

## **Anglo-Korean Society Event on Thursday, 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2009**

**Venue: Committee Room 14, House of Commons, and then reception in the Churchill Room**

Members of the Society, and many others interested in both the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, assembled in Committee Room 14 for what must surely have been a unique gathering of Ambassadors connected with the peninsula. Sitting behind the same dais were Mr Chun Yung-woo, Ambassador of South Korea, and Mr Ja Song-nam, Ambassador of North Korea, accompanied by the Second Counsellor at his Embassy, and Mr Martin Uden, British Ambassador to South Korea. A family bereavement prevented the British Ambassador to North Korea, Mr Peter Hughes, from attending, but in his place came Mr Stephen Lillie, soon to be British Ambassador to the Philippines and at present Head of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Far East Group.

The host for the evening was Mr Frank Cook, M. P., a Member of the All-Party Britain-Republic of Korea Parliamentary Group, who spoke of his meetings with Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and alluded entertainingly to his involvement with a football match which had led the North Koreans to present him with a splendid signed ceramic vase, on display below the dais.

Mr Lillie described help being given to disabled people in North Korea, and to children in need, but said that there were two major areas of concern, namely human rights, and the nuclear situation. If North Korea went ahead with the currently planned satellite launch, it would jeopardise the six-party talks.

Mr Uden, who has been Ambassador to South Korea since February, 2008, first visited the country in 1978. He spoke about the present economic situation, with a weak won that should make exports easier, but in fact there had been a decrease of about 25% in exports. Ambassadors everywhere were working on the financial crisis; South Korea would be taking the G20 chair in 2010. Much was being done regarding climate change. Relations with North Korea had deteriorated, he said. President Lee had decided that a hard-nosed, not a "sunshine", policy would be best

In the Questions & Answers Session which followed, Mr Ja was asked what he saw as his Embassy's mandate. To improve bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, he replied. The British Council was involved in the programme for learning English, which promoted mutual understanding; there had been a remarkable change since the first Embassy was established in Pyong Yang in 2000. (Because of a slight delay in part of the programme, the audience had heard the first Ambassador in Pyong Yang, Mr Jim Hoare, talking about his experiences there.) Mr Ja added that the graves of airmen killed in the Korean War were being well tended in Pyong Yang, and families of the deceased had visited the graves.

A lively exchange of views took place between Mr Ja and Mr Chun regarding the proposed launch of a satellite by North Korea. Mr Chun gave a grave warning that the satellite was a way of testing missiles, which could carry nuclear warheads. North Korea was using huge amounts of their scarce resources on this. Given their track record, what they were planning was in violation of the United Nations Security Council resolution; everything depended on how strongly North Korea was committed to co-operation.

Mr Ja referred to the North-South Summit in 2006, after which inter-Korean relations had improved. Through a joint venture on tourism, more than 100,000 South Koreans had visited the North, including separated family members, which had deepened understanding between the two countries. But the improvement had rolled back after the election of President Lee, and the present South Korea government was refusing to admit joint North-South negotiations. Mr Chun had mentioned that North Korea was putting scarce resources into the

satellite, but whether the country was better off or not, it did not prevent them from having a communications satellite. In the 1980's, when North Korea was trading with the East Europeans, the position had been different, but early in the 1990's that trade had collapsed, and China wanted foreign currency if trading with North Korea. That meant economic problems, but the demand of the people for high living standards had risen. Mr Ja maintained that if his country were to be left out, when others were exploring space, there would be no space for North Korea to explore. The satellite would have a trajectory over South Korea, so they had no reason to worry. As South Korea would be launching a satellite in June or July, North Korea should not be blamed for launching one also. They had officially informed the relevant authorities about the launch.

It was true, said Mr Ja, that North Korea had conducted nuclear tests, but the weapons were a deterrent, and they did not want to threaten anybody. After the Korean War, North Korea had been under constant threat of a pre-emptive strike by the United States. Technically North Korea was at war with the United States. It was not fair to demand that one side should disarm. They had pressed for a peace treaty in the 1970's, but the Americans would not agree, so North Korea had felt compelled to have nuclear weapons for self defence and now they had short, medium and long range weapons. Missile negotiations which had started with President Clinton had come to an end with President Bush. As for the UN Security Council resolution, any country that felt threatened could declare it null and void.

Mr Chun made it clear that he did not accept the points made by Mr Ja. As might be expected, the exchanges had been robust, but the general feeling in the audience, some of whom had their own straight questions for the Ambassadors, was clearly that this had been an engrossing and worthwhile encounter.

Dr Robert Hawley gave the vote of thanks to all concerned, and drew special applause for the Society's Social Events Secretary, Sylvia Park, who had done much of the organising of the Evening, including the finger buffet and wine reception which followed, in the Churchill Room. The Ambassadors mingled with Members and their guests, giving the opportunity for further questions to be asked of them.

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