November China Talk

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Good evening and thank you for this opportunity to share with you my thinking, my ever-evolving thinking, about Canada-China relations, a topic that is dear to my heart, and one that was central to my professional life.

I don't claim to be a China hand, much less a Sinologist. I have found that any association with China tends to get you more credit than is your due. People outside of China tend to see it as a distant, exotic and somewhat inaccessible library. And they assume that anyone who has actually found that library and made it past the imposing doors must have mastered every book on its numberless shelves.

I have spent a lot of time in the wonderful library that is modern China, but I feel as if I've barely made it out of the extensive section intended for new readers.

But before anybody asks for his money back, let me assure you that I have spent more than 30 years thinking about a tiny subset of that much larger subject, specifically China's relationship with Canada. The re-emergence of China has been the central foreign policy development of my career, and I was lucky enough to experience some of its most dramatic chapters. It's actually hard for me to connect the China that I first experienced as a newly minted Foreign Service officer with the place I retired from many years later.

Setting up operations in China was, in the early 1980s, something of an achievement. I remember being awed back then to receive telexes from a Canadian business person operating from an office in the Beijing Hotel who ended his messages with the postscript "Alone in China." It wasn't true even then, but it certainly impressed my neophyte self.

The Shanghai that I worked in 30 years ago was a drab, soot-covered shadow of its 1930s art deco heyday. It was so untouched by time that Steven Spielberg filmed his World War ll epic, Empire of the Sun, without masking anything of the city's downtown. I am very familiar with the film because my wife appears in it as an extra. That magical moment 18 minutes in when she hails a taxi still commands family attention whenever it is shown on TV.

That was then. I ended my government career in 2012 in a China that was by that time far and away the world's second largest economy; a China of high-speed trains, futuristic airports and luxury cars; and a China in which the ubiquity of Microsoft, McDonalds and Marriott had long ceased to be newsworthy.

The last 3 decades have seen China transform itself from being a closed-off and backward place struggling to emerge from the trauma of the Cultural Revolution to its current status as a challenger to

the United States for global hegemony. It is an evolution that has been increasingly consequential for China's neighbors near and far, Canada included.

Indeed, I would argue that China's rise brings with it the dawn of a new era in Canada's international relations, requiring of us a new kind of diplomacy. We need to embrace, and sooner rather than later, what I would describe as a grown-up approach to foreign policy, a more sophisticated management of our interests in a changing world, a world in which China is increasingly important. This is a timely topic in a year that has seen back-to-back leader-level visits between Canada and China. The hope has been expressed, on both sides of the Pacific that Justin Trudeau will be able to channel some of his father's vision and purpose so as to usher in a new golden age in Canada-China relations.

I want to talk about whether that hope is realistic or, as currently imagined, even desirable. And, while I'm at it, I want to get personal, sharing some of my experiences as a Canadian diplomat, and as a religious believer, a Catholic in modern China.

That's timely, too, because the Church is engaged in the latest chapter of a long negotiation with China's communist rulers, hoping to reverse a pattern that has, to date, offered 2 steps back for every one forward when it comes to being allowed to fulfill its mission freely and faithfully. And it's timely, too, because religious freedom is part of a larger current in Canada-China relations, human rights. I want to explore the question of whether human rights should be a priority on our bilateral agenda, and whether Canada has a role in promoting religious freedom for China's Catholics, Muslims or Buddhists.

I have said that I want to make the case for the rise of China ushering in a new normal in Canadian foreign policy. Up until very recently, we've enjoyed the luxury of having the most important questions that a foreign policy is designed to safeguard--our prosperity and our security--comfortably embedded within the context of our relationship with the United States. And although the recent election has given us all at least some cause for concern, I think we can agree that Canada has flourished under the Pax Americana that has prevailed since the end of the 2nd World War.

Like the person who was born on 3rd base and grew up thinking he'd hit a Triple, our geographical advantage has allowed us to believe that we occupy an exalted status, one in which how and when we engage the rest of the world, the non-US part of it, is entirely up to us. We haven't attached much importance to cultivating long-term relationships with other countries, particularly other countries that aren't like us. Who Canada is friends with tends to be dictated by vagaries of the Prime Minister's travel schedule. For most countries, it's the other way around: foreign engagements are strategic. This aversion to strategic thinking has resulted in an inconsistent, will 'o the wisp approach to our relationship with other important countries. Japan is a priority one year, India the next and "the Americas" the year after that.

