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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

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• (1305)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Order, please. This is the 28th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is October 28, 2010.

[*English*]

Today we are engaging in a brief study of the situation of human rights and freedom of expression in China. We have two witnesses who are joining us from New York by means of video conference. We have Jianli Yang, founder and president of Initiatives for China, and Maran Turner, executive director of Freedom Now.

I will remind members of the subcommittee that today's meeting is televised and also that unfortunately we only have an hour for our hearing.

I will turn things over to our witnesses. We're glad to have you here. I'd just encourage you to make opening remarks. Normally we ask for about 10 minutes from our witnesses, but there is some flexibility there.

Please take it away.

Ms. Maran Turner (Executive Director, Freedom Now): Sure. I guess I'll start.

My name is Maran Turner. I'm the executive director of Freedom Now. Freedom Now is a non-partisan, non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. Our mission is to work on behalf of prisoners of conscience all over the world. Those are individuals who are imprisoned or detained because of what they say or what they believe or who they're associated with. Our mission is to work on their behalf individually, mobilizing legal, political, and public relations elements to help secure their release.

I'll give you just a little bit of our background and what makes it especially special to sit next to Dr. Yang. Our organization got involved in Dr. Yang's case. Unfortunately, Dr. Yang, as a long-time human rights activist who was at Tiananmen Square himself, found himself imprisoned in China, serving a five-year sentence—for spying, I think, for Taiwan, which at the time was a very common charge.

Dr. Yang stands today as a prominent human rights activist based in the United States, and works tirelessly for human rights in China

still. I believe his experience gives him a special insight into what it's like to be imprisoned in China as well as to be a human rights activist.

I'll give you a little bit of background on the situation in China with respect to dissidents as well as to the rule of law. The climate for individual thinkers in China is bleak. Activists, religious practitioners, lawyers, and journalists more and more are operating at their peril, and unfortunately also at peril to their families.

Many say that the situation in China has worsened, that the government is in full crackdown mode. Human rights defenders are being harassed, intimidated, and surveilled; their families also are being targeted. More and more are being arbitrarily detained and, frighteningly, “disappeared”, as in the case of Gao Zhisheng, which I'll speak about.

As all of this happens, unfortunately, China's image has changed dramatically over the last few years. They've made impressive strides economically, and as the world watches its improvement in its stature, sadly the debate over the human rights situation diminishes. Unfortunately, it continues as it has before. Although there has been some human rights progress, it's generally mostly lip service, and when it does come to pass, it's when it's convenient to the government and when the world is watching.

The rule of law has been said for a while now to be in full retreat. As I said, individual activists and dissidents are targeted; they're being arrested; they're being put on trial. They're generally being charged, with very few exceptions, under article 105 of the Chinese criminal code, which deals with subversion or “splitism”. More often they're charged with merely inciting subversion or splitism. For neither one of those is there any judicial or legislative interpretation. The law is incredibly vague, and of course “inciting” is even more vague.

The evidence used against dissidents such as Dr. Yang and Liu Xiaobo and Gao Zhisheng, whom I'll speak about, is their words, their expressions, things they have written. To us, prosecuting free expression is anathema to our values and our culture, and it is to the Chinese as well. The Chinese government claims also to respect freedom of expression. It's contained in their constitution; China signed on to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which contains provisions requiring that freedom of expression, freedom of association, the prohibition of arbitrary detention are to be upheld. China has yet to ratify the ICCPR, but having signed it, and considering that their own law contains many of the same provisions, without question China is bound by it.

Unfortunately, the claim by the Chinese government is not that they're breaking any laws—not their own, not international law. Rather, they say they're adhering to it, that they are respecting freedom of expression, except when it endangers security. And unfortunately the people who are targeted, the people who are arrested and accused of endangering security, are those who are actually just speaking out against the one-party state and calling for democratic reform, which is to say that the security the government is concerned about is not the security of the people but the security of the party.

What this suggests to us, to me, is that the government is becoming increasingly paranoid about its own security, and as a consequence they're cracking down on dissidents even more.

• (1310)

Thousands are being watched, harassed, imprisoned, and unfortunately disappeared. Two emblematic cases—two cases that we are here today to highlight—are two cases that Freedom Now is proud to be involved in. We represent both Gao Zhisheng and Liu Xiaobo.

