

# THE MORAL CHALLENGE IN DEALING WITH CHINA

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Thank you for that introduction and thanks to the organizers for inviting me to be here and to speak on "The moral challenge in dealing with China." I'm not sure there's only one moral challenge but since the topic I was assigned is in the singular the thing that I chose to start with, not unique to this but almost everywhere in life I think, the first moral challenge is honesty.

In life and particularly in politics we cannot take refuge in fantasy or self-delusion. And there are then three things I think it's very important to be clear on in dealing with China, the first of which probably does not need to be stressed to people in this room but I'm going to start with it anyway because I think it does need to be stressed especially for our government.

First point: The Chinese government is a brutal and powerful tyranny. Not surprising anybody here, but that is one of those things that a lot of people would prefer just to have go away. And if they cannot make it go away in fact they can make it go away in their minds. And so you get the kind of statements our government is prone to make about, say, the Chinese legal system.<sup>1</sup> Because points two and three, troublesome to our governments: (2) there's not really all that much that Canadians can do about the Chinese government and in particular (3) there's not much they can do through trade, whether boycotting or engaging, to change the nature of the Chinese government.

Therefore Plan A is pretend it's not that bad because then you don't have to worry about how much you can do about it. Plan B is pretend you are doing something about it therefore you must be a statesman. Sometimes Plan C is to combine the two, incongruous though that may seem logically.

Now I do want to be fair to governments. The primary duty of the Canadian government in foreign affairs is to protect the safety of Canada from foreign attack. Governments, legitimate governments, acquire their powers and responsibilities by delegation from citizens. And their very first responsibility is to suppress force and fraud at home (through the police) and abroad (through the military, alliances and such auxiliary methods as may seem appropriate).

Canadians have delegated to their government their right of self-defence and their government is obliged to exercise that right on our behalf. Those in office may not decide they're just better people than that, that they're above military things and won't have an armed forces because armed forces are tawdry.

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<sup>1</sup> The previous speaker, Clive Ansley, had cited various statements about improvements in that system that he indicated were without basis in fact.

American president Woodrow Wilson actually once said “there is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight.” We could debate this proposition on a personal level but in fact for governments there is no such thing. They cannot refuse to authorize policemen to shoot armed robbers and the same holds true of using the military when necessary. And indeed when Wilson made this remark he was trying to avoid getting the United States into World War I and instead simply managed to get them in much later than they should have at horrendous cost to Western civilization including ultimately the United States as well.

Our governments tend to overlook even this fact. Canada not having seen much of the horrors of war, devastation or tyranny they often underestimate the importance of defence and hence neglect the state of our armed forces. But also, in a broader sense, they neglect the state of our diplomacy. It is often simply not a serious business.

The difficulty, though, and when you are asking governments to do things please do bear this in mind, a lot of people in government feel an impulse to make the world a better place. And if they are doing their job they will think carefully about the trade-off between trying to make the world a better place and protecting the safety of Canadians because our desire to make the world a better place is not one of our primary rights like self-defence and it is not something we have unambiguously delegated to our government either.

If they can do something about tyranny or starvation in the world at low cost by all means they should do it. But they shouldn't sacrifice the safety of Canadians to this sort of impulse. And sometimes this does force a difficult dilemma on people in government that doesn't exist for people in private life. If you decide that you're going to devote your life to combating tyranny in China, if you decide that you're going to go there, endangering yourself in pursuit of this, you're allowed to do that. You don't have the same duty the Canadian government does to exercise the right of self-defence on behalf of your fellow citizens.

Now that too is an unpleasant truth not just I think for people in this room but for governments. They don't want to have this problem. They want to have it all. And therefore they will often tell you that they can make the world a better place, and in doing so make Canadians safer. For instance they can make China a democracy and by making China a democracy they'll make the world a safer place.

I'm not going to go too far sideways into this. There's a long argument about whether it is really true that democracies behave better in foreign affairs than dictatorships. There are certainly examples of democracies doing things they shouldn't, but on the other hand no two nations with full adult manhood suffrage have ever fought a war against one another.