This tendency to dabble abroad has been exacerbated by two unfortunate distractions. The first is a rather well-developed sense of self-regard, typified in the assertion that the world needs more Canada. Lost in this is the sense that we might need other countries or, that other countries might have their

very own plans for us. An Australian ambassador once said that although his country didn't have a China strategy, China almost certainly had an Australia strategy. It almost certainly has a Canada strategy, too.

The second distraction is the steady encroachment of the 24/7 election cycle, the relentless politicization of governance, a process through which international relations become an exotic extension of Canadian politics. Foreign policy is reduced to foreign travel which is reduced to foreign photo ops, reflecting back to us a reassuring impression of how worldly and tolerant we are.

As tempting as it can be to replace a telescope with a mirror, there are trends out there worthy of our careful attention. And China is the source of many of these. Much of my recent book on Canada-China relations is about how the rise of China is reverberating across Canadian society, from how homes are bought and sold in Vancouver to how lobsters are marketed in Nova Scotia, from China's public diplomacy in Canada—think of Confucius Institutes and cuddly Pandas—to clandestine efforts to intimidate Canadians, to shut down voices, here in Canada, that China considers problematic.

We should be paying careful attention, now more than ever. And we're not.

We should be paying attention because current trends point to a China that will be even more influential, assertive and unpredictable in the years ahead.

China continues to defy expectations. If you had polled China watchers 10 years ago, the majority would have said that governance in China was following a peaceful and promising trajectory, a reassuring path from rule by a single leader, Mao Zedong, to rule by a consensus among an ever growing collection of senior leaders and advisers. If democracy wasn't in the wings, at least we could expect higher degrees of balance, prudence and predictability as more constituencies were heard from.

But the steady ascendancy of President and Party leader Xi Jinping has confounded these expectations. Let me be clear. We are not returning to the Mao Zedong era. Xi is not attempting to bolster his leadership through a cult of personality. That said, he has made it increasingly clear that he is *more* than a first among equals in the Chinese system. He has steadily seized control of all the levers of power, including power over the military and over the security apparatus. He has, through an ambitious and ominously enduring campaign against corruption, which is eliminating more than a few troublesome rivals in the process, signalled that no one, no matter how senior, can safely defy him. Indeed, the Central Committee of the Party last month dusted off the rarely used epithet of "Core Leader" and bestowed it on Xi.

This matters immensely because Xi's centralization of power imperils efforts to build into China's governance mechanisms for a predictable and orderly transfer of power. A big part of such a system is premised, at least in China, on the confidence that a leader can step down without worrying whether he and his supporters will be purged and imprisoned arbitrarily (or even legitimately) by the next regime. Many, myself included, worry that Xi has let that particular genie back out of the bottle. When it comes to succession, all bets are off.

It is important here to think carefully about what appears to be motivating Xi. And let me assure you that I will only briefly don the mantle of pop psychologist. While a personal agenda, inspired by a desire for wealth or power, can never be ruled out, I would argue that Xi's true motivation is more strategic and political. Almost everything he has done, from suppressing freedom of religion and freedom of speech to attacking corruption, has had as its objective reinforcing the power and authority of China's Communist Party, ensuring that it is widely supported as the only legitimate option for the long-term governance of China.

Now, and this is where the pop-psychology comes in, this seems very strange from someone like Xi, whose own father was broken and destroyed by the Party during the Cultural revolution, and given the fact that Xi was himself banished to the countryside at that time. But I think that these experiences instilled in Xi a stark, binary view of China's possibilities: you can have the Party or you can have brutal chaos. Put another way, it's better to be within the Party's tent than wandering in the wilderness outside of it. Xi Jinping is the ultimate Party man.

He has tapped into Chinese nationalism, a fiery source of political energy that the Communist Party carefully tends and, selectively stokes. And his public humiliation of corrupt officials, from the most senior (called tigers) to the very modest (dubbed flies) is also hugely popular. This is all the more compelling because he manages to convey the image, an accurate one, I believe, of personal probity and plain living. This has allowed him to assume, easily and comfortably, the homey nickname of Xi Dada, Uncle Xi, if not beloved then at least admired by China's Lao Baixing, the old one hundred names, the regular Joes.

The result of all this activity, Xi's infectious patriotism, and his bracing call to rectitude, is a sort of suspended sentence, the postponement of the Party's inevitable rendezvous with history.

