

Canadian Youth Engagement for Tibet

Project Report

June 2016



As part of an initiative to encourage youth engagement for Tibet, the Canada Tibet Committee launched an exchange project between its 2016 research interns and the 2016 parliamentary interns hosted by the Parliamentary Friends of Tibet. The exchange took place in two parts – the first during a parliamentary roundtable in Ottawa, and the second as a day-long workshop in Montreal.

INTRODUCTION

As part of an initiative to encourage youth engagement for Tibet, the Canada Tibet Committee (CTC) launched an exchange project between its 2016 research interns and the 2016 parliamentary interns hosted annually by the Parliamentary Friends of Tibet (PFT). The exchange took place in two parts – the first during a parliamentary roundtable in Ottawa (June 8, 2016) and the second as a day-long workshop in Montreal (June 13, 2016). Outcomes of the exchange included commitments for ongoing collaboration.

- **The Parliamentary Friends of Tibet Internship Program**

The annual program offers young Tibetans living in Canada an opportunity to learn, through first-hand experience, how Canada's system of government functions. Under the guidance of a Member of Parliament, the interns participate in parliamentary processes and develop job skills for the future. Over a six week period, each PFT intern is tasked with routine office duties and encouraged to engage a specific project of their choice, for example to follow a Committee debate or draft Tibet-related statements.

This year, the PFT internship program was coordinated through the office of PFT Chair Arif Virani. The four candidates selected were: Sherap Therchin (placed with MP Arif Virani, Liberal Party); Tenzin Chemi (placed with MP James Maloney, Liberal Party); Tsewang Rinzin (placed with MP Randall Garrison, New Democratic Party); and Sangay Tsering (placed with MP Garnett Genuis, Conservative Party).

- **The CTC Research Internship Program**

For the second year, the CTC welcomed university students who expressed an interest in contributing towards the Tibet cause. The selected students were offered an opportunity to work with the Executive Director on a research a topic of his or her choice. The only requirement is that the topic be relevant to goals set out in the CTC strategic plan. The research team is encouraged to work collaboratively, to establish a common report structure, and to identify opportunities to share their final reports with other interest groups.

This year, the research team will develop recommendations for the Government of Canada on various elements of Tibetan autonomy that find common cause in the Canadian experience. These elements include environmental protection, cultural rights and religious freedom, and economic rights. The team includes Max Honigmann (Concordia University), Manon Tsering (McGill University), and Ty Cary (McGill University).

PART ONE: Parliamentary Roundtable (Ottawa)

To mark the conclusion of the PFT internship program, the 2016 interns organized a “Lhakar” event on Parliament Hill including a panel discussion on youth engagement (the literal translation is “white Wednesday” but for Tibetans Lhakar represents an expression of non-cooperation). Tibetan community leaders from Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa participated in the

event which was hosted by the PFT Chair and Co-Chairs. MPs attended the reception and later mingled with guests while enjoying traditional Tibetan snacks provided by Ottawa's Tibetan community.



The panel on youth engagement was introduced by **Thubten Samdup**, CTC founding president, former Chitue for North America (1991-1996) and Representative of the Dalai Lama in the United Kingdom (2009-2014). Samdup emphasized the importance of youth involvement in the Tibetan struggle reminding participants that the current Tibetan leadership is aging and young people must pick up the mantle. He urged adoption of new strategies based on the changing global context adding that repeating failed approaches of the past will not yield results. He emphasized the importance of reaching out beyond the Tibetan “bubble” to engage with non-Tibetans.

The **PFT interns** offered their views and insights developed over the course of the internship experience. A common theme was the importance of higher (university-level) education as the first priority. They emphasized that in order to contribute adequately to the Tibetan political struggle, it is imperative that young Tibetans communicate in the public sphere as professionals representing various academic disciplines. Sherap expressed concern that for many young Tibetans in India and Nepal, the first objective is to immigrate to the west where they often work in low-paying jobs to send money back to families, giving up the goal of higher education. Tenzin agreed adding that this happens despite the fact that the first priority of Tibetan parents is for their children to be educated. Both Tsewang and Sangay worried that respect for Tibet's cultural heritage is lacking among youth and as a result many young Tibetans in the west do not make sufficient effort to speak or write their own language. Tenzin suggested that lack of a peer group for many young Tibetans in the west contributes to this problem and that new ways of building community should be found.