It really does seem to be a fact that at least in some respects democracies behave better. And when you get somebody like Michael Moore saying oh, you know, American foreign policy, it's so terrible, you can't believe, they do this, they do that, eventually they tend to work their way around to saying the United States is not

really a democracy, accepting that there must be some connection between the two. And certainly when you look at China's foreign policy, it is difficult to believe that a democratic nation could conduct its affairs in that kind of way, because the citizens would not stand for it. So it probably is true that if somebody out there could cause China to become a democracy we would actually be safer in this country, to say nothing of its effects on the people who live in China. Freeing them from tyranny is obviously a good thing in and of itself. But from the point of view simply of the national security of Canadians, we would be better off if China did not have the kind of government that it has.

The problem of course is that it does have that government. That is a very real problem to the people who live in China and it is also I think a very real problem for the people who live in Canada. China is one of the primary sources of unrest in the world today. Wherever something bad is happening you can be reasonably certain that the Chinese government will have people there helping to make it worse. Like the Soviets in their heyday, such as it was, the Chinese do like to fish in troubled waters, and it is hard to find a repulsive regime anywhere in the world that doesn't have some kind of friends in official Beijing if only because they can't find them anywhere else.

Certainly the Chinese communists have some associates in the Middle East who you wouldn't have thought they had a natural affinity with on the grounds of communism being essentially atheist. It is difficult to see how the government of Iran would be sympathetic to that, but then we all remember the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Maybe they think they'll finish us off and then they'll deal with one another and it doesn't really matter to us very much how badly they've miscalculated Part II of that if they've made a reasonably accurate assessment of Part I, as Hitler and Stalin came very very close to having done in the early 1940s.

The problem here, the moral dilemma for our governments in particular, is that our governments are not allowed just to jeopardize our security, either by ignoring threats or by behaving excessively belligerently towards the Chinese government. But also a problem, for those people in this room who wish that the Chinese people did not suffer from the government that they do suffer under, is that the Chinese regime has *no* legitimacy. The point that the previous speaker, Clive Ansley, made about the death of the Communist Party of China the day that they submit to the rule of law, that is a very serious problem and it creates a very serious moral dilemma.

Remember, Mao Zedong seized power on the basis of a kind of demented agrarian Stalinism. And the regime that he established, over the decades, has carried out any number of atrocities that have killed thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people, in order to carry out policies that didn't even work. A regime like that cannot one day say oops, I'm sorry, we shouldn't have done that, should we?

I was struck by a contrast here while listening to Clive Ansley talk about the Chinese legal system, because I've been doing some research lately on the British constitution. And one of the weird things about the British constitution is how far back you can go and still find fundamentally the same spirit of government that persists in free countries to this day. In 1215 one of the things that King John promised in Magna Carta was that he would not sell justice, that he would not deny justice to anybody, that he would not delay justice. Now if you know anything about King John you are aware that he said that with his fingers crossed behind his back. He would have liked nothing better than to do all three things simultaneously. But basically it wasn't possible for him or his successors to do it.

The entire nation had a political culture that didn't stand for that sort of thing. In fact, prior to Magna Carta, in 1185, some monks sued King Henry II in his own council (the court system wasn't nearly as formally elaborated then as later and it was hard to tell if this was a legislature, a court, a council or just a bunch of guys sitting next to the king drinking wine) because he was taking away their property and they said he shouldn't do it. And the assorted advisors to the king looked at one another and delivered themselves of the opinion that "our customary rights had been established reasonably and wisely, that nothing excessive could be found in them, *and that the lord king neither wishes NOR DARES* to go against customs in some measure so ancient and so just or to change anything respecting them"<sup>2</sup> and ruled unanimously in favour of the monks. In 1185 one of the Angevin monarchs would not *dare* to steal his subjects' property.

There's nothing like that in the Chinese regime's antecedents. It cannot say we were founded on justice, we had a mandate from the people, we have ruled according to law for centuries, lately we've let things get kind of ugly but now we're going to reform ourselves. They cannot do that. The day they cease to repress their people is the day that the regime is overthrown and very possibly trials are held subsequently, fair or otherwise, of the people now in power.

This is a really serious issue if you want to see China governed better than it is. Especially for our government. People in government cannot say "let justice be done though the heavens fall." It is very much the job of government, especially when it comes to national security, to see to it that the heavens don't fall. That is what we pay them to do. They may not seem to be aware of it sometimes but it is pretty much their primary job description.