Tapping into nationalism and nostalgia, including the selective deployment of Mao's complicated legacy, provides much of the energy necessary to carry off Xi's ambitious agenda. It helps to sustain an assertive foreign policy, provides a rationale for stifling dissent, and offers a distraction for less than spectacular economic performance.

Above all, it offers a justification for continuing rule by the Communist Party, the Party of Mao Zedong, which is the central objective of Xi Jinping's leadership.

Accepting this explains many characteristics of the Xi Jinping era, among them a less ambitious commitment to economic reform. Unlike his predecessors, Xi is not about to cede more authority to market forces. This is true even though reformers, like Xi's own Premier, Li Keqiang, have argued that liberalization of the economy is the key to reigniting growth. That may be, but the priority, for Xi, is ensuring that the Party retains control of all levers of power.

This also explains the longevity and ferocity of the anti-corruption campaign, reflecting Xi's accurate assessment that public resentment of corrupt officials is a grave threat to the Party's continuing rule.

And it provides the rationale for Xi's relentless efforts to root out so called western influences in the media and academia and his implacable desire not just to control but to sinicize religious belief, to make it more Chinese, more susceptible to the Party's guiding hand.

So, how is Xi doing? It depends, as everything in China depends, on your perspective. In the short term, he looks pretty good. He remains popular despite a slowing economy, and China continues to consolidate, if not expand, its regional and global influence.

Longer term, the picture is less bright. Pessimists believe that Xi's back to the future approach to governance suggests that he will not go quietly into retirement at the end of his second 5 year term, and will find some means of retaining continuing control. But if Xi does this, he is taking a major risk. Not only does he provide a compelling a agenda for his own rivals, who could describe themselves as patriotic reformers, but it also points China into an uncertain and potentially dangerous future.

In a system that is increasingly predictable and governed by traditions, if not rules, there is reason to hope that the country is embarked on a long, careful process of evolution and reform. Abandoning that path casts a shadow over hopes for progress in governance, and gives ambitious and unprincipled people throughout the system cover to undo the many small initiatives, the grass-roots experiments that build to larger systemic change.

That's bad in itself, and fatal for the Party. It is evident that we have come to the end of the great experiment, launched in the chaos and uncertainty that followed the Tiananmen massacre, in which the Party bought stability through economic growth and rising expectations. Even modest efforts at democratization were put on hold as the economy grew at break-neck speed. Reform, such as it was, was restricted to making the Party more corporate, less of a one-man show. Now, even this appears to be on hold.

It worked for almost 20 years. But slowing growth and rising corruption emboldened people to question the status quo. Their scepticism was enabled through the increasing internationalization of Chinese society, and facilitated through new technologies, most notably social media.

Xi's mix of patriotism and pragmatism has given the Party a reprieve. He is gambling, doubling down on patriotism rather than reform, hoping that he can convince China's people that perpetual rule by the Party is both inevitable and desirable.

The Chinese Communist Party is a remarkably adaptive organism. But it is burdened by its own history of extreme violence and repression, and it is highly resistant to the kind of openness that is increasingly expected by modern societies. Whether it has the ability to meet looming challenges posed by environmental degradation, and a stalled economic reform program just as the bill comes due for decades of ruthless demographic experimentation through the one-child policy is a question that is being posed with increasing urgency.

My own sense is that given China's resilience, depth of talent and inherent dynamism, it will find a way to muddle through. But at the cost of stability and predictability at home and in its foreign relations. China's not about to implode or fracture, but we should all be prepared for a bumpy ride.

This means that, for the foreseeable future, we will have to deal with this deeply flawed entity that is the Party, the architect of China's resurgence, and architect of some of its darkest and bloodiest experiences. But even as we continue to find a modus vivendi with the Party, we must also be open to what I think of as China's constituencies for change, the journalists who want to be fearless reporters, the teachers and writers who want to dedicate themselves to the truth, and the activists who dare to dream of a better future.

I believe that our number one foreign policy challenge is figuring out how to share the planet with a China that is home to many contradictions, that has *always* been home to contradictions. We need to navigate our Canadian future alongside a China is assertive and insecure, that prides itself on being the Middle Kingdom but complains about being banished to the peripheries, that vaunts its culture, ancient and modern, and imprisons its artists and scholars, that preaches the gospel of non-interference and interferes relentlessly in its own neighborhood and, as Canadians are increasingly aware, far beyond.

So how should the Canada of the 2nd Trudeau era respond to this bundle of contradictions?

We should start by seeing China as it is. For too long, we have tended to vacillate between 2 extreme positions.

