

**Paddy Ashdown Memorial Lecture – Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2020**

**Delivered by The Rt. Hon. Lord Patten of Barnes CH**

**Westminster Central Hall**

I would like to begin briefly by expressing my sympathy to the people of Wuhan and China about the virus which has brought death and illness. The work of the health service workers in Wuhan is a struggle in all our interests. We wish them all well.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be invited to give this talk in honour of the late Paddy Ashdown.

It may surprise some that for the last twenty years I regarded Paddy as a friend and comrade in arms on many issues. Why the surprise? I suppose because he was the leader of the Liberal Democrats who ended my political career at Westminster in 1992. A little improbably, Bath electors in the process of that rather painful episode chose the next Governor of Hong Kong. In the event this proved to be one of the best things that has ever happened to me. “Sweet are the uses of adversity”.

I got to work alongside Paddy, and to form a huge admiration for him, when I was the European Commissioner for External Relations and he was the UN and EU Special Representative in Bosnia Herzegovina. Our co-operation was made even closer by the fact that his senior aide Edward Llewellyn (now the British Ambassador in Paris) had worked for me in similar roles in Hong Kong and Brussels. Paddy did that job in Bosnia with huge courage, dedication and competence. The only criticism might have been that he did the job so vigorously that local politicians could leave all the hard work and tough decisions to him. But when you saw Paddy in action, you rather wished that there were even more international responsibilities available for him to take in his stride. He was a natural and decisive leader. He would of course have made a superb Governor of Hong Kong.

Paddy's interest in that last great British colony, which we liked to call euphemistically a territory, was another substantial reason for our friendship. He was not uncritical about Britain's role in Hong Kong. Observers tend to focus on the criticism that came from those who thought we had gone too far to try to ensure that Hong Kong had at least a shadow of what it had been promised in terms of democracy and the protection of the rule of law and human rights. Their argument, rooted in a mass of personal, intellectual and commercial censures suggested at their most sophisticated that Hong Kong (which anyway they suggested was not much interested in anything save making money) would have more democracy in the long run if we simply did whatever China wanted before 1997. Why would Hong Kong have had more democracy under communism if it had less under us? Arguing with China, it was said, would be fatally disruptive. In fact Hong Kong was remarkably stable in our last five years: I always believed it would have been less so if we had in effect ceded sovereignty to Beijing before 1997, doing pretty well whatever the Communist Party wanted. Moreover, we would have brought international obloquy down on our heads if we had rolled back the explicit promises made to Hong Kong in the Joint Declaration. How would it have been if Hong Kong in those days had been roiled by even a fraction of the sort of unrest which has in the last few years so damaged the city. All that was long ago but I remain surprised that we are still blamed today for attempting in the 1990s to be open with Hong Kong citizens about how we could attempt to implement the Joint Declaration. It was the practical, honest and decent thing to do.

I was always more concerned with the arguments that came from the other side, from people like Paddy. They argued first that we should have done more to introduce democratic accountability much earlier. This rather overlooked the heavy pressure from senior Chinese officials not to make any such moves since they would serve to give Hong Kong citizens – a word China did not like to use – the impression that the territory was being prepared for independence like other former colonies. But the Ashdown arguments had more force after the Parliamentary debates and political discussions about the Joint Declaration in which the government argued quite explicitly that China would have to keep its side of the bargain on Hong Kong because if it did not do so, it would be held publicly to account by nascent democracy. Democracy would be a guarantee of Hong Kong's autonomy and governance.

The other factor that changed the atmosphere in the late '80s and '90s was the murderous assault on demonstrators in 1989 in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, and in other cities. Those events have been expunged from the Communist Party's version of history. If the events did not happen then we should presumably believe that the protests subsequently in Hong Kong against them were simply street theatre.