The **CTC interns** described their reasons for supporting the Tibetan cause and why Tibet is relevant in their lives. They spoke about being attracted first by Tibetan religion and culture and how that attraction led to their involvement in political issues. For this reason, they agree with the PFT interns that young Tibetans must actively engage their unique culture. Ty added that many of the challenges faced by Tibetans inside Tibet today, such as climate change and lack of religious freedom, are issues widely discussed in universities. He believes there is a broad audience for Tibet outside of the Tibetan community and that this audience can be tapped by working on cross-cutting themes. Max agreed with Ty's comments adding that commentaries about human rights in China in the Canadian media, and the possibility of a free trade agreement with China are topics that resonate with Canadians. Therefore young people should be prepared to engage those discussions in order to capture new support for the Tibetan cause. Manon described her own personal experience growing up in Hong Kong, explaining that Hong Kong

youth are increasingly engaged in political issues because of their own recent experiences and that there is potential to build alliances with Chinese youth activists.

Ms. **Dicki Chhoyang**, former Minister for International Relations of the Central Tibetan Administration (2011-2016), responded to the panelist comments by encouraging young people to work together to identify innovative ways of promoting the Tibetan issue here in Canada. She said there are many issues that find common ground between Tibetans and Canadians. For example, she pointed out that Canada shares common objectives on climate change, women's rights and the preservation of cultural heritage. She also highlighted Canadian policies on indigenous communities saying there are lessons to be learned from the Canadian approach to matters such as land policy and resource sharing.¹ Ms. Chhoyang encouraged MPs present in the room to work across party lines and to coordinate their activities with both Tibetan organizations and Canadian Tibet supporters in order to maximize impact and achieve targeted strategic goals.

PART TWO: Exchange workshop (Montreal)

Part two of the youth engagement initiative comprised a day-long exchange workshop held in Montreal. The workshop agenda allowed a more informal and in-depth follow-up to the Ottawa roundtable panel discussion. The event also welcomed presentations from invited guests.



The morning discussion began with an **overview of research being done by the CTC interns**. Max kicked off the presentations describing his efforts to better understand the Tibetan vision of political autonomy by breaking down the larger concept into its basic elements and mapping out specific benchmarks. Max has found that several elements within the Tibetan administration's Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy² are also relevant in the Canadian context such as language and cultural policies. He hopes that by highlighting these issues his research will

encourage Canadian politicians to press China for a change of its policies in Tibet.

Manon presented preliminary outcomes of her research on cultural rights. She has also discovered that many of the challenges faced by Tibetans seeking to freely enjoy their cultural traditions are closely related to contemporary struggles in Canada and therefore China may view Canada as an appropriate interlocutor on these matters. Manon has decided to focus her research on the impact of tourism and migration on cultural identity in Tibet. She also intends to identify ways in which women experience gender-specific challenges. Manon believes that these issues

¹ For example, see: <http://mappingtheway.ca/our-agreements>

² The Memorandum can be downloaded at: <http://tibet.net/important-issues/sino-tibetan-dialogue/memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>

will resonate with university students and potentially attract a wider audience of young people to the Tibet movement.

Ty provided an overview of the many ecological challenges that have surfaced in the course of his research. He has selected three focus issues for his paper: water; land; and climate. Like Max and Manon, Ty believes these issues will find resonance with the Canadian public and politicians alike. His approach will be to highlight Canadian best practice – for example the past agreement between the Government of Quebec and the Cree Nation which determined a profit sharing scheme for hydro development on Cree land.³ He also pointed out that Canada and China have signed several of same international environmental agreements which may offer opportunities for Canada to engage China about its policies in Tibet.

The **PFT interns shared their perspectives** on the challenges of Tibet advocacy in Canada and the lessons learned from their parliamentary internship experience. Tenzin began by expressing her surprise upon learning how little most Canadian parliamentarians know about Tibet. She realizes that even the very basic facts have to be explained. At the same time, she was unprepared for the fast pace on the Hill and came to understand that MPs must deal with many different issues in the course of a day's work. For that reason, she believes that keeping the Tibet issue alive in parliament is a significant challenge. MPs face multiple competing priorities and they hesitate to take up sensitive political issues. Moreover, most MPs give priority to constituency-based projects and associated areas of interest.

