

# Hasten slowly on China human rights

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The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, deserves considerable credit for the forthright way in which he has raised concerns about human rights abuses in China, and more especially in Tibet, during his visit to Beijing.

The whole world recognises China's very poor record on human rights and the recent extremely harsh crackdown on dissent in Tibet only serves as further evidence of its continuous abuses.

The Prime Minister was right to raise the matter and to press the Chinese leadership to reform its policy.

The challenge for Australia is that we do not overplay our hand and jeopardise other key national interests.

In this context, Rudd should think carefully about joining the calls for a political boycott of the Olympic Games.

These are no doubt well intended and serve to draw attention to China's poor human rights record, but they will almost certainly, and regrettably, have no impact on Chinese policy.

Of course the Olympic Games is a political event, but there is little likelihood the Chinese will be forced into a back-down by shrill calls for change from outsiders. China had always regarded its rule in Tibet as an internal matter and, not surprisingly, insisted on its sovereignty there.

A boycott will not change Chinese behaviour and runs the risk of wrecking the Olympics for all of the athletes who have trained so hard to achieve excellence at the world's ultimate sporting event.

I am certainly no apologist for China's bad behaviour on human rights, but it needs to be recognised that China has made progress in improving the social and economic opportunities of its people. Thirty years ago, when 90 per cent of the population was engaged by agriculture, the Politburo announced plans to achieve "Four Modernisations" in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and the military.

Now, 50 per cent of the people rely on the prosperity which has resulted from China's industrialisation. Since that time, significant steps have also occurred in the development of the rule of law and in the creation of a more accountable judicial system.

The result has been improved standards of living and greater freedom of opportunity for hundreds of millions of Chinese. There is still a very long way to go to reach standards that would be acceptable in the West, but progress is being made, although from a very low base.

Critics of China should not be denied the right to protest the Olympic torch relay, but the best way to make further progress on human rights in China is through continuous dialogue and sustained diplomatic pressure. China needs to be brought into the international community as a "responsible stakeholder" and not alienated from it. It needs to be encouraged to acknowledge its disgraceful human rights standards and drawn to reform, not pressured into defending them by international action designed to force a change of policy, but more likely to be seen in China as involving a humiliating loss of face.

It must be remembered that China's history is dominated by more than 4000 years of feudalism, which was not enlightened by what it sees as the numerous "unequal treaties" imposed by outsiders such as the UK, France, Germany, Russia and the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and which reinforced a long-term distrust of the West.

Aside from raising human rights issues at every opportunity and supporting the courageous stand of the Dalai Lama, the Rudd Government could do more to advance the reform agenda. It should upgrade the regular human rights dialogue meetings begun with the Chinese under the Howard government.

The previously closed sessions should be advanced to a higher level of ministerial participation and opened to greater public scrutiny, with a full record of the proceedings being published on completion of the talks. Australia should also encourage other members of the international community to press China continuously on its human rights record.

Three decades ago, Wei Jingsheng, a hero of the Democracy Wall Movement, unfurled a poster over the official slogans calling for a "Fifth Modernisation" democracy. The Middle Kingdom needs to be pressed continually to move in this direction, but, to paraphrase Confucius, "Strong trees grow slowly: too fast is too soon and brings only short-term gain."

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