The first, and in many ways the hardiest and most enduring of these is to see China as a Canadian project, a country that can, with the right amount of help and encouragement, become just like us. The most modern manifestation of this tendency, at once generous and naïve, is strongly associated with the Liberal party of Canada, and is rooted in the 1960s and 1970s, what we might call the recognition era. That's when intellectuals in the West believed in the emergence of the New China, presided over by a storied Communist Party led by Mao Zedong, still seen by many as a wily and engaging peasant philosopher.

Canadians in the recognition era saw themselves as having a lead role in helping to construct the new China that Mao promised. And we did indeed make major contributions, particularly in the field of higher education. The notion that we should partner with the Communist Party in overseeing China's steady transformation into a like-minded major power even survived Tiananmen. As recently as the 2000s the Liberal Party was considering establishing the kind of party-to-party relations with the Communist Party of China that they had with America's Democrats. This naïve optimism lives on into the present. It surfaced during the Prime Minister's recent visit when he suggested that we could help China position itself on the world stage. As if helping Canada position itself on the world stage wasn't job enough!

This plays to our vanity, to our "the world needs more Canada" complex. And it plays to our tendency to see the China that we want to see, rather than the far more complicated China that's out there before our eyes.

But a very different view of China has also held sway in large parts of Canada off and on since the creation of the People's Republic, particularly among members of Canada's Conservative Party. China, in this conception, isn't so much a promising work in progress, as it is a relentlessly antagonistic and dangerous outlier, not our golden future, but the sum of all fears.

This was the view of the Harper government for a significant portion of its time in power. That stubborn conviction, coupled with the Conservatives' tremendous impatience with traditional diplomacy, rendered them unable to understand what their Chinese interlocutors were telling them, or to communicate effectively in return. If the Liberals tended to ignore the significant negatives associated with the Communist Party of China, that's all that the Conservatives tended to see. They also largely ignored the many avenues for cooperation with those "constituencies of change," I talked about.

And both the Liberals and Conservatives are hindered by their dedication to the 24/7 election campaign. Foreign policy is no longer seen as a responsibility entrusted to successive governments for their careful stewardship. It has become a political tool, part of the spoils of war won by the victorious Party.

No democratic governments is immune from using foreign travel as an exotic extension of domestic politics. But my sense is that recent Canadian governments have taken this to new depths. I talked in my book about seeing Canadian ministerial aides manhandling senior Chinese officials to set up a photo op. At other times, they were more hands off, leaving senior Chinese guests in lonely isolation at banquets, while they hustled the Prime Minister off to pose with long lines of Chinese and Canadian guests. The rhythms of our engagement with China have come to be determined by the vagaries of political polling in Canada. Governments now follow rather than lead public opinion on sensitive foreign policy questions.

In my final year in China I came to the worrying conclusion that the government, at the political level, was behaving this way, not because politicians didn't understand the cost to Canadian interests, but because they really didn't care. Short-term political advantage back home trumped, and trumps (no pun intended) every other consideration.

Canada tends to see the China of its fondest imaginings or worst fears, and it tends to engage China as an exotic extension of Canadian politics. This doesn't sound like a promising basis from which to embark on a new kind of foreign policy, one that sees Canada deftly navigating in a world in which we have many opportunities but fewer real friends, in which major emerging powers like China will choose to engage us, regardless of whether we feel inclined to engage them.

So, what would a successful Canadian engagement of China look like?

First, it would be launched in Canada. We need a serious public debate about why we need to engage China in the first place if we are to protect and promote our security, our prosperity and our well being. We need to convince Canadians that talking to China is not the same thing as agreeing with China and, at the same time, remind Canadians that there are actually many voices in China with whom we might actually agree. We also need to reassure Canadians that, despite China's size and growing power, we are

still capable of managing disagreements and of saying no. As China watcher James Fallows likes to say, we should respect China, but we shouldn't fear it.

Second, we should invest in China competence. Here we can take a lesson from countries like Australia, New Zealand and the US, where students are encouraged to study abroad, where priority is attached to learning Asian languages, starting with Chinese, and where there is growing recognition of the importance of ensuring that national cabinets and corporate boards are staffed with at least some people with experience of China.

