

THE DEATH OF DR MICHAEL ARIS

Address by the Hon Gareth Evans QC MP to the House of Representatives, Canberra, 29 March 1999 (*Hansard* pp 3836-7).

Mr GARETH EVANS (Holt)(5.32 p.m.)—I take the opportunity of this debate to talk for just a few moments about the death of a man whom I believe this parliament and, indeed, the whole world should be honouring. Last Saturday, on his 53rd birthday, Doctor Michael Aris died of cancer in London, leaving grieving his wife, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, his two sons, Alexander and Kim, and a very large number of people around the world who had the most intense admiration, respect and affection for him.

I was privileged to be one of those who knew him personally. We had discussions on a number of occasions, both when I was foreign minister and subsequently, about the appalling situation in Burma and what the international community might possibly be able to do to advance it.

Just a couple of days before his death I wrote and posted a letter to him saying how terribly distressed I was to hear of his terminal illness and how disgusted I was at the news, which had, by then, echoed around the world, of the appalling cruelty of the Burmese authorities in denying him entry to Burma to pay a last visit to his wife. I said to him in that letter that I hoped he had some sense of the enormous respect and affection there was for him personally all around the world not only from those who had the privilege of knowing him personally, but also from those many more who had to be content with admiring him at a distance.

I also said to him that few people can possibly imagine the stress which that enforced separation must have had on his personal and family life, compounded throughout as it was by the impossibility of knowing when it would ever end, but that his bravery and his decency had been obvious to everyone. Unhappily, and very sadly, he could never have received that letter, but I do think it is appropriate to put on the public record a few of the sentiments in it and to spell out in just a little more detail the nature of that bravery and that decency.

Michael Aris was a man of great personal charm and warmth, with a calm and a gentleness about him characteristic, perhaps, of what one might expect of a scholar in the Tibetan language and literature; a calmness and a gentleness, however, that rather belied an immense inner strength. And make no mistake about that strength: he needed absolutely immense reserves of it to cope with the stress of the last decade. He was deeply

and utterly devoted to Aung San Suu Kyi, his wife of 27 years, and one can barely imagine the pain that was involved in that separation and the responsibility that he had to keep his young family together, without the boys' mother, throughout that more than a decade.

The obvious stress began in 1988 when Suu Kyi went to Burma to care for her dying mother—the widow, of course, of her father, the great national hero, Aung San—and then stayed on to lead the democracy movement in response to those tumultuous events of 1988; the hopes and the fears that were running throughout the community in response also to the horrors of the regime's attempted suppression of the democracy movement. Michael Aris identifies in the preface to his book the circumstances of that 1988 decision. He said:

"Suu picked up the phone to learn that her mother had suffered a severe stroke. She put the phone down and at once started to pack. I had a premonition that our lives would change for ever."

That is in the preface to the book *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings* that Michael Aris edited, putting together the work of Suu Kyi for an international audience.

The most appalling separation was at the end, of course, but it was preceded by many long years of acute and enormous difficulty. He and the boys were completely denied access to her from 1989 to 1992—the years of house arrest and, indeed, total isolation—when, for two years and four months, the family went by without even a letter passing between them. Some visits were allowed in the period from 1992 to 1995 but, since January 1996, again there has been no physical contact at all.

The most appalling separation of all must have been in those last few weeks and days when both of them, Michael and Suu Kyi, must have known they would never see each other again—knowing that, if she left the country to see him in London, she would never be allowed back because forcing her into exile has been the absolute centrepiece of the Burmese regime's whole strategy for the last few years. It is nonsense, I believe, to suggest that the regime should and could have been taken at its word when it said that she would be allowed back. If it had been genuine, it would have opened up the option for him to come to Burma. It just refused to do that with utterly spurious arguments about the quality of available medical treatment, and the whole thing was a cynical and ugly exercise.

But both of them bore this final separation with great dignity as they had borne all the others because they knew that what they were fighting for—Aung San Suu Kyi herself on the ground in Burma and Michael Aris as her voice and her presence throughout the rest of the world—was the life, the happiness and the future of millions of people and they

were both prepared to devote their lives to that cause. Michael Aris made it clear, again in the preface to his edited book, that he understood the nature of the commitment he might one day be ultimately obliged to make. He knew that this day, this time, this obligation and this sacrifice would probably come. He said:

"She constantly reminded me —"

in the days before their marriage—

"that one day she would have to return to Burma, that she counted on my support at that time, not as her due, but as a favour."

Again, he says rather movingly:

"Sometimes I am beset by fears that circumstances and national considerations might tear us apart just when we are so happy in each other that separation would be a torment. And yet such fears are so futile and inconsequential: if we love and cherish each other as much as we can while we can, I am sure love and compassion will triumph in the end."

This is what he was writing in the early 1970s in anticipation of what might come to pass, and it did come to pass and it has been horrifying. I did not think I would ever find myself quoting John Pilger with any degree of approval, but he did write a piece in the press this morning which I think captures exactly what I want to say about Michael Aris:

"Just as Aung San Suu Kyi is Burma's most famous heroine, her husband, Michael Aris, was one of its heroes. Michael, who died at the weekend, was not simply the Oxford professor who supported his extraordinary wife; he gave his life to the cause of freedom in that suffering country."

Might I say just finally in the few moments remaining that this is a time, this week, with this unhappy death behind us, for the international community and for this government and parliament to renew our commitment once more to achieving peace and democracy in Burma. The need is stronger than ever. The country is in absolute terrible limbo—economically, politically, in terms of human rights, in terms of the primacy of the drug trade and in every other way—and it desperately needs to break out of that cycle.

No-one suggests that the task is an easy one. The leverage of the rest of the world is very limited. The lever of ASEAN membership, the main game for so long in terms of putting pressure to bear on Burma to behave better, has been lost with the admission of Burma to ASEAN in mid-1997. China, one of the other countries with real leverage, has obviously never been interested in any kind of political reform. Japan is interested and it does have

real influence but, unfortunately, it is engaged in a rather misconceived policy of constructive engagement which has meant that its potential to really be influential in changing the course of action through the application of its aid policy has not been exercised at all. Japan has not been nearly as influential a force for good as it may have been.

There is some small ray of hope with the package that has just been put together by the UN and the World Bank, presented last October by Special Envoy Alvaro de Soto to the Burmese authorities, in which it is proposed that political progress be rewarded with \$1 billion in financial and humanitarian aid. That will involve some flexibility on both sides if a process of that kind can be put in place.

I just want to conclude by saying that suggestions that are emerging in some quarters—for a long time in ASEAN, now in the US Congress more visibly and, I fear, in some quarters in the Australian government—that Suu Kyi's time personally has come and gone, that she is too intransigent, too inflexible, cannot lead the way forward and should no longer be regarded as the centrepiece of the democratic movement struggle, I believe, should be absolutely rejected. That diminishes her judgment and her intelligence which, I believe, have always been of a kind—and it is partly based on my conversations with her husband—that would lead her to be appropriately flexible whenever there was half a chance of that being reciprocated. To challenge her authority or question it in this way is not only to diminish her and her magnificent stature but also to diminish the memory of Michael Aris which it is totally appropriate that the world and this parliament, as I say, should be honouring this week.

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