

LAST WORD

Canadians' Perceptions of China

The Chinese have had bad luck with key anniversaries of the 1949 founding of the People's Republic. The 10th anniversary took place amid the chaos of the Great Leap Forward, the 20th saw the Cultural Revolution and armed conflict with the Soviet Union, and the 30th saw China trying to recover from an embarrassing war with Vietnam. Now it is 1989 and Chinese soldiers are attempting to dance away the bloodstains on Tiananmen Square. There will be no exuberant celebrations inside China and most people outside have chosen to ignore this event.

Since the massacre in Beijing, perceptions of China have changed dramatically. No longer is Deng a jolly little fellow heroically bringing China into our modern world. Now he is an aging tyrant who exterminates opposition. The Chinese reforms which only yesterday seemed to be so successful are in disarray. The government doesn't have enough cash to pay its peasants; inflation is rampant; corruption is widespread; China's trade deficit has escalated. The social and political consequences of the economic changes have proved difficult, if not impossible to contain. The Communist Party cannot provide decisive leadership, and pressures for true political reform are growing. More and more Chinese question the very legitimacy of the Party, if not its four-decade commitment to the building of socialism.

Is such a judgment fair? Should the sins of 40 days be visited upon the achievements of 40 years? The Communists brought national unity to China after a half-century of chaos, ended foreign occupation, and gained their country respect as an international power. They restored order to a ravaged economy, initiated industrialization and provided basic food and shelter to the world's largest population. Surely the management of the daily lives of 1.2 billion people is a stunning achievement even at the cost of some bloodshed. If China remains authoritarian, why should we be surprised? How many developing nations are equipped to handle democracy? Why should we expect China to be any different?

The peculiarity of China is that we want to think it is different. Canadian fascination with China has yielded a special relationship with the PRC. China is the only Communist nation to which we have given substantial development assistance. We have poured millions of dollars of government funds into our trade relations and have elaborate and expensive cultural and educational exchange programmes. A recent visitor from India noted that "Canada probably is spending 20 times more on China than on India, yet it is India that is the more democratic, more attuned to the Western mentality, and more likely to modernize successfully."

In the aftermath of Tiananmen, it is time for Canadians to stop thinking that China is "special", or that we have partic-

ular influence on the course of events there. Let us treat China like any other developing country, albeit a very large, overpopulated one. Let us not look to China to develop in our own image, that is, along the lines of capitalist liberal democracy. Let us assume that the price of economic change in such a country will be occasional political disorder, and that the leadership will respond with force. Let us not think that democracy can be injected into the Chinese body politic like a steroid which will magically transform the authoritarian values and behavior of centuries. Let us support human rights in China but not be dismayed when students are crushed by government tanks. Remember that change in China will occur painfully and slowly, tempered by the needs of a population that grows by almost the population of Canada every year.

Then the achievements of the past forty years are indeed impressive, and our previously inflated expectations of China can be more realistic. Yes, the government acted brutally on June 4. Yes, we must voice our outrage. Yes, the honeymoon in Canada-China relations is over. Yes, we will have to rethink some of the basic elements of our bilateral relationship. But we must do this soberly, maintaining the perspective of 40 years of change, if not several thousand years of China's development. As the Chinese say, "a journey of 10,000 li begins with one small step."

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