Third, we need to focus carefully, and attach true priority to the relationship. Our mission in Afghanistan struggled until John Manley and his panel made the recommendation that we shift from having 100 or more "priorities" to having four or five. Manley also made it clear that the mission was sufficiently important that it needed to be "owned" by the Prime Minister and directed by cabinet. China is far more important than Afghanistan ever was to us. We need to attach even higher priority to our relationship with China. The Prime Minister, like his father, needs to take the lead here. And the first thing he should do is to help us focus not on 100 things, but on the four or five things that we absolutely need to get right.

And what would these be? Canadian prosperity, our ability to create jobs and to invest in things like infrastructure, health care, schools, depends fundamentally on the health of our economy. And the health of our economy depends, increasingly, on the health of our trade relationship with China, the world's second largest economy. While China isn't nearly as important to us as the US is, it is far more important than any of our other partners.

China is also fundamental to our security. We have a stake in ensuring that China's continuing rise is peaceful, that it helps to maintain stability in east Asia, and that China, in the words of the Senior American official Robert Zoellick, becomes a responsible stakeholder, capable of constraining North Korea, and cooperating to combat terrorism and piracy.

If we take a hard nosed look at things, that's not the trajectory that China is on at the moment. China appears unwilling and/or incapable of restraining North Korea. And, if anything, its remorseless assertiveness is destabilizing east and southeast Asia, and is beginning to represent a challenge and threat to our closest ally, the United States. Indeed, we seem remarkably unconcerned that our most important and second most important trading partners are now locked in an increasingly tense standoff.

That means that we have to invest more in traditional defence, not to mount a challenge to China, but to engage positively with the Chinese military on training and cooperation. We need to show that the Asia-Pacific region isn't simply a zone for Sino-American conflict, and that many countries share that space. We welcome China's rise, but we have expectations of the role China can and should play.

We also have to admit that China poses a direct challenge to our security in terms of espionage, cyber as well as human, and in terms of interference in Canadian affairs, whether it be by attempting to silence critical voices or by intimidating Canadians of Chinese origin, particularly in the Tibetan and Muslim Uighur communities. There is no escaping the fact that we need to do a better job detecting and

deterring clandestine efforts by China to interfere in Canadian society. Simply being seen to be willing and able to make the effort is an important first step.

A third Canadian priority, by my accounting, would fall under the heading of what I call wellbeing. China is increasingly part of the problem and part of the solution when it comes to the environment, global health and food safety. The road to global progress in each of these areas now necessarily passes through Beijing.

I would round out my list with a fourth priority: establishing a full and effective program to address human rights. This should be an ambitious undertaking, and include things like quiet diplomacy and public pressure, training and exchanges, collaboration and a division of labour with like-minded allies, and support for fledgling Chinese organizations.

Now suggesting that we make human rights a priority within the bilateral relationship is not without critics and controversy, in Canada as well as in China.

Canadian critics, who can be very vociferous, cite two main reasons for not including human rights on our list.

The first objection might best be described as a "realist" argument. Under this, critics argue that China is simply too big and too powerful too be approached, much less persuaded on this basis. It is presumptuous to attempt to lecture (and it is always described as lecturing) a country with 30 times our population, and whose problems are 30 times as complex.

The second objection is what I would call a relativist argument, in which it is argued that when Canadians invoke human rights they are really only invoking western values that are alien and inappropriate in a Chinese context.

Both these arguments have merit, and both should be carefully considered. Indeed, the very real issues they raise for consideration immediately rule out any possibility that we can or should stand on our Canadian soapbox and lecture China. But there are powerful counter arguments that are, in my view, ultimately more persuasive.

They include the fact that a human rights engagement of China is no longer primarily focussed in or on China. We need to understand that a confident and increasingly assertive China is taking the discussion beyond its borders, into the international space. China's argument is that economic freedom is as important as political freedom and inevitably precedes it. This is an attractive argument in many parts of the developing world, particularly given the fact, amply borne out in China, that political freedom can be handily postponed for a future that never comes.

So, this is now a global debate, and one that we cannot afford to sit out or ignore.

A second counter argument is that it is false to suggest that calling for greater freedom and human rights betrays a western perspective. Indeed, it is downright condescending to make such an argument. Recent Chinese history abounds with examples of champions of human freedom who made their

arguments in Chinese terms and in a Chinese context. Indeed, the example of modern, democratic Taiwan provides an instructive counter example, as does the courageous umbrella movement for greater democracy in Hong Kong.

