



Greg Sheridan

Dalai Lama tour a hit

The Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, has had a triumphal tour, albeit somewhat against the odds, in Australia.

The high points were his meetings with Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd.

He has advanced Tibet's cause and charmed many thousands of Australians with his spiritual message.

It's a tribute to the Dalai Lama's personal popularity and enduring appeal that the tour can finally be rated such a success, because in many ways it was poorly managed.

But, at the end of the day, the Dalai Lama's own charisma and standing overcame that.

His meetings with Howard and Rudd, whatever their precise content, did much to put Tibet's plight back on the international agenda, where it belongs.

I interviewed the Tibetan leader many years ago and found him personally charming and endearing. He was straightforward and commonsensical about the mystical aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, explaining them well to a non-believer.

I wasn't overwhelmed by his presence as some people claim to be but on the other hand I was in no doubt that I was in the presence of a good man who cared about humanity, tried to do good and was seeking something better for Tibet.

The Dalai Lama's position on Tibet itself is moderate and reasonable.

He is not campaigning for full independence for Tibet. Instead he asks the Chinese Government for three things: a degree of internal autonomy for Tibet, full observance of basic human rights standards by the Chinese Government and some respect and a special place for Tibetan culture within Tibet itself.

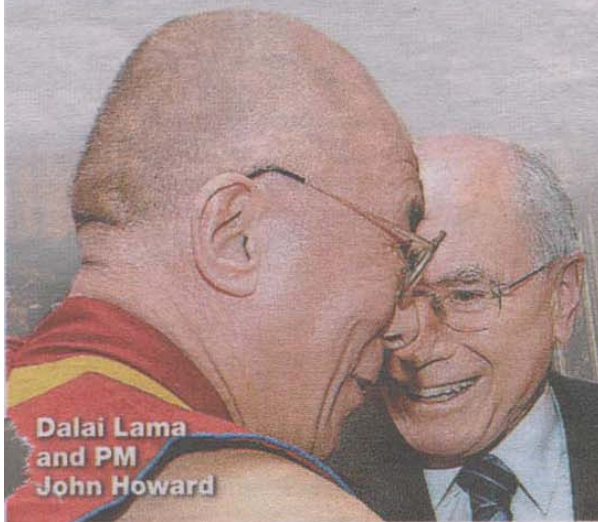
According to the Dalai Lama, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans have been killed by Chinese authorities over the years.

These claims are not made by the Dalai Lama alone. They are backed up by academic experts and international human rights organisations.

In recent years, Beijing's strategy has been to swamp Tibet with immigrants from other parts of China so that Tibet's distinctive culture will ultimately die out.

Within Australia there was a silly official timidity about receiving the Dalai Lama. Federal parliamentarians were not allowed to hold an official parliamentary reception for the Dalai Lama because it might upset the Chinese. However, the parliamentary friends of Tibet, a bipartisan group led by the estimable Labor politician Michael Danby, the Liberal Peter Slipper, the Australian Democrats' Natasha Stott Despoja and Greens leader Bob Brown, organised an unofficial reception that was attended by many MPs, showing the vibrancy and independence of Australian democracy.

The Dalai Lama is a welcome visitor to Australia. His message of peace and tranquillity, if a little woolly, is well worth hearing. And he remains a profoundly important figure for Tibet.



Dalai Lama and PM John Howard