and the key issues that emerged from discussion.

On the day following the meeting, the CTC Board of Directors met to review outcomes, to amend sections of the draft strategic plan accordingly, and to adopt the CTC Strategic Plan 2016-2019 with the amendments.

SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE CTC STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

Speaker: Carole Samdup, Executive Director, Canada Tibet Committee¹

The Executive Director provided an overview of the nine-month planning process led by the Board of Directors. The process began with a literature review and was supplemented by external consultations with Tibetan and non-Tibetan stakeholders. Opportunities and challenges were evaluated in response to four sectoral reviews that had been commissioned by the Board (operations, communications, government relations, and campaigns). Conclusions of a Parliamentary Roundtable hosted by the CTC in Ottawa in April 2015 were taken into consideration.² In addition, an external fundraising needs assessment commissioned by the Board of Directors influenced final decisions. The Directors hosted this meeting with Tibetan community representatives in Canada to share outcomes of the planning process and to seek input about their priorities and expectations for national Tibet advocacy.

¹ The full power-point presentation is available upon request.

² Parliamentary Roundtable on Tibet: Meeting report, Canada Tibet Committee, May 15, 2015, http://tibet.ca/en/library/media_releases/373

Technical consultations with external stakeholders took place by email and/or telephone. Policy-oriented consultations with Tibetan-Canadians were held via a multiple-choice electronic survey sent to more than 80 young Tibetans in cities across Canada. Of the more than 50 who responded, 60% felt that the CTC's primary responsibility is lobbying for Tibet in Ottawa. Of the lobbying objectives suggested, promotion of the "Middle Way Approach" was the top choice among respondents.

Tibetans who responded to the survey felt strongly that the CTC should create an advisory committee to facilitate their participation in its activities and that the CTC should make efforts to build its presence at the local level either through a system of representation or via regular visits by CTC staff and Directors.

Samdup introduced the "Monitoring and Evaluation Framework" as a companion document for the strategic plan. The MEF details specific activities and campaigns designed to achieve the objectives. The MEF is designed to be an iterative document that will be reviewed and revised as needed.

Discussion: Participants debated the strategic importance of Tibet support groups in relation to the advocacy agenda of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and that of Tibet Associations. They also considered the appropriate relationship between the CTA and support groups. While supporting pluralism and the importance of diversity, concerns were expressed regarding multiple, often conflicting, priorities among various Tibet groups in Canada which has resulted in poorly coordinated public messaging. Participants discussed how advocacy approaches might change should there be a new government following the federal election in October 2015.

SESSION TWO: BUILDING SUPPORT FOR THE MIDDLE WAY APPROACH

Guest speaker: a Tibetan currently studying in Tibet

Speaking via the Internet, a special guest speaker provided insights from inside Tibet. The speaker has lived several years in Tibet. She described her personal observations about the political and social priorities of Tibetans living in Tibet.

The speaker has observed that most Tibetans in Tibet are not preoccupied with the country's political status and that, practically-speaking, they don't view the Central Tibetan Administration as their representative. Speaking about such issues carries significant risk inside Tibet which has resulted in a chill effect. She added that there is virtually no overt discussion about the merits of the middle way versus independence, and that most Tibetans do not believe either objective is likely to be achieved.

What Tibetans seek instead, the speaker explained, is a relaxation of the policies of control that limit every aspect of personal development. In particular, she highlighted the prevalence of systemic racism that affects every aspect of daily life and which has had negative impacts on the economic well-being of Tibetans and their ability to enjoy cultural traditions including religious traditions. The speaker suggested that the primary immediate needs of Tibetans in Tibet are access to higher education and elimination of discriminatory social policies.

The speaker offered three recommendations to Tibet groups in western countries: prioritize access to education as an advocacy campaign; foster closer collaboration between Tibet community associations and Tibet Support Groups and reject the growing split in their agendas; improve understanding about China and the Chinese personality in order to develop alliances with Chinese people beyond the intellectual community.

Discussion: An engaged discussion followed the guest presentation. The risks and opportunities of adopting a focus around the specific elements of autonomy (as presented in the Middle Way Approach) were debated. Some CTC representatives expressed reservations about endorsing the MWA, some were completely opposed to the idea, while others supported it. All of the Tibet Association representatives at the meeting supported it. Various alternative wording was debated including “autonomy” and “self-determination”. Self-determination was viewed as too sensitive in the Canadian context, while autonomy was considered to be too vague. The Directors took all comments under advisement.