There is a third reason why we need to include a discussion of human rights in our engagement of China and that is because we live in a democracy, and the Canadian people expect that we necessarily talk about serious things like this with serious partners. This doesn't mean that we have to succumb to the unrealistic belief that we're going to help China become more like us. But it does mean that we are willing to reach out and engage and better understand those individuals and communities in China who are trying to effect positive change in Chinese terms. An effective human rights dialogue isn't about lecturing China, or imposing a made in Canada solution on China. It is instead about listening, sharing, collaborating on ideas of mutual interest and mutual benefit, and in our modest, helpfully Canadian way, encouraging the emergence of Chinese ideas, of Chinese solutions.

My favourite example of this approach was a program sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency but eagerly, actively and equally supported by partners in China, including the All China Women's Federation, local governments in Guangdong Province, even the Chinese Railway. The idea was to find ways to alert migrant workers to laws, policies, regulations and resources that would protect them in a sometimes predatory working environment.

This wasn't Canada standing on a soapbox and lecturing China, it was about Canada partnering with Chinese agencies to promote reforms that we all supported. We all wanted to help vulnerable migrant workers use the system to protect themselves from exploitation. The Railway, for example, offered to provide brochures and information to passengers who might be at risk, typically young women travelling from the country side to the big city.

Now, while I want to make the case for taking on the realists and challenging the relativists, I do have to admit that my confidence was shaken by a penetrating critique that strikes, and strikes hard at the very foundations on which my assumption is based.

In a review of my book, Paul Evans, a professor at UBC, a highly respected authority on Canada in Asia, and friendly antagonist made the point that my perspective on China and human rights is that of a Catholic who believes in the universality of basic human rights underpinned, as he points out, by a natural law tradition of thought.

Guilty as charged. That's absolutely true, and I will come back to that in a moment. But Evans is getting at something else with this argument. He argues, not without justification, that my particular take on things, my bias he would say, leads me to invest too heavily in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, authored in 1945.

I have institutional connections to two framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One, John Peters Humphrey was a Canadian Public Servant, which I once was. Another, Jacques Maritain, was closely associated with the University of St. Michael's College, where I currently work.

The Canadian Public Service is deeply proud of Humphrey, but not being a particularly introspective organization, it doesn't spend much time thinking about the justification for the claim of universality. It basks in Humphrey's authorship of what Eleanor Roosevelt famously declared the Magna Carta of mankind, but never asks to see his homework, how we make the case for universal human rights.

Maritain's writings show his homework, how he makes the case that universal rights are both real and discernable. They allow us to fulfill our destinies as created beings, if we are to become the people we were born to be. He was also honest enough to concede that, even 70 years ago, there was something less than unanimity around the question of universality. But careful negotiating and drafting, and the overwhelming dominance of the major western powers, who were then less troubled about such claims, allowed the document to see the light of day.

The then Republic of China was a signatory. While the modern People's Republic has not repudiated the document, it is not inclined to acknowledge claims to universality. It also argues that any accession to greater rights is necessarily incremental and only follows economic development.

It reminds me of that legendary sign: Free Beer. Tomorrow.

Evans makes the point, and I think it is a valid one, that we would be unable to get anything like unanimity around a similar inventory of rights today. And if you read between the lines of his argument, he's pointing out that the problem isn't just with countries like China. It's with us, too. If right and wrong are not based on what is written in our hearts but what's in our heads, as fleeting and transitory and deeply personal as that might be, it's impossible to speak in universal terms.

I had intimations of this while I was in government. At the start of my career in far-off 1981, there was little daylight between what I believed as a Catholic and what amounted to what might be described as Canadian values. That wasn't true by the closing decade of my career. This didn't come to me through any dramatic revelation but through smaller epiphanies, signs that I might be on the wrong side of a growing ideological divide.

I came to believe that on contentious issues, like abortion, Canadian officials working at the multilateral level, at the UN and elsewhere, held views that were not only different from my own, but ideologically autonomous, resistant to evolution even in the wake of profound electoral change. I saw this first hand when I served as Foreign and Defence Policy Adviser in the first year of the Harper Government. This was and is a professional, non-partisan appointment, and my role was not to promote a particular policy position, but simply to ensure that there was complete transparency on policy issues, including policy issues at the UN. I can recall trying to clarify for the new government Canada's position under the heading of Reproductive Health, which concerned itself with things like access to contraception and abortion. It was very difficult to get any information. Officials stalled and temporized, and largely because, as I came to believe, they didn't want to open up processes and decision points that they felt might be threatened by the political agenda of the new government. They seemed to identify more clearly with like-minded colleagues in other western delegations. Indeed, if anything could be described as an imposition of western values, this was it.