Paddy Ashdown, like others, thought that we should, in particular from the mid-1980s onwards have done more to bed down democracy. He and many others like Martin Lee raised the question at the time and particularly and explicitly in relation to the conclusion in the 1980s that a survey of public opinion in the city suggested to general incredulity that a majority did not want an increase in the number of directly elected legislators in Hong Kong's Legislature. What I tried myself to do with the support of the British Cabinet and Parliament, though not with the support of all those who had once worked as government officials, or still did so, was to make the agreed balance between directly elected and indirectly elected legislators in the Legislative Council as democratic as possible without breaking our agreements or the Basic Law, the proposed post-handover constitution. In addition, of course, we pursued an extensive programme of protecting human rights, the rule of law and the judiciary.

I have always believed that the noisy and exaggerated assault on my proposals by Communist apparatchiks and by those whom Vladimir Lenin would have regarded as the useful idiots of communism (they exist still) made it easier to persuade my critics on the democratic side that I had probably done as much as I could have. I still believe that is true given that I was operating within the tight bounds of agreements made explicitly and implicitly. Moreover, the Basic Law had itself committed China to the eventual introduction of full democratic suffrage in Hong Kong, and both the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the chief Chinese official dealing with Hong Kong committed Beijing to allowing Hong Kong to determine its own pace of democratic change. The progress towards full democracy would be determined within the city.

For all this, you can tell why I was always a lot more sympathetic to criticism from Paddy and others like him than to criticisms on the other side of

the debate. In addition, Paddy Ashdown pressed strongly for the rights of those who held British National (Overseas) passports to stay in the UK if they were worried about their future safety in Hong Kong. Like me, he had previously always argued for a wider distribution of UK passports to Hong Kong citizens, a proposal rejected by both Labour and the Conservatives.

In his more recent remarks on Hong Kong, Paddy focused on what will be the principal issue in the next few years for Britain and China as well as for the city itself. Hong Kong was promised in the Joint Declaration of 1984 that it would be run after 1997 on the basis of Deng Xiaoping's imaginative formula of "one country two systems", which was probably devised as much or more for Taiwan as Hong Kong. This helped both the then and future sovereign powers to escape from a tangle of moral and political problems: the nowadays indefensible circumstances in which Hong Kong had been acquired in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the fact that more than half its population were refugees from Communism; and the embarrassment for Britain that the terms under which it had been obtained meant that it could neither decide its own future nor be prepared like virtually every other British colony for eventual independence. Pretty well alone among British colonies, Hong Kong had to be denied self-determination. That was the price of history.

Yet "one country two systems" allowed Hong Kong to continue with its governance and freedoms intact, with a high degree of local autonomy, until 2047. This was set out in terms in the Joint Declaration, which is in effect an international treaty lodged at the United Nations. Before 1997, the United Kingdom was bound by its terms and had to explain if required to China and the people of Hong Kong how it was keeping its side of the bargain. After 1997, China had to stick to what it had itself promised - the obligations undertaken to guarantee the way of life of Hong Kong citizens.

For a dozen or so years after 1997, this agreement was pretty much kept. But Paddy Ashdown started to point out more recently how the treaty was being undermined, and to question whether the British government was taking a sufficiently firm line with China as their behaviour became more dismissive of British concerns. Was London firm enough in standing up for Hong Kong and was China keeping its word – a point that raised questions about how much China could be trusted as the 21<sup>st</sup> century rolled forward. The Chinese

response – that none of this was any business of Britain or anyone else since the Joint Declaration was simply a historic document – was absurd. Any past treaty could be so described. So, I suppose, would the 99 year lease of the New Territories, the termination of which had rightly led to the change of sovereignty in 1997. This was a surprisingly foolish thing for Chinese Communist officials to say. I wish that Hong Kong’s government had also criticised the argument about a “historic document”, - who were Communists trying to kid? Come to think of it I wish that the UK government had been more robust on this point. A treaty is what all the contracting signatories agree it is; it is not simply whatever one side says it is. But then the Communist Party has a habit with deep roots of redefining the agreements it makes as meaning whatever it wants them to mean.