SESSION THREE: CONSOLIDATE THE CTC AS A SELF-SUSTAINING ORGANIZATION Guest Speaker: Luisa Durante, CTC Director and Treasurer³

Board member Luisa Durante provided an historical overview of the CTC’s fundraising successes/failures, and she described current objectives of the Board of Directors as well as funding opportunities currently under consideration. She reviewed the changing dynamic confronting NGOs in 2015, including Tibet-related NGOs. She also summarized the changing demographics and priorities of the Tibet diaspora at large and in Canada. Durante also addressed the ethical concerns about government and/or private funding.

Discussion: In the discussion following Durante’s presentation, participants raised concerns about the capacity of the CTC to undertake the activities outlined in the strategic plan without adequate funding. They also questioned the CTC’s ability to manage the suite of fundraising activities required to sustain the organization. There was debate about the declining commitment

³ The full power-point presentation is available upon request.

to volunteerism and its impact on Tibet advocacy in Canada. Representatives of Tibet Associations cautioned that there are numerous demands on their limited resources, including the current immigration program. Despite such concerns, participants felt strongly that Canada needs its own national advocacy organization to lobby for the Tibet issue in Ottawa and that the CTC should not close its doors. The majority also felt that it would not be helpful to merge the CTC with an organization based outside of Canada.

SESSION FOUR: ENHANCE TIBETAN PARTICIPATION IN THE CTC

Guest speaker: Thubten Samdup, CTC founding President, former North American Chitue, former Representative of the Dalai Lama in UK

Samdup described the origins of the CTC and its alignment with the Tibetan community as a founding principle of the organization. He reviewed several notable achievements that were the result of collaboration between Tibetans and non-Tibetan supporters. He emphasized that the CTC must attract new ideas and new people to the Tibetan cause, particularly from amongst the thousands of new Tibetans who have come to Canada in the past ten years. In conclusion, Samdup emphasized that the best formula for success is one in which Tibetans and non-Tibetans work *together* for the cause and that the structural divide that has evolved in recent years between Tibet Associations and Tibet Support Groups, must be eliminated.

Discussion: The representatives of Tibet Associations were receptive to the idea of closer collaboration with the CTC however they cautioned that community leaders are often elected based on specific qualities – for example because they speak Tibetan well or because they have a specific knowledge of cultural traditions. These are not necessarily skills that would respond to CTC needs. Some Tibet Associations have regulations limiting Board involvement with other Tibet-related organizations, while ex-officio Board appointments are prohibited under CTC procedures. However, some formal collaborative mechanism might improve communication and joint strategic planning. It was noted, also that Tibetan communities face significant financial demands of their own and there are scarce resources for other purposes.

The representatives of Tibet Associations alerted the Board that most of their members know very little about what the CTC does or what it has done in the past. It was agreed that Thubten Samdup would travel to various cities to speak in Tibetan language to community members. It was also agreed that an annual face-to-face meeting will build a culture of collaboration between the CTC and Tibet Associations. It was suggested that Tibet associations be invited to nominate Board members to the CTC. Participants concluded that this meeting in Montreal had been a positive first step in our dialogue and that efforts should be made to maintain relations, particularly after the federal election.

CONCLUSION

Participants appreciated the opportunity to meet and discuss coordination of Tibet advocacy in Canada. There was agreement that Canada needs a dedicated organization for this purpose and that a unified approach will improve effectiveness in Ottawa. Representatives of Tibet Associations agreed to work collaboratively in future and to discuss issues raised during the meeting within their executive committees. The CTC promised to improve communication with Tibet Associations across Canada, and to facilitate at least one joint activity, two joint letters, and another face-to-face meeting in 2016.

The meeting concluded with a dinner kindly provided by the Tibetan Cultural Association of Quebec.

PARTICIPANT LIST

1. CTC Board of Directors:
Hon. Consiglio DiNino (Chair); Dr. Mati Bernabei (Vice Chair); Raymond Yee (Secretary); Luisa Durante (Treasurer); Dr. Lara Braitstein
2. CTC Staff:
Carole Samdup (Executive Director); JoAnn Dionne (Regional Representative Victoria); Tenzing Musu (Donor Relations Coordinator); Marley Morris (Database Coordinator); Thubten Samdup (President Emeritus)
3. Tibet Associations:
Pema Lekstog (Executive Committee, Tibetan Association of Alberta); Nyima Latristang (President, Tibetan Cultural Association of Quebec); Sonam Lankar (President, Tibetan Cultural Association of Ontario); Tashi Lhundup (Board member, CTAO); Tensin Norsang (Board member, CTAO); Kalsang Dolker (Board member, CTAO); Floriane Tsering (Ottawa Tibetan Community Association).

**** NOTE ****

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