Another thing that governments have to take into account, as do citizens when they pressure governments, is something Rudyard Kipling apparently said although I've never been able to trace the reference further than David Pryce-Jones's paraphrase in *National Review* in 1999 that "If you go into the jungle, as Kipling put it, you must be sure what size beast you are."<sup>3</sup> Canada is not a superpower, economic,

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Howard McIlwain *Constitutionalism: Ancient and Modern* pp. 59-60.

<sup>3</sup> David Pryce-Jones in *National Review* 31/5/99 p. 22.

moral, energy or otherwise. And people, again because it is frustrating not to be a superpower, tend to gloss over or deny this fact.

There was a time when some Canadians boasted that we were a “middle power” but I’m inclined even to doubt that today. If you compare our ability to cause things to happen in the world, for good or evil, with that of, say, Iran, we’re simply not on the same level except in one important regard. And that is our special relationship with the United States, geographic, cultural, and historical.

We are far more influential in the world than we would otherwise be if we are a good friend and reliable advisor to Washington. A reliable advisor can tell them when they are wrong, but we cannot go around biting them on the ankle because it makes us feel good. Things like the land mine treaty, when we know the Americans need to use land mines to protect their troops and carry out security operations some of which we assist with, others of which we don’t.

Probably people in this room are very aware of the Straits of Taiwan and the possibility that something very, very nasty could happen there. A miscalculation by the Chinese regime, a “provocation,” it’s hard to say what could trigger it, but the possibility that the People’s Republic of China will attack Taiwan cannot be disregarded. And if they do the Americans are going to be engaged in a very, very unpleasant naval engagement there. Is Canada going to be in a position to help?

That’s the kind of thing that we could usefully do for ourselves and for the people of China, to tell their government that whatever else you’re going to get away with, you are not going to enjoy an unbroken string of glorious foreign policy successes that will help legitimize you in the eyes of most of your people. And that’s one thing we should be doing.

I’ve talked mostly about government because it is really very important. But I do want to say something about private citizens here. I think the Chinese government miscalculated hideously when they decided to host the 2008 Olympics. Regimes of that sort are very prone to this sort of error because they don’t get good feedback. People don’t tell the emperor he has no clothes. And they wouldn’t go and say to the Politburo look, you’re a bunch of wretches, your regime is a blood-stained tyranny and if you have the Olympics people will come and find out about it. But that is in fact the case provided the world goes there with its eyes open.

That brings me back at the end to where I started. The primary moral challenge in dealing with China is honesty. Reporters who are covering the Olympics, athletes who are taking part, visitors who are watching, everyone has to be honest about what they have seen. You must know the story about Walter Duranty winning a Pulitzer Prize for reporting on the Soviet Union in the early 1930s that denied the existence of Stalin’s deliberately engineered famine. Malcolm Muggeridge, by contrast, did report it and got fired as a journalist. But in 1933, when he saw the

famine, Muggeridge wrote in his diary “Whatever else I may do or think in the future, I must never pretend that I haven’t seen this.”<sup>4</sup>

The power of truth is actually enormous. And private citizens are better off than governments when it comes to being able to speak the truth.

You have to be aware that there’s not all that much you can do, especially in a practical way, on all kind of fronts. The Chinese government has, I think, a pretty tight grip on the country and, if it’s going to lose it, it won’t be because you went there and started prying their fingers off it. But the truth is enormously powerful.

If you tell the truth, if you force other people to confront the truth, whether they want to or not, and I don’t mean that you should be unpleasant about it, but rather to be polite and firm, to persist in all of this, it will make a difference.

I heard somewhere that a Soviet dissident, I think it was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, once said if everybody in the Soviet Union told the truth for one day communism would collapse. And I believe that is the great weakness of the Chinese regime, and that they have an uneasy awareness that one day of truth-telling would finish them off. And so that comes back to the great moral dilemma in dealing with China.

Don’t pretend you can do things you can’t. Don’t delude yourself about what our government can do. But above all, do not pretend you have not seen this. You know what the Chinese regime is and if you manage to spread that message it really will make a difference.

There are a lot of moral dilemmas in dealing with China. But there is one moral solution and that is: Do not be afraid to tell the truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Hunter in *The Report* 27/3/00 p. 54.