They're both emblematic cases in that neither one of them, Gao nor Liu, are radical figures. Gao Zhisheng is a human rights lawyer, or was a human rights lawyer, at one point heralded to be one of the top ten lawyers in China. Unfortunately, because he took on too many cases on behalf of people who were marginalized, people who were persecuted in particular religious minorities, such as Falun Gong, he found himself bearing the brunt of attacks by the Chinese government. He was arrested and harassed on numerous occasions. He suffered torture that one can't even imagine, including being beaten with a baton, having lit cigarettes held to his face, and being electrocuted, all because he represented people. He himself was not an outspoken critic of the government. He was representing others who were merely trying to express themselves and to believe in what they wanted to believe in.

He tried to work through the judicial system in China. When he found that he couldn't, when he found that his clients were still being tortured and imprisoned, he then called out and became public, and wrote open letters to the government calling for an end to torture. He ultimately provided information to the U.S. Congress regarding the human rights situation in China.

Unfortunately, what's happened to him is that he has disappeared. This is incredibly alarming because over the years, certainly, there have been many who have disappeared, but nowhere near the numbers that are actually charged and imprisoned. The fact that we're talking about a human rights lawyer who has disappeared is very worrying.

He was arrested on February 4, 2009, and disappeared. No one knew where he was. We know that he was last seen in government custody. After some inquiries were made, ominously, the foreign minister publicly came out and said that Gao is where he should be. Nobody quite knew what that meant. Everybody, after that, stepped up international attention and their inquiries, and it was only because there was so much international attention that the Chinese government felt compelled to “reappear” Gao.

He reappeared and stayed reappeared for less than a month. In that month he was able to speak to press, he was able to speak to family members, but sadly, in less than 30 days, he disappeared again. That was in April, the last time that anybody had any contact with him. We now don't know where he is, and know nothing about his condition.

Next, I will talk about Liu Xiaobo, who of course is now a celebrated Nobel Peace Prize laureate. We're of course delighted. I know that Dr. Yang is delighted with the Nobel committee's decision to award it to such an incredible man as Dr. Liu, who for years has used his intelligence and his charisma to seek human rights in China and some democratic reforms. He himself has been punished for it.

He's a literature professor in Beijing. He spent time in the United States as a visiting professor at Columbia. He, like many others, like Dr. Yang, went back to China during Tiananmen Square. He was one of four intellectuals who negotiated for the peaceful removal of some of the students. He advocated for nothing but peace to the students. He was able to negotiate with security officers there to help get them out of harm's way.

For his activities, he served 20 months in prison. He remained in China, and continued to work on initiatives and speaking for democratic reform. He of course was also harassed on many occasions and was imprisoned. Ultimately, in 2008, he was a principal drafter of Charter 08, which I'm sure Dr. Yang can speak more to.

• (1315)

This document was quite something, and one that a number of intellectuals were involved in. Dr. Liu was certainly the one who was most out front and outspoken, as a signatory. It mirrored itself on the Czech Charter 77. What it called for was no radical revolution in China, by any means, but democratic reforms. It called on China to commit itself to act. What it was saying that it was providing, which is really respecting freedom of expression, really respecting individual rights—that's what it called for.

Because of his association with Charter 08, he was arrested on December 8, 2008. Charter 08 was released two days later.

Initially there were approximately 300 signatories to Charter 08. When it was eventually taken down from the Internet, there were approximately 10,000 people who had signed on and endorsed Charter 08.

Dr. Liu, like so many others, was held for a period of about six months, incommunicado for the most part. He wasn't charged. It wasn't until after about six months that he was charged with, of course, inciting subversion, in violation of article 105.

During his trial, for which his lawyer had had very little time to prepare, he was given 14 minutes before the court cut his defence off. So suffice it to say there was no respect of due process rights, or international respect for fair trial rights. He received a sentence of 11 years.

The crime, inciting subversion, carries a maximum penalty of 15 years; however, Dr. Liu received the longest sentence that anyone has ever received for this particular crime. His wife was barred from the trial. She wasn't allowed to observe the trial. Journalists were prohibited from entering the courtroom, as were diplomats who also attempted to enter the courtroom. So it was by no means an open trial.

At sentencing, through a statement released by his lawyer—I think it's incredibly eloquent, and I want to read it to all of you—Dr. Liu said:

I have long been aware that when an independent intellectual stands up to an autocratic state, step one toward freedom is often a step into prison...and true freedom is that much nearer.