As I have said, by and large I think that “one country two systems” survived without too many problems for well over a decade after 1997. Admittedly, there was a rolling back of Beijing’s promises on democracy; there was also an occasional tendency on the part of the Communist Chinese National People’s Congress to ruffle feathers about its legislative oversight of the Basic Law and the rule of law in Hong Kong; and there was a growing pattern of interference by Beijing’s Communist Party outpost in Hong Kong in the city’s affairs. But overall, I believe that most of the sceptics about Hong Kong’s future prospects were answered in that early period. The real change came with the elevation of Xi Jinping to the imperial throne in 2012. This unfortunately coincided with the selection of C.Y. Leung as the Chief Executive of Hong Kong.

I note that the recently chosen new director of Beijing’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong, following the dismissal of his clearly badly informed predecessor, said after his arrival in the city that it should return to the right track. It might be rather better to direct that advice to his superiors in Beijing and to Carrie Lam’s administration which is supposed to govern the city. I say this in a spirit of friendship, repeating that I believe that the city was broadly on the right track until about 2012. Things were not going too badly. A school report might have said, “could do even better, could do a lot worse”.

The charge sheet in recent years is well known and I will not dwell on it in great detail. Xi Jinping’s Communist Party reversed previous progress in

separating the party from the government. It re-established party control everywhere, cracked down on any dissident activity which included the growth of civil society organisations and of legal support for those charged with offences against the party's rules, and it incarcerated Uighurs in Xinjiang and set about destroying some of their religious sites. At the same time, Beijing also began to tighten the screw on Hong Kong. All the emphasis was placed on "one country" or rather "one party" not "two systems". United Front activities were stepped up and the Liaison Office became more intrusive as it interfered more in the administration of the city. Attempts (already begun) to introduce into the school curriculum civic education which clearly promoted aspects of Communist ideology, led to large protests not least by educationalists and pupils in 2012. The plans had to be dropped but they are still in Beijing's in-tray.

Publishers and booksellers disliked by the Chinese leadership were abducted by security agents, as was a billionaire who was plainly a bag-carrier for very rich mainlanders including party bosses. The Hong Kong government looked the other way as did one or two of those "useful idiots" who complain in Communist newspapers like the China Daily that any criticism of Hong Kong's government is an assault on the rule of law. These sad souls are nowhere to be seen or heard when there are real attacks on the rule of law by Beijing.

Any signs of independent criticism in the media led to vilification and physical assault. A mounting sense that Hong Kong's freedom was being stifled and suffocated produced the "yellow umbrella" democracy protests in 2014 led in part by some of the students who had protested not long before about the politicisation of the school curriculum.

The list could go on but let me pause there. The democracy protests, which were doubtless very inconvenient for some people, were conducted overwhelmingly peacefully. The self-discipline much of the time by the demonstrators was unique in the eyes of most experienced observers who had never before witnessed demonstrators who cleared up after themselves and supervised homework during their sit-ins. This was the sort of moral and civic education which Communists must have envied. Indeed, when years ago communism was a moral cause it might have been capable of something similar.

But the causes espoused by the young demonstrators – a more open democratic process for electing the chief executive and the Legislative Council – got nowhere. The government, which increasingly seemed to be run by mainland officials from a villa over the border in Shenzhen, refused to budge, not even allowing some changes in the election system for the chief executive which at present means pre-selection of candidates, more or less as happens in Iran. Any serious dialogue with the demonstrators was rejected. Indeed the most popular candidate by a street for the post of chief executive was black-balled by Beijing partly because he advocated this approach. The choice of Carrie Lam made it clear that any attempt to build bridges and develop a consensus was unacceptable. The courts were required by the government’s Justice Department officials to deal with some of the leaders of the democracy movement through the use of the remnants of public order legislation left over from the cultural revolution riots in Hong Kong in the late 1960s when 51 people were killed. The last of these trials, accusing a group of much older pro-democracy activists including two professors and a Baptist Minister of conspiring to cause public nuisance took place in 2019, a divisive and vengeful pursuit of political events which had taken place so long before. Legal definitions of public nuisance cover a ragbag of bits and pieces. This may explain the exchange in a Marx Bros film. Groucho hears Chico making a lot of noise in the street. “Do you want to be a public nuisance” asks Groucho. “Sure” says Chico, “how much does the job pay”

