

Oppressed Tibet needs moral support now - not in another 60 years

March 19, 2008

Stephen Smith is wrong about Chinese sovereignty over Tibet: Tibetans were never afforded self-determination ("PM joins international pleas for restraint", March 18).

The Foreign Minister says Chinese sovereignty over Tibet "is not and has never been in question". This is a political statement.

The legal issues surrounding Tibetan sovereignty are complex and defy such sweeping claims. When Chinese forces occupied Tibet in 1949-50, Tibet was to all intents and purposes an independent state. The Tibetan government sent a plea to the United Nations secretary-general, Trygve Lie, in October 1950, but he failed to disseminate it, contrary to UN resolutions.

Tibetans - like their counterparts in West Papua - have never been given the chance to express their views by referendum on the exercise of their right to self-determination.

Australia's record on these matters is patchy. We have traded human rights for economic gain before. We were the only country to recognise Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor - in exchange for the lucrative Timor Gap treaty with Jakarta. One wonders whether Mr Smith's comments on Tibet are more about economic policy and less about our human rights obligations under international law.

The desire of the Tibetans for freedom from Chinese domination and oppression is no surprise. In the human rights era, people the world over are seeking greater transparency in government, an end to corruption, greater civil and political freedoms, and democratic governance. In all respects China has a long way to go.

For these reasons, China is unlikely to grant Tibetans a referendum on the question of autonomy versus independence unless compelled to do so by other countries, as was the case in East Timor. The same applies to Indonesia granting such a referendum to West Papuans. We all know what the result would be in both cases.

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has praised Dietrich Bonhoeffer for opposing Nazi aggression. However, there do not seem to be many words of support for Tibetans who call for an end to Chinese aggression.

Support for the actions of heroic historical figures is easy. But Tibetans who bravely call for independence and an end to oppression need our support now - not in 60 years.

Ben Clarke Senior Lecturer Human Rights Law, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle

Mental health system failed these young women

The unforgivable part of the Mercy Ministries tragedy is that these women were forced to turn to such a seemingly unorthodox organisation because of the inadequacy of public mental health services ("They prayed to cast Satan from my body", March 17).

Having worked in private and public mental health care, I have seen first-hand the divide between best practice and what our underresourced public hospitals are able to provide, despite the best efforts of

dedicated staff.

Governments must adequately fund public specialist mental health services for drug addictions, eating disorders and other common, treatable illnesses. Until then, people like Naomi Johnson and Rhiannon Canham-Wright will have little choice but to take their chances outside the mainstream.

Dr Peter Davies Blakehurst

As a pastor's son, and a lifelong church member until five years ago, I am all too familiar with the sort of arrogance that underpins Mercy Ministries. While many of the people involved in these programs work with the best of intentions, they are all too often blinkered by the notion that what they are doing is godly and everything else isn't. In this black-and-white view of the world, every mental health or emotional issue is the work of Satan, and practical means of assisting the patient, such as counselling or drug therapy, are largely scorned.

While we would all like to live in such a simple world, life is rarely so obliging. Failing to treat anyone in their care appropriately results in much distress on the recipients' part and massive credibility issues for the church, and leaves others wondering, rightly, how the people who purport to convey Jesus's love can be so cruel, uncompromising and hurtful.

Andrew Gillman Erskineville

The scorn with which your writer dismisses the use of the Bible and prayer in addressing people's needs offends Hillsong Church and all Christians. It is astonishing that Professor Hickie should be quoted as dismissing the propriety of prayer in therapy, given the abundance of recent, validated research that prayer and spirituality help recovery and healing.

Barry Chant Miranda

Real issues of faith, recovery and life change are being trashed by your belligerence. Where were the interviews with Mercy graduates who have benefited from this ministry? Where was the open and honest attempt to learn more about the process they use? And why use inaccurate, inflammatory words such as "exorcism"? Billions of Christians ask God to "deliver them from evil" every day. Are they conducting exorcisms, too?

What mental health, rehabilitation or recovery organisation does not have its disgruntled former patients? The people working in this field understand they will often get the blame for the difficulties their patients or clients face. I'm ready for challenging debate on these issues, but the *Herald* has disqualified itself because of its anti-intellectual witch-hunt of Hillsong.