Sangey described his internship as a productive and engaging learning process. He was fortunate to be able to participate in committee hearings with his MP and to contribute text for questions submitted by his MP related to the situation of Tibetans in Nepal. He was given an opportunity to follow the parliamentary debate on Bill C-14 (assisted dying) and drafted questions to guide interventions on the issue by his MP. Sangey felt that he learned a lot from his internship experience. With respect to working on the Tibetan cause here in Canada, Sangey believes that youth should find ways to engage young people inside Tibet, not only other youth in exile.

Tsewang said that his internship experience provided an opportunity to develop two Tibet-advocacy initiatives. Taking the lead from proposed U.S legislation on reciprocal access to Tibet⁴, he drafted an "Order Paper Question" to be submitted to Government by his MP. The question requests information about Canadian diplomatic access to Tibet and the access provided by the Government of Canada to Chinese or Tibetan officials from Tibet.⁵ The Government must respond to the question within 45 days. Tsewang also prepared an e-petition that is currently posted on the Parliament of Canada website.⁶ The petition will be used by Tibet campaigners to encourage Prime Minister Trudeau to seek the release of the Panchen Lama during his visit to China in early September.

³ For a copy of the agreement, see: <http://www.gcc.ca/pdf/Cree-Quebec-Governance-Agreement-signed.pdf>

⁴ The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2015 is currently pending in the US Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/1112>

⁵ The order paper question #337 (June 15, 2017) is found at: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?Pub=NoticeOrder&File=9>

⁶ Sign petition #e-431 before October 18, 2016 at: <https://petitions.parl.gc.ca/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-431>

Sherap's presentation shared his academic research about Tibetan innovation and entrepreneurship. Sherap feels that lessons from his research are relevant for the political struggle because it concludes that Tibetan youth haven't adequately capitalized on the education they have received. As an example, he points to the than 400 young Tibetans, many of them university graduates, who have been working in Ontario Food Terminal at minimum wage for more than 4 years. He also noted Tibetan dependency on remittances which simply encourages continuation of the west immigration/low level job syndrome. Sherap believes that Tibetans in India and Nepal should be more innovative in seeking new livelihood opportunities. To encourage innovation among youth, he suggested potential mechanisms that could be put in place by the Tibetan government and supporting organizations, such as peer-to-peer lending, a community bank, expansion of the Tibetan Entrepreneurship Development (TED) initiative⁷, and construction of a crowd-funding platform.

During the **lively discussion that followed** the intern presentations, several questions were raised and discussed including: the debate about Tibetan autonomy vs. independence; use of the "greater Tibet" vs. "Tibet" terminology; the value of emphasizing human rights in campaigning; and how to approach the sensitivity around self-immolations.

- **Guest presentations**

Julia Stenzel is currently working towards her PhD in Tibetan Buddhism at McGill University. She congratulated the interns and said she hoped such interaction and reflection would continue. Julia explained that she has attended many conferences about Tibetan religion, language and culture but that very few participants are Tibetan. She therefore encourages young Tibetans to study their own religion and cultural traditions, and to actively engage efforts to preserve its traditions. She encouraged young Tibetans to take up the intellectual challenges of higher learning and to become expert spokespeople of their own history and cultural traditions.

Sangye Dhondup is a student of contemporary Tibetan literature and a recent immigrant to Canada. Dhondup suggested that attitudes inside Tibet differ substantially from attitudes in the diaspora. He described people in Tibet as less concerned about political issues and more concerned about day-to-day survival and livelihoods. He said the influx of Chinese migrant workers is a significant challenge for Tibetan identity because migrants do not understand Tibetan history and traditions, yet they dominate the work force reducing employment opportunities for Tibetans. For young people facing these realities in Tibet today, higher education and being free to practice their religion are the two most important things, he said.

