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Human rights and how to deal with China

Don't You Dare Go to Dinner

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Liu Xiaobo and China's with-us-or-against-us moment



“IT IS the unrelenting, unremitting continuance of pressure that often yields results on human rights.” Thus Britain’s then prime minister, John Major, during a visit to Beijing in 1991. On the first trip to China since then by a Conservative prime minister, David Cameron was far more cautious. In the face of Chinese fury over the awarding of the Nobel peace prize to an imprisoned Chinese dissident, Mr Cameron opted for deference.

Liu Xiaobo’s prize on October 8th has made Western governments almost as uncomfortable as China’s. Since the early 1990s the West and China have largely managed to accommodate their differences over human rights while pursuing closer

economic ties. “Pressure” has consisted of polite but unproductive “human-rights dialogues” between lower-ranking Chinese and Western officials. The peace prize has pushed the issue back to the fore.

For Western governments, the timing is unfortunate. Their economies are suffering while China’s is booming, China holds many more cards than it did in 1991, when its economy was far smaller and communism was collapsing all around it. Mr (now Sir John) Major was the first Western leader to visit Beijing since the crushing of the Tiananmen Square protests two years earlier. An ostracised China was grateful for his mere presence.

Mr Cameron is the first Western leader to visit Beijing since the Nobel announcement. China is in an uncompromising mood. Police have kept tight controls over the movements of Mr Liu’s wife and other dissidents. On November 9th, as Mr Cameron was in town, Mr Liu’s lawyer was stopped from flying to Britain. China is doing its level best to prevent any Chinese from attending the award dinner in Oslo on December 10th.

Mr Cameron, trailing behind him four cabinet ministers and a vast business delegation, was clearly anxious not to let Mr Liu’s plight spoil a commercial opportunity (see article). In formal talks with Prime Minister Wen Jiabao he did not raise Mr Liu’s case, though he brought it up later over dinner. At Peking University Mr Cameron spoke about the need for “greater political opening” and the rule of law. Yet Chinese leaders themselves talk in similar terms, all the while defending one-party rule. On the same day, a campaigner on behalf of families of children poisoned by tainted milk was sentenced to 2½ years in prison, for disturbing the social order.

President Nicolas Sarkozy took a similarly soft-spoken approach during a visit to France by his Chinese counterpart, Hu Jintao, from November 4th-6th. The trip resulted in more than \$20 billion-worth of contracts, including an agreement by China to buy 66 more Airbus jets. The two leaders’ apparent rapport was in sharp contrast to 2008, when the Chinese pilloried Mr Sarkozy for threatening a boycott of the Olympic Games because of a Chinese clampdown on Tibetans.

Now 15 Nobel peace prize winners are calling on G20 leaders, during their summit on November 11th and 12th, to press China for Mr Liu’s release. Anxious for Chinese support for efforts to rebalance the global economy, no leader will be keen to do so. European countries appear ready, as usual, to send ambassadors to the Oslo dinner. Even that, the Chinese say, is offensive. The dinner must be shunned.

Indeed, China rather than the West is playing up Mr Liu’s case. On November 5th Cui Tiankai, a deputy foreign minister, said that other countries faced a stark choice: either take part in “this political game” over Mr Liu or develop friendly relations with China. Make the wrong choice, he threatened, and “they will have to bear the consequences.” On the same day the People’s Daily, the Communist Party’s main mouthpiece, said that Mr Liu’s award was an attempt to “topple China”. Westerners eager for business will hurry to explain that they want nothing of the sort.