Dr. Liu took that step, and he knew he was taking that step. What he didn't know was that he would win the Nobel Prize.

This was an opportunity for China to step up and embrace one of its own—not someone who was seeking any sort of radical reform but someone who was seeking progress for his country and wanted to see China flourish. Unfortunately, instead of embracing him and instead of embracing that one of their own was recognized by the Nobel committee, they instead immediately cordoned off his wife, Liu Xia, and put her under de facto house arrest, where she remains today. She was permitted to see Dr. Liu a couple of days after the announcement was made. We were in touch with her only briefly within the hour that the announcement was made before they came in and cut off her phone and cut off her ability to communicate. We know they then removed her to Beijing and then the following day took her to see Dr. Liu. I think she spent about an hour with her husband.

Upon hearing the news of the award, he was moved to tears and immediately said that this award was not his, but that he dedicated it to the martyrs of Tiananmen.

Since then the situation has worsened. The Chinese government is still holding Liu Xia, his wife, under house arrest. We're no longer getting any news of her situation. We're not sure; as far as we know, she's still being kept in her home, but that's all we know. They've cut off her phone. They've cut her Internet access.

So this is where we are today. We have one client, a human rights lawyer, who has disappeared. And we have another one who is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who has been recognized by the world as a man to be celebrated, and instead he sits in prison somewhere and his wife is under house arrest.

Our concern is with the alarming trend of the Chinese government to continue to act so unabashedly, the greatest sign of which is taking a prominent human rights lawyer and just disappearing him. It's outrageous. Equally outrageous is the fact that they have now moved in and have his wife under house arrest. She has been charged with nothing. Her only crime is that she is the wife of a Chinese man who won the Nobel Peace Prize. This is of incredible concern to us.

● (1320)

Before I turn it over to Dr. Yang, I will just say that I'm delighted that world leaders are calling for Dr. Liu's release, as well as the release of his wife, Liu Xia, and also for the reappearance of Mr. Gao Zhisheng.

I'm happy to know that the Canadian Prime Minister, Prime Minister Harper, spoke on behalf of Liu Xiaobo, and celebrated his award of the Nobel Prize as well. I also know that Foreign Minister Cannon has raised his case with the Chinese government.

I think it's critical that we now speak louder and more forcefully than ever and that world leaders come together and unite and take the case to President Hu. Again, no one is trying to impose any values on President Hu, but we're merely asking them to respect the rights and freedoms they already proclaim to do.

So I hope that the Canadian government will reach out to President Hu, and I hope that members of Parliament will urge your own government to do so. Certainly a great opportunity is the upcoming G-20 summit in November. I think that's a perfect opportunity for the world leaders gathering there to come together and have a unified voice.

With that, I will turn it over to Dr. Yang.

Dr. Jianli Yang (Founder and President, Initiatives for China):
Thank you, Maran. Thank you for your wonderful opening remarks.

Thank you very much, Chairman, for inviting me to speak to you today at this historical moment of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to our great countryman Liu Xiaobo.

In the opening paragraph of its announcement of the selection of Liu Xiaobo for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, the Nobel committee made a simple but profound statement:

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has long believed that there is a close connection between human rights and peace. Such rights are a prerequisite for the "fraternity between nations" of which Alfred Nobel wrote in his will.

I'm here today to plead with you, the representatives of a great democracy, to consider this statement very carefully. For too long, the democracies of the world have too often ignored this unbreakable bond between democracy and world peace. For too long, the democracies of the world have lulled themselves into thinking that political rights for the Chinese people will automatically follow in the wake of China's embrace of a market economy. We must now recognize that just the opposite has occurred.

The Washington Post raised the warning flag in an editorial on July 11 this year. The title of the editorial was "China's Thin Skin". In it the *Post* clearly stated that Western democracies' toleration of China's disregard for human rights and the rule of law has only emboldened the government to increase its repression. I quote:

China's human rights record is dismal enough that the latest crackdown on political opposition should not surprise, but there is a disturbing new element, human rights activists say: the government's total lack of reticence in going after even high-profile targets....The brazenness is a reflection of Beijing's increasing assertiveness in the international sphere—and its calculation that there is little or no price to be paid in its relations with the United States or other nations for abusing its own citizens.