With no attempt by the government to engage with its critics, and with pressure on universities to discourage free speech and enquiry (which were thought to have led to the demonstrations), it is hardly surprising that some of the activists took more extremist positions including the advocacy of self-determination for Hong Kong and even independence.

This played into the hands of Communist hard-liners and risked weakening support for the changes that the democracy activists wanted to bring about. I warned about this at big meetings of students in Hong Kong in both 2016 and 2017. No one from the government spoke to them in the same way. What the government did do was to connive at striking down elected legislators (under pressure from Beijing) or preventing democratic candidates (like Joshua Wong) from standing in elections on what often seemed pretty trivial grounds. That continues.

This was the background to the unrest that began last year. The trigger was an extradition bill but the political environment was as I have described, a growing sense that Hong Kong's freedoms were being whittled away even while some popular social concerns like housing were not being addressed.

The principal author of the extradition bill may well have been Carrie Lam. She had already courted controversy by allowing mainland officials who were stationed inside a Hong Kong train terminus to enforce Chinese law on travellers. Ms. Lam appeared to be leaning over backwards to accommodate Chinese demands on extradition. One of her supporters rather gave the game away. He said that Hong Kong needed an extradition bill so that China no longer had to abduct people it did not like from Hong Kong. What the majority in the community understandably feared was that this proposed bill would destroy the firewall between the rule of law in Hong Kong, and what passes for the law decided by the party on the mainland. Concern united the community from democracy activists to lawyers to business people.

The demonstrations which began last June have attracted huge attendance from hundreds of thousands, to one million to 2 million. It was surprising that the Liaison Office and the Hong Kong government did not appreciate that this represented the hugely strong feelings of Hong Kong's citizens. Again and again - Carrie Lam gave currency to the idea herself – it has been suggested that the demonstrations and unrest are stoked and even organised by external “black hands”. This is insulting to people in Hong Kong and shows profound ignorance about them. Demonstrating how little they understand Hong Kong, Chinese leaders vetoed attempts by Lam's administration to back down over the bill. A former Chinese vice-minister of public security, Chen Zhimin, linked the bill to President Xi's crackdown on the mainland. Attempts to backtrack on the legislation, were impeded by Beijing. Communist officials would only allow the discussion of the bill to be stopped which did not satisfy the protestors. It took further demonstrations to persuade Ms. Lam and Beijing to drop the bill altogether.

That of course was not enough. The demonstrations continued. The government barely budged. Their most significant move was to introduce a ban on face masks, widely derided and ignored. Increasingly it seemed that



they had given virtually up governing, becoming within Beijing's tight control a cat's paw administration. Hong Kong was left in the hands of police, using increasingly questionable and aggressive tactics. As the police got tougher on those some of them called "cockroaches"; as tear gas replaced politics, so a radical fringe of the demonstrators behaved with totally unacceptable violence. The fact that there was so little condemnation of this in the wider community suggests the extent to which Hong Kong citizens thought that policing behaviour and a lack of political engagement by the government made such behaviour inevitable and even to some extent defensible.

Let me make two points about violence and public order. The violence – arson, ransacking shopping malls, sometimes targeting mainland students and police officers' families – is something I will never, ever, support or condone. It corrodes support for the overall aims of the demonstrations. When I reviewed in the late 1990s, policing and related human rights issues in Northern Ireland, I was never prepared to condone violence against the police but was always intent on removing the excuses for or causes of violence. So why has there been the violence in Hong Kong? It is a city which I always regarded as being a model of moderate behaviour. It had an exemplary and popular police force in the 1990s, and crime figures according to Interpol better than those in Singapore.

