

Harper deserves every bit of praise for meeting the Dalai Lama

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BY GEORGE JONAS

The prime minister received praise and criticism this week for meeting the Dalai Lama. In a way, I find the praise more disturbing.

Stephen Harper deserves every bit of praise for doing the right thing, but it's a sad commentary that such a minimal endorsement of the United Nation's founding principles should be praised instead of being taken for granted.

After all, Harper could hardly have done less than even former Liberal prime minister Paul Martin felt obliged to do about three-and-a-half years ago. In 2004, after flip-flopping for a while, first about whether to meet the Dalai Lama at all, and then whether to confine any discussion to religious matters, Martin announced he was prepared to talk about Chinese human rights abuses.

"I'm always open to discussing the question of human rights," he said to reporters just before meeting Tibet's spiritual leader.

He may have said it between gritted teeth, he may have said it under his breath, but he said it. He may have met the Dalai Lama surreptitiously, in the residence of Ottawa's Catholic Archbishop, instead of welcoming him on Parliament Hill, but he did meet him.

It may be no great achievement to show more backbone than the United Nations, but I'm still glad two Canadian prime ministers did. Compared to how the world body treated the Dalai Lama 12 years ago, even Martin cut a fine figure, let alone Harper.

In June, 1995, as the UN was celebrating its 50th anniversary, an item appeared on the back pages. It described how UN officials, worried about hurting China's feelings, deleted a human rights plea by the Dalai Lama from a book marking the world body's 50th anniversary. Called "A Vision of Hope", the book was one of the documents commissioned by the UN to congratulate itself.

Associated Press reported one of the UN book's authors naively decided to quote the spiritual leader of Tibet in a section dealing with human rights. The Dalai Lama, forced into exile some eight years following the annexation of his country by communist China in 1951, apparently uttered some innocuous remarks about the importance of freedom in the world. Cautious, mild-mannered, and resolutely diplomatic, he didn't even mention China by name. However, the mere inclusion of his pious platitudes proved too much for the sensibilities of the UN.

A certain Gillian Sorenson, a senior official handling the project, said the comments were unacceptable. Using a remark by the Dalai Lama — as another UN official explained — "was construed as implicit criticism of China, a (UN) member state."

Well, heaven forbid that we should criticize a member state of the UN, implicitly or otherwise, for offending the principles for which that august body was established. On the contrary, whenever we celebrate the UN on the occasion of one of its birthdays, we should be meticulously protective of those who trample on its principles, like the rulers of Beijing, and rigorously exclude those who try to uphold them by word or example, like the Dalai Lama.

This was 12 years ago but nothing much has changed.

Those who criticize Harper for meeting the Tibetan leader worry about the feelings of China's leadership.

Oh, is little China hurt? Too bad. She'll get over it. There's no doubt that some muggers, being sensitive, take offence at anyone comforting their victims, but I doubt if Canada needs to elevate mugger's sensitivity into a foreign policy consideration. For Harper not to have gone as far as Martin would have been truly unthinkable. I doubt if it was ever on the table even as a remote policy option.

Some readers may wonder how Sorenson's career developed after her exclusion of the Dalai Lama from the UN half-centenary celebrations in 1995. Well, in 1997 she was appointed by former secretary general Kofi Annan as assistant secretary-general for external relations, a job she held until 2003. In that position, she was described as having been "a key diplomatic contact between Annan and important religious leaders, scholars, and political figures devoted to human rights issues."

These days, as senior adviser and national advocate at the United Nations Foundation, Sorenson makes speeches rather than policy. Billed as a "tireless advocate for peace, progress, and justice around the world," she gave a convocation address on Oct. 19. It was entitled "U.S. and UN: Can this Marriage be Saved?"

God, I hope not.

George Jonas is a CanWest News Service columnist.