The vociferous reaction of the Chinese government to the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo shows how out of reach the government in Beijing is with the outside world. The fact is that the Chinese government's repression of its own people is accelerating with its fear of losing its illegitimate and unilateral hold on power. From Tibetans to Uighurs to the burgeoning Christian community and Falun Gong practitioners, from independent intellectuals to dissidents such as Liu Xiaobo and Gao Zhisheng, the Chinese government has alienated virtually every segment of Chinese society.

Its persecution of its citizens is more widespread than ever before. Imprisonment, intimidation, and torture take place everywhere against all strata of society and all areas of human behaviour. Forced evictions of citizens, to make way for the grandiose schemes of the government and to enrich the pockets of local officials, are rampant. Three hundred thousand people were forced to leave their homes in Beijing to make way for the 2008 Olympics. And 18,000 families were displaced—with little or no compensation and without recourse—to make way for the Shanghai World Expo, that the UN-Habitat called a monumental achievement.

•(1325)

The cases of Liu Xiaobo and Gao Zhisheng highlight the brutal repression of free expression and the emasculating of the independent scholars, human rights lawyers, and professionals. The discontent and alienation are so deep and widespread that more than 120,000 large-scale demonstrations occur each year in China that go largely unreported in the west.

To keep a lid on this cauldron of discontent, in the past 20 years the Chinese government has constructed an unprecedented police state, or, as the Chinese government calls it, a “stability-preserving” system. This huge security apparatus costs the Chinese people over 5 trillion yuan out of the GNP each year.

This security system is out of control. It clearly shows the paranoia of this regime and its attitude that its citizens are enemies to be mentally and socially controlled at all costs. For instance, Chen Guangcheng, the recently released blind human rights lawyer, is closely watched by about 30 security agents at any given time.

It has become common practice for the government to hire thugs and gangsters to beat and kidnap dissidents and family members to intimidate them into silence. When the so-called sensitive dates come around, the government-deemed sensitive personnel elements are intimidated, imprisoned, placed under house arrest, harassed, and taken to a police station—or restaurant for “tea”. That's a new term that has been developed in the past few years, that you're taken for a cup of tea. After the announcement to the world of our peace prize, many, many people, in every city, were taken to police stations for tea. Some of them were placed under close surveillance. Some of them were even placed under house arrest. In Beijing itself that involved more than 200 of them.

I could go on all day, but the record is clear. The question is will we continue to ignore reality and allow the Chinese government to continue its self-destructive ways with serious consequences to the Chinese people and world stability? Or will we help the Chinese government to truly join the world community by embracing the universal values of democracy and the rule of law?

In this regard, today I offer the following suggestions.

Number one, most urgently, I would like to urge the Prime Minister, Mr. Harper, to reach out on the cases of Liu Xiaobo and Gao Zhisheng, and other cases, and talk to the Chinese government. I most urgently ask him to talk to Hu Jintao in his meeting during the G-20 summit next month in Korea to ask for the release of Liu Xiaobo and return of freedom to Liu Xia.

Number two, we should replace the policy of patience and acquiescence with a policy of reciprocity. In our relations with China, we should connect its ability to enjoy the fruits of our open society, through treaty relations, academic exchanges, media, etc., to its demonstrated advances in opening freedom of speech and Internet access in their own society. That is to say, we should demand that our citizens should do what we allow their citizens to do in our open society.

•(1330)

Number three, Canada and China had a human rights dialogue between 1996 and 2006. I urge that it be reopened, with the caveat that human rights groups be involved.

Number four, the Canadian Parliament should establish a foundation—Canada's equivalent of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy—to actively support the Chinese democracy movement based in North America.

Time does not permit me to elaborate on this point, but I will leave you with this counsel. Proceed with strength and engage with confidence. Democratic reform must come to China, not only for the sake of the Chinese people but also for the sake of world peace. We must help the Chinese people make this transition peaceful and successful.

Do not fear negative reaction by the Chinese government. It knows that it is in a precarious position. All of its rhetoric is the bluffing of a desperate regime that knows its time is running out. We must help the Chinese people with our firmness and guidance. Above all, we must back our words with actions.

Thank you.

•(1335)

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of our witnesses.

We have 24 minutes left, which means that there's time for one six-minute question and answer period per party. Any party that has more than one member here may choose to divide their time. It's between the MPs who are present.

So let's start with Mr. Silva and the Liberals.

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to remind the witnesses that it's six minutes for our questions and answers. It's all the time we have.

