

The silence of the British left on Hong Kong

Thursday 23 January 2020, by [EYRES Harry](#) (Date first published: 10 January 2020).

Jeremy Corbyn appears to have devoted more time to tending vegetables than voicing his thoughts on the fight of Hong Kongers against the erosion of their rights and freedoms.

The Hong Kong protests are the defining freedom struggle of our time. Young pro-democracy activists are risking their lives to square up to an opaque authoritarian regime that censors, imprisons and oppresses millions.

Yet the British left is – with a few notable exceptions, such as Labour MPs Catherine West and Helen Goodman – nowhere to be seen.

A parallel can be drawn with Spain in the 1930s. When a right-wing military coup against the democratically elected Second Republic in July 1936 led to a full-scale civil war, the majority of the British left – despite the immense complexity of the Spanish imbroglio – at least agreed about the vital importance of defending the Republic. Thousands of young British leftists went out to fight for the Republic in the International Brigades; hundreds died as a result.

For the poets WH Auden, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender, Spain was the inescapable political and existential challenge of the time. Though the then *New Statesman* editor Kingsley Martin and contributor George Orwell may have disagreed violently on the role of Russia and communism in the Spanish war, they would at least have concurred that not taking a stand in defence of the Spanish Republic meant acceding to the rise of fascism.

No such spirit animates the British left, and more specifically the Labour Party, when it comes to the brave and perilous stand of Hong Kongers against the erosion of their rights and freedoms, backed with increasing violence, by China. Questioned last month on the *Today* programme, the shadow international trade secretary Barry Gardiner could only flounder: he spoke, rather oddly, about “*the escalation of violence between protestors in Hong Kong and ordinary people in Hong Kong*”, almost appearing to blame the protestors, or at least falling into the position of deploring violence on both sides, in an unwitting echo of Donald Trump’s comments after Charlottesville.

Gardiner was also unable to answer Justin Webb’s question about whether Hong Kongers holding British National Overseas (BNO) passports would be given permanent rights to live and work in the UK.

Meanwhile, Jeremy Corbyn appears to have devoted more time to tending winter vegetables than voicing his thoughts on this burning issue.

Writing in *Labour List* in August, the British-Chinese writer Xiao Hua called out the Labour Party and its leader on these matters, citing John McDonnell’s failure to support the BNO campaign, officially espoused by the Lib Dems in the last election and endorsed by the vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group, Hong Kong, Lord Alton, and in relation to Jeremy Corbyn’s silence on Hong Kong, commenting that “*a leader who has an admirable record for consistently voicing the concerns of oppressed people across the globe has allowed this injustice to pass him by.*”

Perhaps stung by these criticisms, Corbyn did voice some concerns about Hong Kong in a speech in the Commons on 3 September. But his three sentences on the subject [“*Mr Speaker, we are all concerned about the situation in Hong Kong. No government, anywhere, should get to shut down rights and freedoms or to pick and choose which laws it adheres to. Will he urge the Chinese government to stick with the joint declaration of 1984 and stand up for the rights of citizens in Hong*”

Kong?”], coming after remarks about the Amazon and Iran, seemed more like the exception that proves the rule than a change of heart.

Elsewhere, the London Review of Books published a piece by the young Chinese writer Sheng Yun, painting a picture of a generation happy to indulge in shopping and online porn while having their basic political rights curtailed. The article played into a view of Chinese millennials as largely apolitical – a view contradicted by the sight of tens of thousands of young adults, students and even children repeatedly taking to the streets in Hong Kong, inspired by articulate student activists such as Joshua Wong.

Though the posture of the Conservative Party leadership towards China has been largely supine (no doubt influenced by trade concerns and following in the kowtowing line initiated by George Osborne), certain voices of the British right – Chris Patten, Tom Tugendhat – have been much more robust in their support of the Hong Kong protesters than any politician on the left. Patten got up the nose of the Chinese Communist Party when he was the last governor (his ambitious electoral reform proposals led to a heated war of words with Beijing and were eventually watered down), and as former chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tugendhat is one of the few MPs vigorously to support the BNO campaign.

The question remains, why should the right be more vocal on such a crucial issue of human rights and democracy than the left?

It seems hard to escape the conclusion that Corbyn and his circle find it impossible to support the Hong Kong protestors with any conviction because, instinctively and atavistically, they see Hong Kong as an emblem of a kind of capitalism they deplore, whereas at a deep level their sympathies lie more with “Communist” China.

As the former Labour activist Gray Sergeant put it in Labour Uncut, their view could be summed up as “why should you stand with a city which symbolises some of the worst excesses of capitalism?” Corbyn’s decision to attend the state banquet for Xi Jinping in 2015, then to boycott the Trump state banquet earlier this year, could be taken to confirm this hunch.

Much is indeed wrong with capitalism as represented by Hong Kong (levels of inequality are shockingly high and housing conditions often miserable) and its incomplete democracy is a work in progress.

But surely those failings pale into insignificance compared to the immense human rights abuses of the Chinese regime, evinced in Tibet for decades, in Xinjiang against the Uighurs more recently and now in Hong Kong? Doesn’t the extraordinary, heart-stopping sight of millions of citizens coming out onto the streets, day after day for months, in defence of democratic rights and freedoms we consider basic, call for more than virtual silence?

Harry Eyres is a journalist, writer and poet

P.S.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2020/01/silence-british-left-hong-kong>