Peter Hallett Leichhardt

I have little doubt many people working with Mercy Ministries are idealistic and well meaning. I am also sure that faith can be helpful for many suffering mental anguish or psychiatric disorders. But as a basis for mental health care a literal application of biblical teachings is a recipe for disaster. It appears that for many young women Mercy Ministries was the only option for full-time clinical care in the face of severely limited and expensive mainstream treatment. Speaking from experience, the desperation for relief from this situation would make the program a godsend. No wonder they submitted themselves to such obvious abuses of power.

Emma Cooper Warrimoo

Let the Sydney dead rest in peace

With the greatest respect and sympathy for the descendants of the crew of HMAS Sydney, there should be no inquiry into its loss. In time of war military commanders are appointed to carry out a certain task which they are expected to perform to the best of their ability. The services have the means to investigate any dereliction of duty. The men of HMAS Sydney obviously carried out their honourable duty to do their best to protect Australia, and they succeeded. May we all thank them and let them rest in peace.

John Watch (Colonel, rtd), Woollahra

Professor Tom Frame is out of order claiming that Captain Burnett, Commander of HMAS Sydney, was "terribly defamed" by Ludwig Ernst, one of the survivors of the Kormoran ("Shots fired over role of HMAS Sydney's captain", March 17).

My uncle was an officer on HMAS Sydney until her departure for the west coast. He later met Captain Theodor Detmers, who described without malice the action between Kormoran and Sydney, which my uncle relayed to me as a warning against inept ship handling. No well-handled warship will approach an unknown, potentially enemy vessel in a casual manner that allows her to present a broadside target. No gunnery officer worthy of the tradition would allow a minimum of armament to be brought to bear and fail to be on target at point-blank range.

While honouring the memory of these service personnel, we cannot whitewash the errors caused by poor ship handling and gunnery control, or we risk repeating them.

David Baker Orange

Retiree imbalance

As Bernadette Scadden points out (Letters, March 18), so-called "self-funded retirees" with an income of \$25,000 a year are entitled to a Seniors Health Card. But that's not all. From next week they get an annual \$500 Seniors Concession Allowance, up by \$282 on last year.

And an election commitment to seniors who travel interstate on holiday will enable people over pension age - regardless of income - to use that state's transport at a concessional rate, costing the Commonwealth budget \$50 million.

Many full-rate pensioners struggle to afford daily transport costs, let alone holidays. In some states unemployed people do not even get concessional fares while looking for work.

However, the biggest cost is the decades of tax concessions, worth billions each year, that most "self-funded retirees" have benefited from. Not only is their income far greater than that of a pensioner, but so is the government support they receive over a lifetime. How much more do we have to spend to keep these people "independent" and "self-funded"?

Michael Raper President, National Welfare Rights Network, Surry Hills

Noise annoys

I read with interest that the City of Sydney considers 65 decibels an appropriate midrange noise limit for concerts in Centennial Park ("Anger as concerts still rock residents", March 15-16) while allowing an extraordinary 85-decibel limit on the low-frequency noise. It is the powerful bass from big speakers that generates the longer wavelengths and lower frequencies - and most penetrating noise - and should have lower limits.

Why did the council allow a heavy metal concert in Sydney Park recently until late on a Sunday night, with a limit of only 75 decibels and no low-frequency limit?

Not many residents under the flight path agree with Air Services Australia that 70 decibels is a reasonable maximum for a residential area, but it is a lot better than the council's 75 decibels at the park boundaries.

It is particularly galling when public land is used for private profit and the council allows a business to deprive residents and ratepayers of both the use of the park and the peaceful enjoyment of their homes.

Jennifer Killen St Peters

I find Neil Runcie's complaint about noise levels at Centennial Park astounding. Nine concerts over three years and it is "wearing him down". Dr Runcie lives next to a public park, so surely he realises there will be noise every now and then. Why doesn't he just go out for dinner on the nights there are concerts? Or if it's so wearying, sell his house and move? His attitude is probably costing the park money that could be put to better use.