I want to thank the witnesses very much for being here. Professor Cotler was actually one of the members who wanted very much to have both of you appear before the committee. Unfortunately he's not here with us today, but he has taken a great interest, working with parliamentarians and academics from all over the world, to sign also a declaration for the release of Liu Xiaobo. He's been working quite hard on that one.

There's no question what Liu Xiaobo represented in what he did at Tiananmen Square back in 1989 and with the charter he modelled after the charter that Václav Havel put forward in 1977. It was a peaceful charter to look at reform in the respect for civil and political rights. As you've mentioned, China is a signatory to that covenant that has yet to be ratified.

There has been, without any question, a lot of rapid growth and transition in China. Certainly a lot of development has taken place in cultural and economic rights, but very little has been seen in the more civil and political rights, which is one of the issues that concern us and about which you're here before us.

World leaders, including from Canada, have called for the release of these human rights activists. We are again calling on China to listen to the call of the world community. We're not doing that as a hostile act toward China; we're extending an olive branch of friendship, asking China to do the right thing for its citizens.

You have listed a series of action plans that you'd like to see Canada follow. But I also want to get your view—before I split my time with my colleague—on what action other parliaments throughout the world have taken, whether it be the European Parliament or the U.S. Congress. What types of initiatives have they put forward that maybe we could also take a look at?

On the issue of human rights dialogue, we have been looking at making sure that human rights NGOs also participate. It's not an easy process. It's a very secretive process that takes place. But we would certainly look forward to having more input from the human rights community in that whole dialogue.

I can see, given the spotlight that was put on the case of the Nobel Prize winner, this would be right time for us to initiate and engage in the human rights dialogue with China in a proactive way.

So perhaps you can let me know of some examples that Canada can follow, but also lead in. I think you had a series of steps you'd like us to follow. Which one would be the priority for you?

The Chair: Ms. Turner.

Ms. Maran Turner: I can really only speak to initiatives by the U.S. government, although I know that many other countries, like Australia and England, and many world leaders have at least called for the release of Liu Xiaobo.

On specific initiatives that I can speak to in the United States, apart from whatever President Obama is doing privately, or what the White House or State Department is doing, our U.S. Congress has been quite outspoken. They've taken a number of initiatives, including writing letters to President Hu and President Obama calling for the cases to be raised, and calling for China to commit

itself to the rule of law, and to commit itself to its own law, and international law.

Dr. Yang.

• (1340)

Dr. Jianli Yang: I would like to look at the experience of the international community in the past few years.

In the past few years, with the assertiveness of the Chinese government in the international sphere, with its economic power and political power, the international game with China, I will say, ran into a situation that could be called the “collective action” dilemma: nobody wanted to singly challenge the Chinese government on human rights issues.

That is exactly why I praised the Nobel peace committee as being a game-changer: with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, I think the game must be changed, and the problem of a collective action dilemma must be resolved.

Now I see the collective action. Every government is coming out to give very positive and strong comments on this work and to take action to push forward with the Chinese government for real change in China. For example, the U.S. Congress, as Maran just mentioned, has come out with a congressional letter to the world leaders who will take part in the G-20 meeting, to specifically raise Liu Xiaobo's case and ask for the immediate release of this Nobel Prize laureate.

I haven't talked to the government of each country yet, but I would assume that each one will take a more proactive role in helping the Chinese people move forward with a democratic transition, simply because of the change of the game.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Deschamps, go ahead.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Good afternoon. I will speak to you in French, Ms. Turner and Mr. Yang. I do hope that the interpretation is coming through clearly.

[*English*]

Ms. Maran Turner: Yes.

Dr. Jianli Yang: Yes, I do.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Welcome and thank you very much for your testimonies.

Before we discuss the progress China has made that you alluded to, Ms. Turner, I would like to speak to Mr. Yang.

I would like to know why you became an activist, why you were imprisoned and why you had to leave China. I assume that you left some of your family behind. Today, you are in exile because of your past actions, because of your activism in China.

[English]

Dr. Jianli Yang: Yes.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Ms. Turner, you described China as a country with two faces. On the one hand, it has made economic progress, and I would say that it has practically become a superpower. On the other hand, the human rights situation in China has deteriorated.

We know that many countries are currently negotiating commercial partnerships or agreements with China. I think that the industrialized countries' interest in China has increased because of what China's economy represents internationally. In fact, China's presence is very strong on virtually every continent.