Sushil Handa is the China officer for Amnesty International Canada (francophone section). He introduced AI as an independent non-governmental organization whose mandate is based on the principles enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. AI does not accept any government funding. AI advocates on behalf of prisoners of conscience including those inside Tibet through letter-writing and other actions. AI is part of the *Canadian Coalition on Human Rights in China* which submits an annual prisoner list to Global Affairs Canada and meets regularly with Canadian officials to discuss current human rights challenges in China.

⁷ For more information about TED, see: <http://tibetanentrepreneurs.org/>

Carole Samdup, currently the Executive Director of the Canada Tibet Committee, provided an overview of the UN human rights system, its structures and operating principles. She described the essential components of the human rights framework, its core treaties, the nature of state obligations, and the special procedures operating under authority of the Human Rights Council. She also provided examples of how the Tibet movement has used these various mechanisms in the past to compel responses from China on issues including the Panchen Lama, nomadic resettlement, development policies, religious freedom, and women's rights.

CONCLUSION

Thubten Samdup offered closing words of the day encouraging young people, both Tibetan and non-Tibetan, to continue their efforts on behalf of Tibet. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama grows older, he said, it falls to the younger generation to keep Tibet on the agenda of world leaders. He said that beyond our political objectives, it is also important in this day and age to promote non-violent struggle which is a central message of the Dalai Lama. Tibet has been a prime example of non-violent struggle for more than sixty years, and yet it has not been able to win the political support it needs to effect change. If the peaceful Tibet struggle ultimately fails, he asked, can non-violence ever be considered a relevant principle in international relations? Or will the international community accept that violence is the only way to achieve results? Young Tibetans and Canadians engaged for Tibet should remember this added dimension to their struggle.

OUTCOMES and CONCLUSIONS

1. The CTC should be more engaged in the PFT internship program and its follow-up activities, sharing advocacy strategies and coordinating parliamentary outreach activities.
2. Improved collaboration between young Tibetans and non-Tibetans in Canada is essential to build parliamentary support for Tibet. For example, participants in the exchange program should continue to share information about the various ongoing projects that have resulted from their internships.
3. Universities offer an excellent environment for reinvigoration of the public discourse on Tibet, including through efforts to engage Chinese students in Canada.
4. Young Tibetans in Canada should develop expertise on issues that will keep Tibet relevant for the Government of Canada. Examples include the expected Canada-China Free Trade Agreement, the ongoing climate change negotiations, and the Beijing Olympics in 2022.
5. Tibetan communities in Canada should encourage the development of Tibetan identity through language and other programs designed for Tibetan youth between ages of 16-30.

PARTICIPANTS

MPs present at Ottawa roundtable:

Arif Virani (LPC); James Maloney (LPC); Randall Garrison (NDP); Garnett Genuis (CPC); Elisabeth May (GPC); Pierre Nantel (NDP); Sven Spengemann (LPC); David Sweet (CPC); David Anderson (CPC); Michael Levitt (LPC)

Community spokespeople at Ottawa roundtable:

Tsering Dolkar (Canadian Tibetan Association of Ontario); Tenzin Jigme (Ottawa Tibetan Community Association); Namgyal Dolma (Tibetan Cultural Association of Quebec); Norbu Tsering (former North American Member of the Tibetan Parliament in exile)

Other guests at Ottawa roundtable:

Intern host families; Sonam Chokey (Students for Free Tibet); Carole Samdup (Canada Tibet Committee); Dicky Chhoyang (former Minister of International Relations, CTA); Thubten Samdup (former Representative of the Dalai Lama in UK); Tashi Wangdi (former Minister of International Relations, CTA); Gayle Turner (Agriteam Canada)

Resource speakers at Montreal workshop:

Julia Stenzel (McGill University); Sangye Dhondup (recent immigrant to Canada); Sushil Handa (Amnesty International Canada, francophone section)

PFT interns:

Sherap Therchin (Queen's University); Tenzin Chemi (Western University); Tsewang Rinzin (University of Toronto); Sangey Tsering (University of Toronto)

CTC interns:

Max Honigmann (Concordia University); Ty Cary (McGill University); Manon Tsering (McGill University)

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ⁱ *Cover photo courtesy Parliamentary Friends of Tibet: the photo shows participants at the parliamentary roundtable in Ottawa on June 13, 2016.*