First, if people believe that peaceful argument and protest about issues about which they feel passionately is getting them nowhere, they turn to alternatives. This is particularly the case if a lack of political engagement is accompanied by public order policing for which the adjective forceful would be a ludicrous understatement. We are told that over 6,000 people have been arrested as a result of the demonstrations. I am not aware of any disciplinary proceedings associated with the demonstrations having been taken against police officers despite the television and still photographs we have seen of brutal police behaviour and the wealth of other evidence to support this. Does even Carrie Lam think that police behaviour has lived up to the standards that were previously expected and invariably kept. Do many police officers think this themselves, including those who when off-duty have themselves taken part in peaceful demonstrations? Is it remotely likely that when over 6000 demonstrators have been arrested, not a single police officer has broken the law? If some of the police and the government seem to be flouting the rule of law, is it a surprise that others follow this appalling example.

Is the Hong Kong police force operating within its public rules of conduct? Is the use of baton rounds, pepper spray and tear gas proportionate? Is it sensible to send police officers to deal with a demonstration armed with live ammunition? Why are the police not showing identification numbers? What is the role of under-cover officers in trying to secure public order? We saw one poor fellow performing his undercover so well that his uniformed colleagues fired pepper spray into his face. To what extent have under-cover officers provoked violence? How can it be justified to treat medical workers, attempting to undertake humanitarian activities, as violent demonstrators – arresting some and detaining them as reported in The Lancet magazine. Is it true, as has again been widely reported, that police cars have turned up when ambulances are called, that the police are sometimes patrolling hospitals in full riot gear, that injured protestors have been given special tracking codes so that they can be arrested when discharged from hospital. If these stories are not true, how come that there were so many reports to the contrary which are believed to be true. Should I not believe what I read in “The Lancet”?

Two things in particular seem to have incensed the community. First, on the fringe of what were overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrations in June, police officers are believed to have been aggressive in dealing with peaceful demonstrators and not simply targeting the then very small minority of the violent. Second, how can the assault on demonstrators returning home at the Yuen Long MTR station on the 21<sup>st</sup> July by a mob, widely believed to comprise mostly triad thugs, be explained? Why did the police not prevent it or take effective action? There is widespread suspicion of collusion between the security services in Hong Kong, mainland China and the triads. This should have been publicly investigated. Failure to do this understandably raises suspicion that the collusion took place, as is thought also to have happened in 2014.

I cannot believe that the police officers whom I was proud to call my friends in Hong Kong would be guilty of this sort of behaviour or would try to justify it. The tragedy is that Ms. Lam’s government, wearing Beijing’s handcuffs, has put the police service in a position where with clearly irresponsible leadership it has fallen so far below its former standards. I blame

Hong Kong's government and Beijing's Communist officials for this. They have often placed the police in an exceptionally difficult position.

So how does the police service, how does Hong Kong overall, return to what we used to regard as normal? One of Hong Kong's most distinguished and long-serving journalists, Steve Vines, asked the other day what we should now regard as normal. You get some idea of the answer by looking at opinion polls. Take for instance the poll at the end of last year conducted by Reuters (the great international news agency many of whose reports on Hong Kong have been censored or blanked out, on the mainland). The poll suggested that 59% supported the protest movement and that a third had attended an anti-government demonstration. Supporters of the protests outnumbered opponents by a ratio of nearly two to one. Only 17% supported seeking independence from China. A large majority blamed the Hong Kong government for the crisis. 68% either "strongly" or "somewhat" supported the model of "one country two systems". 74% said they wanted an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality in handling the protests.