Is the international community sending a message that the economy, or trade, is more important than any human rights issue and justifying its position by bringing up the issue of economic recovery and the possibility of a global crisis?

•(1345)

[English]

Ms. Maran Turner: Yes, I think there's no question that this, sadly, has been the effect of China's economic position. They certainly are an economic world leader. I wouldn't go further and call them a world leader beyond that. I think they're masquerading as one, simply because they're not respecting the rights of their own citizens.

They have made tremendous economic progress. I'm sure Dr. Yang will back up the fact that many Chinese citizens are benefiting from that. China is doing much better, is much more prosperous than it once was, at least in the cities. Let's not forget that in the rural regions, they're still living in much the same conditions as before.

But in terms of the message that we are sending, there's no question we're sending that message. You identified the duality of foreign policy with respect to China. On the one hand, many western countries, including my own, the United States, have a deep relationship economically with China, and we see it in the human rights community in the sense that the dialogue has changed dramatically not just with businesses but also with people. When you speak to people and you talk about human rights in China, particularly young people, it's not like 10 years ago, where people immediately thought about Tibet. To some extent the situation with the Uighurs has received a lot of press, but it's not like it once was. People's first reaction to China is not, "Wow, the human rights situation is bad"; it's "Wow, China's a superpower, and we have to contend with that; they're making much greater progress".

I think China has done a really great job at branding itself. If anybody says anything negative against China, China immediately comes back and calls them a China-basher and says this is some conspiracy to try to keep China from progressing.

To some extent, they've controlled that dialogue, they've controlled that narrative, because businesses have such an invested interest there. And we can all understand that, but at the same time there's no reason that the two dialogues can't coexist together. There's no reason why governments and businesses can't proceed

with a relationship with China and at the same time call for progress, because progress in human rights is progress in rule of law, which is to say progress in respect for commercial contracts and things like that. Businesses have a vested interest to see China improve its situation not just for its own citizens but for themselves, and they need to recognize that. I think it's important that we bring that message to businesses, for sure.

Dr. Jianli Yang: I want to add a few words.

Regarding the situation in China, we admit that people enjoy greater personal and economic liberties than before. People have benefited from economic growth in the past 20 to 30 years. But without the protection of political rights, which is totally controlled by the Chinese government so far, the small amount of liberty they are enjoying can be taken away at any time if the authorities determine so. It is happening everywhere in China, especially in the economic field. Without the protection of political rights, you can easily lose your house without recourse to having your grievances redressed.

Over the years, people overseas and the international community have developed the wrong impression that the Chinese people, ordinary people, may not demand democracy, freedom, and human rights. People have the wrong impression that with economic development, people may just forget about human rights.

That's wrong. That's totally wrong. I always challenge people with those views to do an imaginary experiment. Take a document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to China, and talk to the people you meet on the street, asking them whether they need or want the rights described in the document. I don't think you will meet anyone who will say "no". If you do this experiment, you will see that what I say is right.

China's people really want democracy, freedom, and human rights. They cannot do it because the Chinese government does not want them to do it. They build up the so-called stability-preserving system, taking the general public as enemies and watching them. Whatever you do that the government does not like, that will put you in the situation where you will lose your freedom, lose your job, and incur costs that you cannot bear. That deters many people from coming out to stand up for their rights and interests. We have to realize that.

China's people will not be offended by a strong foreign policy from Canada or the United States towards China. China's people will be offended by the inconsistency and insincerity they see in the policy.

Thank you.

•(1350)

The Chair: Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I certainly appreciate the opportunity to speak to our two guests here today.

Dr. Yang, are you familiar with the name Huseyin Celil? He was a Uighur who became a Canadian citizen. He went back to China to see if he could get his two elder sons out of the country. He was arrested and has been detained there since.

At any rate, in the year 2007, Peter MacKay, who was our foreign minister at the time, was travelling to Beijing, and I had the opportunity to travel with him. I just wanted to reaffirm something that you were talking about.

At one point, another opposition member and I met with the foreign affairs committee and we were talking about how human rights were evolving in China. The people from the committee talked about the disparity between what was happening in Beijing and what was happening in the provinces. They were saying that Beijing was the light of democracy compared to the provinces. I kind of chuckle at that because it's a pretty dim light sometimes from our perspective.

I wouldn't mind your comment on that comparison because you mentioned earlier that the administration today, the government of the day, is starting to become fragile and that there's potential for change going on. I sensed that talking to those people three years ago.

