

Huge Crowd Welcomes The Dalai Lama to Monash

By Erica Contini and Marius Smith

A capacity crowd of almost 1600 people packed the Robert Blackwood Hall at Monash's Clayton campus in June to hear His Holiness the Dalai Lama discuss the political situation in Tibet. The event, which formed part of the sprightly guru's whirlwind 2007 Australian tour, was the culmination of months of planning by the Castan Centre and its co-host, the Australia Tibet Council.

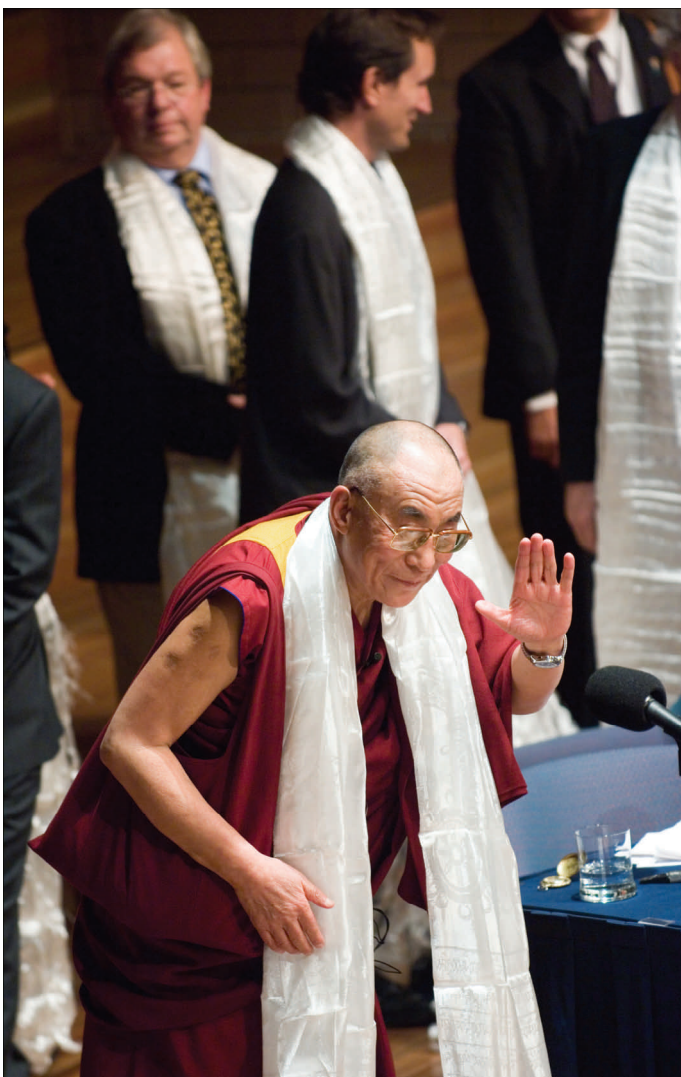
On his arrival at Clayton, His Holiness was greeted by Castan Centre Director Sarah Joseph and Australia Tibet Council Chairman George Farley, and ushered onto stage where the waiting crowd had been entertained by Dr Keith Suter's lively discussion on the New Era of Warfare. Dr Suter, a leading economic, social and religious commentator, noted that war is gradually dying out and being replaced by disarmament, conflict resolution and the struggle for justice. It was an appropriate introduction to His Holiness' talk on "The Middle Way: a peaceful approach to resolving conflict". The talk was a departure from most of his Australian

speeches, which focused on religious issues.

Specifically, His Holiness discussed his approach to the Tibetan issue and the relationship between Tibet and China. He noted that many in the Chinese government fear that he is striving towards complete independence for Tibet, but he emphatically rejected this and instead stated that Tibet is part of China. He added that he was simply concerned with the preservation of Tibetan culture and establishing meaningful autonomy for Tibet, as envisioned in China's Constitution.

His Holiness addressed four aspects of the Tibetan problem which make it a global issue. First, the preservation and protection of the environment. Geographically, Tibet is the source of a number of major rivers which flow through the Asian continent. His Holiness noted that there has been large scale deforestation and exploitation of minerals and other natural resources on account of lax restrictions imposed by the Chinese Government in Tibet since the 1960s. This has had a major impact on the flooding of India, Bangladesh and China. The second aspect was Tibetan Buddhist culture, which is naturally compassionate and creates a peaceful society and is thus worthy of preservation. The third issue involves human rights abuses in Tibet, which often result in the arrest and torture of ordinary Tibetans. This approach only serves to increase anger and resentment against Chinese rule in Tibet. Finally, the Dalai Lama noted the geopolitical role Tibet played acting as a buffer zone preventing conflict between India and China. He also went into detail of the history of the situation and steps he had taken to attempt to come to an agreement with China.

After his speech, his Holiness relaxed noticeably as he was subjected to a very enjoyable panel discussion with a number of experts hosted by Peter Mares, presenter of ABC Radio National program, "The National Interest". The presence of a translator during the discussion – which took place in English – seemed mostly to allow His Holiness to engage in



His Holiness waves to the audience while panel member Piers Akerman looks on.



The view from the media section



His Holiness greets Nellie Castan



(L-R) Alex Butler, Piers Ackerman, Bee Chen Goh, Keith Suter, Sarah Joseph, Malcom Mackerras, His Holiness, Peter Mares, Nellie Castan, Paul Bourke, Melissa Castan, Alan Molloy and George Farley.

some entertaining comedy routines.

Colin Mackerras, Emeritus Professor in the Department of International Business and Asian Studies at Griffith University opened the discussion by asking His Holiness to explain in greater detail what Tibet consisted of, given that there are two Tibets, the political entity – the Tibet Autonomous Region – and a greater region which includes Amdo and Kham areas which are now part of Chinese provinces. The Dalai Lama responded to the question by noting that from his view, as Tibet is not seeking independence and is more concerned with the preservation of Tibetan culture within China, every ethnic Tibetan community should have some variety of autonomy in order to preserve its culture and language.

In response to a question by Daily Telegraph columnist Piers Ackerman about dealings with Chinese officials, His Holiness spoke about his many conversations with Mao Zedong. On one occasion Mao even told him to feel free to fly the Tibetan flag. Now, when Tibetan supporter groups receive complaints from Chinese officials about the flag, His Holiness tells them “Oh, it doesn’t matter that those local Chinese officials protested to you. I got permission from Mao Zedong himself”.

The discussion also touched on the spirituality of Buddhism when Professor Bee Chen Goh, Head of the School of Law and Justice at Southern Cross University, asked a question about Buddhism’s wider role in society. His Holiness stated that his religion’s non-violent and peaceful nature would allow it to play a role in rebuilding traditional Chinese family values which have been destroyed in the past half century.

His Holiness wrapped up the discussion commenting on the need for continued dialogue between Tibet and the Chinese government and further reiterated his role as a spiritual leader for those not only in Tibet, but in China as well.

At that point, there was an elaborate succession of Tibetan greetings on stage before His Holiness was ushered off to meet the late Ron Castan’s wife Nellie and daughter Melissa. Ron had met the Dalai Lama many years earlier and struck up a relationship which reverberates to this day.

For a transcript of proceedings and all the highlights from the day, see www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre.



His Holiness during his interaction with the Panel



Dr Keith Suter providing his colourful introduction