This troubled me for two reasons. First, it seemed to me a failure of the democratic values of which the public service is justifiably proud.

Second, it pointed to the fact that I was becoming something of an outlier in my own public service community. This growing divide, separating me from those who continued to be my respected professional colleagues, became apparent in other ways. When I later served as ambassador in China, I was on one occasion asked to sign off on a project sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The project involved providing business training and skills development for what were referred to as Sex Workers in ethnic Tibetan communities. The idea was to make them better at their jobs and therefore safer.

But I felt that the project was deeply flawed and wrong. I didn't believe for a moment that Tibetan women, living in hardscrabble communities on the stony plateaux of south west China somehow selected this de-humanizing and perilous path. I argued that Canada was wealthy enough, and CIDA capable enough, to offer training in alternative livelihoods, so that these women wouldn't have to sell themselves to feed their families. CIDA's proposal sounded like a flawed, made-in-Canada interpretation of a very real Tibetan tragedy. It was quite the opposite of the migrant worker project I described just a few minutes ago. I said that I was unable to approve the project. Although I had been told that my agreement was essential, CIDA found a work around and the project went forward.

While I was in China, the Conservative government also announced its intention to name an ambassador for religious freedom. I welcomed the idea, but I was concerned that the project might founder if the government succumbed to the temptation of politicizing the office, a charge of which I can't completely acquit them. But the reaction within the department of Foreign Affairs was different. Many colleagues complained, asking, not entirely rhetorically, if the government was also going to name an ambassador for atheism. It was clear that many of my colleagues saw this initiative as unfairly favouring religious believers, as if protecting them from persecution was a plum that would have to be balanced with some equally gratuitous gesture to other groups. It was as if freedom of religion wasn't under threat, as if it wasn't particularly important.

But I saw it under threat daily in China. And, as a Catholic, I felt it. It hurt to see the Church constrained and under siege. I tried to channel that personal distress into a more general inclination to do my best to support religious freedom writ large, across China, and in relation to any and all believers.

This impulse was allied to my broader fascination with religious faith in China, a country with a rich array of beliefs and believers.

So, when I finally was granted permission to travel to Lhasa and beyond, I fought to see something of Tibetan Buddhism, battling with Chinese officials who would otherwise have filled my program with happy-talking proponents of the regime.

On a trip to Yunnan, I was able to sneak into a Protestant House Church, something that would have been impossible in Beijing, where such places are ringed by security officials. I spent a couple of hours in

a sunny courtyard listening to elderly people from one of China's many minority cultures sing hymns and read their bibles.

In Xinjiang, I resorted to more subterfuge, slipping away to visit Muslim communities and believers and, in one case, finding myself followed by a carload of burly security types.

I was keenly interested in what I saw and often reported on my experiences on social media. This in turn generated interesting responses and queries. Some of my reports sometimes elicited expressions of deep anxiety about Islam in general and Muslim Uighurs in particular, something I tried to deflect by underlining, as a friendly outsider, my keen interest in China's rich mix of cultures.

The Catholic China of my Beijing days was very different from the struggling, re-emerging Church that I knew in Shanghai in the 1980s. The Church was growing, albeit not as quickly as Protestant denominations, but it was benefitting from a wise and generous overture that Pope Benedict had initiated through a wonderful 2007 letter to the Chinese faithful—all of them.

In it, Benedict attempted to collapse the wall separating the state Church from the underground Church, recognising that there were faithful believers on both sides, and creating space and conditions for new growth. And the Church worked behind the scenes allowing for the ordination of bishops who, while unobjectionable to the government, were clearly also loyal to Rome.

But that Catholic Spring was short-lived. By 2009, when I returned to Beijing, China was basking in the glow of praise for its dynamic economic model. Assertiveness was the order of the day, and compromise far less necessary. Positive overtures to the Church were reversed, and officials were once again aggressively bending the Church to the Party's will, in some cases frog-marching elderly priests and bishops to rigged meetings, and insisting that only a national Church, and one clearly subservient to the Party, would be tolerated.

I was struck by the re-emergence of old and absurd fears. I recall hearing the foreign minister, a senior official in a nuclear armed state, spit out in rage the 3 syllables Fan Di Gang, the Chinese name for a tiny and far-off Roman enclave: the Vatican.