Also, I had a meeting while I was there, a breakfast meeting we attended with some people. Two were from NGOs. You could see they were busting to say some things. Clearly, if they said anything that was the slightest bit out of the way, the heads of the officials in the room turned and looked at them very abruptly. That was very concerning.

My last comment is that when I arrived there—we were in a rush, as you are when you're on these kinds of tours—I was given an offer to go to the Great Wall or Tiananmen Square. They gave me ten minutes either/or. So I chose Tiananmen Square to stand for those ten minutes with the people who had lost their lives there.

The Chair: Would you care to respond to that?

Mr. Wayne Marston: I was looking to see if the witnesses wanted to respond about the situation with Huseyin Celil or the sense of the change in Beijing and the provinces.

Dr. Jianli Yang: Thank you very much. Thank you especially for choosing to go to Tiananmen Square to show your solidarity with the people who demonstrated on the street in Tiananmen Square. I really appreciate that. Thank you very much.

There is a clear disparity between the cities and the rural areas in China. So that's a major problem, the gap between the rich and the poor. Whenever my friends from the United States want to go to visit China, I always suggest they go to the countryside. Otherwise they will not understand what China is.

In my recent reports and talks, I always say there are two Chinas in China. One China I call "China Incorporated", which formed gradually after the Tiananmen Square incident. In the other China, you are not a citizen of China but a "shitizen" of China.

I have a specific story for that term. To make a long story short, it happened a few years ago in Shenzhen. A party official openly sexually attacked an 11-year-old girl, and when the parents protested, this party official said, "I am a party official. You're just a shit in front of me." So for the other China, we say "shitizens" of China, in a very special way, to express our discontent with the Chinese government.

This separation into two societies is unprecedented. That is why we think the so-called economic growth does not solve the economic problems of these people. The gap becomes larger and larger, and there is no sign it will stop any time soon. Recently China's premier, Wen Jiabao, commented on this quite a few times. He revealed that without protection, without the safeguard of political reform, the fruits of economic reform will be lost. That's a very important signal from inside the government.

So there is a disparity, and this disparity will become a serious problem for the Chinese people. Now what we must do is bring the two Chinas together with consensus. This consensus must be based on universal values. We have no other choice. That is why Charter 08 is so important. I think Charter 08 is important because it's an effort, an attempt, to bring the government and the people together, to reach consensus for the future China, that is a democratic, free China based on universal values.

Thank you.

• (1355)

The Chair: Unfortunately, Mr. Marston, that uses up all your time, at exactly six minutes and four seconds.

I turn now to Mr. Sweet from the Conservative Party. I see the clock, and it's giving you enough time to give your questions along with the answers.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll be brief, because my colleague has some questions as well.

This past weekend we hosted the Dalai Lama in Toronto. He was there to dedicate the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre. My colleague across the way, Mr. Bagnell, and I have been members of the Parliamentary Friends of Tibet, and have advocated for freedom of Tibetans as well. I could wax eloquently regarding the Falun Gong and the Uighur situation, but I won't do that.

What I would like to ask you is something that you just ended your remarks with. I had heard from good sources that Premier Wen Jiabao had publicly said that democratic reform was absolutely necessary for China to move forward, and I just wanted to ask you whether you felt his words resonated. I know they resonated with the average people of China, but did they resonate within the Communist Party of China, and do you see that as a very hopeful sign going forward?

Dr. Jianli Yang: Thank you for your question.

I think his comments are very important in the way he expands the boundaries of freedom of expression. His comments definitely, obviously, resonate with average people. Do they resonate with the people inside of government? I think they do, to a certain degree.

I called friends who work inside government, and they all feel the need for China to move toward democracy. But we have to realize that there's a very strong inertia in the system. When the number one person in that system does not want to do that, you can do very little or nothing. I don't think there's an agenda by the Chinese government. If the government has an agenda, it would not be Wen Jiabao to say it but rather Hu Jintao. Wen Jiabao is the number three person in the system. So it would not be him.

I think there's a very strong inertia in the system that makes everybody sitting in one room, when they try to make a decision, choose the conservative policy instead of the liberal policy, because that is safe. They would not make the mistake of saying, oh, we have to have a heavy-handed policy, a heavy-handed measure against dissidents. Nobody would make the mistake of saying that. But the person who dared to say something like what Wen Jiabao commented would endanger his or her position in that hierarchy.