Selwyn Shapiro Paddington

Off the track

This Blue Mountains commuter and unionist does not want more people using train carriages as their private offices, with someone's laptop screen inches from our faces, the infernal tapping of keyboards and the incessant wheeling and dealing on mobiles ("Pay us to travel to work", March 18).

Never-ending work does not lead to increased productivity. It leads to burn-out. Rather than encouraging work on trains, we should be encouraging the socially and spiritually productive activities that were once the norm: reading a newspaper, looking out of the window, talking to the person next to you, playing cards, knitting, day-dreaming.

Then again, if the corporate sector were prepared to pay for this office space by buying much-needed new carriages, and if we could isolate the work-obsessed in designated carriages, it might be worth considering.

Helen Yoxall Springwood

I understand the unions' call for travel compensation, but asking employers to pay is not the answer. This will only make it harder for prospective employees from fringe areas to find a job as, logically, employers will favour those living closer to the place of employment. A far better solution would be to make travel costs tax-deductible. This would be more valuable to those in fringe areas, and therefore much more equitable.

Greg Menzies West Pennant Hills

As the diabolical waste of time and resources that is Sydney's morning commute continues to escalate, surely it is time the Federal Government offered tax breaks to companies who allowed their employees to work from home at least one day a week. It would get many thousands off the roads.

Richard Whitaker St Ives

Let me guess, Christopher Brown (" 'Ferrari' trains for Sydney", smh.com.au, March 18): the new train system will be flashy, expensive and completely inappropriate for the daily commute. Does each ticket

come with an optional midlife crisis?

Heather Smith Neutral Bay

You don't matter if you're west of Parra

Sydney's great divide is indeed stark ("It's a city of great dividing ranges", March 18). While those north of the Parramatta River experience high levels of broadband access and those to the south struggle with mortgage stress, the million or so who live west of Parramatta don't even exist, if the *Herald's* graphics are to be believed.

Tim Vollmer Kingswood

Guilty as charged

Not sure which game you've been watching, Mitchell Beston (Letters, March 18), but shoulder charges are illegal in rugby union. It has been a banned tackle for years and players risk temporary dismissal if they offend.

Des Gilbert Tingira Heights

Thanks Roosters and NRL, you made our decision easy. We've just withdrawn our son, a promising league player, from a schools representative team. He'll play union from now on. If you want to eliminate foul play, and I honestly wonder if you do, may I suggest you get a truly independent, fresh team of experts - such as WorkCover.

Mark O'Neil Highfields

Mind your beeswax

The advice on candles in the Earth Hour supplement (March 17) may not be as green as you claim. Every standard-sized candle, when burnt completely, releases 15 grams of carbon dioxide whether it is beeswax, soy or paraffin-based. The lady depicted is burning 28 candles, creating more than four times the CO₂ supplied by coal power to light one old-fashioned 100-watt bulb for an hour.

Paul Roberts Lake Cathie

Captive audience

The Sydney Ports Corporation has a large advertisement on the back page of the *Herald* (March 17) stating it welcomed almost 100 cruise ships in the past 12 months, that it offers two dedicated passenger terminals, and so on. Why is it advertising? Where else are the ships to berth?

Bob Doepel Fernmount

Ono it was Yoko

One member leaving doesn't imply the end of a rock group, Lee Borkman (Letters, March 18). If that were true the Rolling Stones played their last note in 1969, when Brian Jones died. The Beatles didn't finish because John Lennon left in 1969. They finished in late 1970 when Paul McCartney demanded the

group be dissolved and a receiver appointed.

Steve Moore Leumeah

Everyone knows Yoko broke up the Beatles.

David Hilyard Lewisham

Middle Eastern accent

I fully agree with John Blackhawk (Letters, March 18) that the American accent of Willem Dafoe's Jesus in *The Last Temptation Of Christ* was ridiculously unauthentic. Jesus would clearly have spoken English with a strong Palestinian accent.

Noel Robinson Mosman

Second job for Vanstone

The ambassador for Ireland has responsibility for the Vatican ("Call for Vatican ambassador", March 18). Why? What about the ambassador for Italy, who probably lives within sight of St Peters? I'm sure Amanda could handle both jobs.

Patrick St George Narrandera

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