The general thrust of these views was reflected in the District Council Elections last November. There was a record turn-out. Beijing supporters previously claimed that the elections would show that a majority of Hong Kong's citizens were silently in support of the Lam government and against the demonstrators. In fact the pro-democracy movement gained control of 17 of the 18 councils in these as ever well conducted elections. They tripled the number of their seats. The pro-Beijing parties lost over 240 of the 300 or so seats they had previously held. Reports suggested that Communist Party papers in Beijing – "the useful idiots" journals – had to change their headlines when the real news proved so different from what they had been told would happen. The head of the Liaison Office lost his job, having presumably given appalling advice. This is not the first time that Beijing's leadership has been totally uninformed about Hong Kong and been told what it wants to hear rather than what is really happening. "Seek truth from facts" as the Book of Han advised in the first century AD. Totalitarian regimes always seem to find that difficult. They like to believe – to be fair the same can be true occasionally of political parties in democracies – in their ideology. There is nothing necessarily wrong with dogma; what is invariably wrong is to be dogmatic.

Applying that ancient Chinese piece of wisdom about seeking truth from facts, I want to suggest briefly how we would stand a chance of returning Hong Kong to what we used to think of as normal. In view of what appears to be happening elsewhere, for instance in the Chinese Communist assault on the philosophy behind open societies you may think I am rather too hopeful. But I will turn finally to the question with some thoughts on why the position of Hong Kong could play such an important part in the political development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before that, what of the immediate way forward in Hong Kong?

It seems to me imperative that the Chinese Communist party reiterates its support for “one country two systems” and for the Joint Declaration. Two practical things that could be done are first to reiterate its support for the rule of law and independence of the judiciary. One thing which still shines like a beacon in Hong Kong is the general quality of the judiciary and its independence and integrity – noted the other day by a former Chief Minister of Canada who sits on the Court of Final Appeal.

It would have been helpful if Hong Kong’s citizens had been given some assurance that the Communist leaders were not going to return to the idea that what Hong Kong needs is a strong dose of what the Communist Central Committee recently described in an Orwellian document as so-called “patriotic education”. This should stand beside – so some Communists argue – a new law on subversion. Hong Kong has been pushed down this road before and resisted both ideas very strongly. I am both surprised and saddened that the new head of the Liaison Office has already proposed this. “Seek truth from facts”. In how many different ways does Hong Kong have to say “no”.

I will not quote at length from the Central Committee publication – but a few phrases are useful indicators of what is intended. Those living in “New China” are advised “to adhere to the unity of loving the party, the country and socialism”. Note the order of precedence. People, including it seems in Hong Kong, should work to “strengthen national security, education and national defence education”. Again, “Youth should be the top priority of patriotic education, the spirit of patriotism should run through the whole process of school education, and patriotism education should be promoted into the classroom, into teaching materials and the mind”. While the education prescribed covers “one country two systems” the whole thrust of the document

assaults the sort of freedoms that people in Hong Kong are keen to defend. The instructions to “resolutely oppose historical nihilism” presumably means wiping out any memories of so many of the events that encouraged Chinese men and women to flee as refugees from China to a safe haven in colonial Hong Kong. Chinese Communism seems to depend on rewriting or obliterating the country’s history.

Most important of all, if Hong Kong is to return to normal and to rehabilitate the reputation of the police there should be a proper independent public enquiry into the reasons for the demonstrations, the behaviour of the demonstrators, and the conduct of the police. The idea that the existing police complaints machinery is adequate to the task is plainly nonsense. The international experts who were asked by the government to advise on how this body could become more credible resigned rather than associate themselves with an impossible task. Would such an inquiry destroy the morale of the police service? More likely it would demonstrate that the police were put in an impossible position by the government. It will be difficult to restore faith in the police, and the spirit and morale of the hitherto excellent police service without a transparent accounting. And we need to be clear about the provocations that were sometimes faced. In Northern Ireland where the Commission which I led reformed the police service and public order policing, we had a series of open, public meetings that gave transparency to the whole question of reform. An inquiry could do the same as well as providing a pause in the on-going turbulence.