I think that resonates with many people inside the government, but it doesn't mean that change will take place tomorrow. It still takes citizens to provoke the democratic forces in civil society and force the government to split, force the party to split. The people with whom Premier Wen Jiabao resonated, when they're unified and have to remain public, will choose to work with the civil forces, the democratic forces. That will present the opportunity for real change in China.

• (1400)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hiebert, you'll be our last questioner today.

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier in your testimony you both talked about how western countries have used economic relationships with China to promote human rights. Later you mentioned that businesses absolutely need the respect for the rule of law.

I'm wondering to what degree you think the Chinese government recognizes that for the economic reforms that have occurred, and for the future growth of their economy to occur, that will require relationships with companies outside of China, and the trust element that's essential to those relationships is in fact the rule of law.

Do you think the Government of China recognizes how it needs to have a cleanly uncorrupted system of the rule of law established deeply within its country so that other corporations from other nations can develop the relationships that they are looking for, going forward?

Ms. Maran Turner: I'll comment briefly.

I certainly hope it does, and I think at some point it'll have to recognize that. At the moment, unfortunately, so many businesses are not making that a requirement, or not forcing it upon the Chinese system. They're happily going in and conducting business inside China without that being any sort of prerequisite. But certainly if business is to continue, I think at some point the Chinese government is going to have to start making some reform. Otherwise I think it's just going to be more and more problematic, and businesses are eventually going to become more deterred.

With that, I couldn't possibly divine the contents of the minds of the Chinese government. I think Dr. Yang might be better able to answer that.

Dr. Jianli Yang: Thank you, Maran.

Yes, I think, based on my personal experience communicating with friends inside the government, that even the top leaders recognize the importance of the rule of law for business itself, if not for other things. The problem is, as I said, with the nature of the system and also the interest groups.

Earlier today I said that two Chinas exist in China. One China is called China Inc., formed gradually over the past 20 years after the Tiananmen Square massacre. This China Inc. formed because the Chinese government realized they had to incorporate the intellectuals and the capitalists, otherwise they would not survive. Then, for reasons of survival, they formed a very strong interest group in China.

They used a few strategies to survive. First was economic growth, that without growth the legitimacy would be lost overnight. Second was to keep stability and increase the police force to build up the stability-preserving system, which takes the general public as enemies. Third was nationalistic sentiment, the so-called patriotic education. And fourth, corruption became one of the strategies for the Chinese government to survive. Corruption gives the intellectuals, the elites—economic elites, intellectual elites, political elites—at each level, local officials, the opportunity to corrupt. Whatever they want to do, that's all right, except for anything that challenges the power of the central government. They actually use it as an exchange for loyalty. Over time, this will form, and has already formed, a very strong interest group that even the top leader cannot break.

So they recognize the importance of the rule of law, not only for other things but for economic growth. They need the rule of law, but they are in a position where they would not be able to break the interest group. That is why Premier Wen Jiabao came out to say what he said. What he said does not indicate that he wants to do something. Instead, it indicates that he's just lost hope in the system. He wants to say it, he wants to cry out for that, before he retires.

To solve this problem, we cannot work only with the government; we also have to look at the civil society, the people. We have to engage directly with the people inside China, and we have to help them develop and build up the power, the democratic forces. Without that, I don't think the interest circle, which I've just described to you, will be broken by itself.

Thank you.

• (1405)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That completes the questioning, and unfortunately we're out of time. In fact, we're a little over time.

I'll take this opportunity to thank both of our witnesses, Dr. Yang and Ms. Turner. We're very grateful that you were able to take the time on short notice to bring us up to speed on what I think we would agree with you is arguably the most important human rights situation in the world today. So I would express our gratitude to you. Thank you very much.

Committee members, before I adjourn, I want to alert you to the fact that we are going to be having a change of witnesses and hearing topics for next Tuesday due to an unanticipated scheduling problem that has arisen.

On Thursday we're going to see if we can meet a half hour earlier—the clerk will be contacting your offices—in order to take care of committee business. Hopefully that will work. If it doesn't work, we'll have to find an alternative arrangement, perhaps an additional meeting. I know nobody wants that. So we'll be taking care of that outside of business hours. But the goal will be to find a time to deal with a couple of the things—scheduling issues and financial issues in terms of getting some approvals taken care of. I'll leave it there.

Thank you very much. We are adjourned.

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