I was once forced to endure a finger-wagging lecture by a junior official sent to meet me on my arrival in a city that was home to an important Catholic seminary, one that I was scheduled to visit. He insisted, out of the blue, that I depart immediately for an urgent call on a senior official. I argued that we could still find the time for my seminary visit, which we did, with me, the Party official, priests and seminarians proceeding at a jog trot. The urgent meeting turned out to be bogus.

It was in this atmosphere that I had a series of conversations with an American priest, one I had first met in Taiwan. At his prompting, I joined with fellow Catholics in the Canadian embassy, to help set up and support a regular Sunday mass for the international community. We could offer a secure and predictable location, a place not subject to sudden cancellation, as other liturgies, organized at hotels and community centres often were.

We also offered our space to other religious believers from other faiths in the broader international community, with no takers. Within a few weeks we were welcoming hundreds to Sunday Mass in the embassy's Alvin Hamilton Room, people from every corner of the world, but one. We were unable to offer access to Chinese citizens. I could not, and would not as ambassador, break the law, even one I deplored. Not only would this has triggered a Chinese reaction against the event and the celebrant, it would have been a betrayal of the trust that my government had placed in me.

I deeply regretted not being able to respond to requests to include Chinese friends. I hoped that some spark of belief might be kindled in the hearts of those watching us gather for Mass, or waving our Palms in procession on the Sunday before Easter. I like to think I saw this spark enflame the heart of more than one watcher. Those Sunday morning were marked by great happiness and contentment. I often felt, at the end of my career, that my personal life and my professional life were coming together, that, in a sense, I was coming home.

We hear that the Vatican and China are again attempting rapprochement. I am convinced that the senior leadership of the Communist party is incapable of understanding a religious perspective, and that they deeply fear religions, particularly those like Catholicism, Islam and Tibetan Buddhism that cannot fit snugly under the flag of a single state. I also think that any seeming accommodation offered to the Vatican by China's Communist leaders will be less than meets the eye. But, despite this, I think the effort worthwhile. God works in mysterious ways and the Church, where it is allowed to exist, has a way of surviving and eventually undermining the most determined opposition.

I am less hopeful when it comes to maintaining a sustained and fruitful bilateral dialogue with China on human rights. For one thing, there isn't much of a western alliance to count on. When I was in Beijing, our major European allies were often content to leave much of the heavy lifting to the EU. For her part, Hillary Clinton, as Secretary of State, assured the Chinese that discussions of human rights issues would not be allowed to derail the larger bilateral agenda. The result was predictably disastrous, with an emboldened China assuming that the US had lost its nerve. I won't speculate about whether the Chinese can expect to receive any lectures about human rights from Donald Trump.

And, as I have indicated, I think it is increasingly difficult for western governments, Canada's included, to present a coherent and foundationally sound argument for the universality of human rights. This makes us disinclined to call attention to a level of sex-selective abortion that is skewing demographic trends, the use of capital punishment as a form of social control, or China’s disquieting tolerance for reckless, unregulated genetic experimentation.

I *do* think that the agenda of topics that we're willing to address with China is shrinking along the lines that Paul Evans suggests. He gets specific in his own Canada-China book, pointing to where Canadians are likely to end up. *Some*, he suggests want to talk about, "social issues, including abortion, religious freedom, the one child policy, capital punishment . . . But "for most," he argues, "the concern is with the political system, corruption, rule by the Communist Party, limited respect for the basic political rights of free speech and assembly . . ." .

The problem is that even this more limited inventory remains somewhat tentative and vulnerable to the relativist critique if it isn't grounded in belief in the ultimate worth and dignity of the people such reforms are designed to protect. If we lose touch with our long-standing and once unshakable conviction that human life is sacred and inviolable, if we are unwilling or unable to articulate why religious freedom should be available to everybody, and not just those lucky enough to be born here in the west, our own agenda becomes untethered and conditional, more a matter of Party politics than of underlying and unchanging beliefs.

We're against the death penalty, until we're for it, sort of.

But I am not completely without hope. I have spoken of constituencies of change in China, of lawyers who want to advance the rule of law, of journalists who want to report the truth, and of religious believers who offer a perspective that transcends an increasingly dreary materialist culture.

And just as there are constituencies of change worthy of support in China, so, too, do such constituencies exist in Canada. Could it be that the truly important discussions about human rights need to be held at a sub-national level, by groups of concerned Canadians, by lawyers who are deeply committed to the rule of law for everyone, by journalists who value fearless reporting everywhere, and by religious believers who are bold enough and brave enough to assert that we are, Chinese and Canadians, all God's children.