There is also a case for revising at the same time, or subsequently, public order legislation and its relationship to the terms of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which is written into Hong Kong’s constitution. Alongside all this, there may be a case for considering the use of amnesties covering both immunity from prosecution and pardons for some who have been arrested during the civil conflict. This has been done in Hong Kong before and it would obviously need to be carefully framed focussing on alleged crimes that did not involve violence or were committed by children.

On the broader political issues – the election of Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, the constitution of the election committee that chooses him or her before this is determined by universal suffrage, and the way in which the

Legislative Council is elected – I would simply hope that the Hong Kong government would be encouraged by Beijing to enter into open-ended discussions with the political parties and civil society on how to begin a process leading to the outcome Hong Kong was promised by Communist leaders before and immediately after 1997. I remain wholly convinced that Hong Kong is a politically moderate community. It take extremes of immoderation to get it to behave in any other way.

How will all this turn out? What will be the old or the new normal in Hong Kong? The outcome is important not just to the city and to its old and present sovereigns; it is squarely in the cross-hairs of questions about the role of China in the century ahead and the relationship between authoritarian bullying and liberal democracy, between socialist (not that there is much in China on show) totalitarianism and western open societies living under the rule of law.

We have paid considerable attention in recent years to Vladimir Putin's attacks on liberal democracy. We should take more seriously the Chinese Communist Party's more concerted and sustained assault on what most western societies believe and the way they are organised.

I hope to have other occasions in the future to consider the challenges posed by China to open democracies. These were helpfully listed by the Chinese Communist Party itself in a paper called "Communique on the current state of the Ideological Sphere", an internal document leaked to the outside world by the brave dissident Gao Yu who was jailed for seven years for this service to the rest of the world. The tough sentence on this woman in her seventies does tend to confirm the authenticity of the document which was apparently distributed to party and government officials and to the armed forces.

There is growing evidence of what is called China's "wolf-style" diplomacy, which seeks to implement this communique from the Antipodes, to North America to Europe. It includes attempts to mobilize the Chinese diaspora

and to influence politics, the media and business. It often involves wholly unacceptable behaviour that should be called out, from political attacks on ministers, journalists and academics to cybercrime and intellectual property theft. But some Governments appear to believe that they will miss huge economic opportunities in China if they stand up for what they claim are their core values.

I am not remotely arguing for a boycott of China or an attempt to cut China off from the rest of the international community. Far from it. I just think that the Chinese Communist government should be encouraged to play by the same international rules as the rest of us. The world would be safer for us and for other liberal democracies if we ensured a value-based cornerstone to our dealings with China. We should do this together and not allow ourselves to be picked off by ill-judged bullying mercantilism one by one.

The truth is that behaving in a way that corresponds with our traditional values does not threaten economic catastrophe. The idea that you can only do business with China if you say and do what Beijing wants has always been nonsense. That is as true of Britain as of others. Whatever became of the cornucopia that was supposed to come with the “golden era” of Britain’s dealings with China: this is the usual self-serving guff.

So to return to Hong Kong, we should not be browbeaten into embarrassed silence if China breaks its word consistently over this wonderful city which exemplifies so many values which Xi Jinping’s Communist Party wants to bury wherever it spots them.

Around the world liberal democracies have to stand up for themselves if their system of governance and the rule of law are to survive as the heartbeat of international politics in the century ahead. What a struggle there is in Hong Kong – a struggle in which we all have a vital stake. What happens there will affect us all. Depend on it. The defence of Hong Kong’s values by its brave citizens is our cause too. As those hundreds of thousands of demonstrators sing from Victoria Park to Wan Chai and Central – “Glory to Hong Kong ..... May people reign, proud and free, now and evermore, Glory be to thee Hong Kong”.

Sentiments I am sure that Paddy Ashdown would have forcefully and elegantly enunciated himself.