

20th Anniversary & Chinese New Year Dinner
Sonny Leong | 20th Jan 2020

Thank you so much.

Welcome to Chinese for Labour's
20th Anniversary & our Annual Chinese New Year
Gala Dinner!

It is a momentous moment for us.

As you all know,
my good friend and the Chair of Chinese for
Labour,
Sarah Owen
- representing Luton North -
has become the first ever
British Chinese Labour Member of Parliament.

I am so proud of Sarah.
She is going to be a fantastic MP
and I am excited to see what she will do.

Sarah – please stand!

For the moment, let us reflect
on just what an historic and challenging time this is
for our first British-Chinese Labour MP
to enter the political fray!

With blonde bombshells
Donald Trump in the White House
and Boris Johnson in Downing Street,
it feels very apt that we are welcoming
the year of the golden rat.

That's a great disservice to rats of course.

That Trump and Johnson
are inhabiting two of the great symbols of
democracy
shows we are in a time
when division dominates
and where diversity and difference
are suspected rather than celebrated.

As many of us know,
the tension between 'British' and 'foreigner'
has always been a feature
of the story of immigrant communities
in their adopted countries.

Holding and managing simultaneous identities
becomes a necessary part of our lives.

It becomes more complex
for second, third and subsequent generations.

Well, over the past three years,
the issue of Brexit -
which has reached more of an uneasy conclusion
rather than a satisfactory resolution -
seems to have raised the question of multiple
identities
for people who have considered themselves
undoubtedly,
some would even say 'indigenously',
British.

The tendency towards the binary,
the oppositional,
to us and them,
is inherent in the British psyche.

The legal system is adversarial rather than
inquisitorial.

The political system –
the green benches of the House of Commons –
and the red lines separating the front benches
two swords' lengths apart –
stands in contrast
to the semi-circular parliaments found in many
countries,
including, of course, Scotland.

The tension between this deeply ingrained idea of
Britishness,
and a version which accepts different
and compatible layers of identity –
being proudly and simultaneously English
eg British *and* European –
have disunited our United Kingdom
in an unprecedented way.

Even more than the choice between
The Stones and The Beatles,
or Blur and Oasis,
or Take That and East 17 –
and I should say that's where my cultural
references stop! –
the binary identities of Leaver and Remainer
have sliced through families,
friendships,
communities,
regions,
political parties
and the four nations of the United Kingdom.

Can the hard-won experience of immigrants,
like our British-Chinese community,
who are not just comfortable
but empowered
by embracing the multiple perspectives
that different levels of identity provide –
point toward how Britain can come together again?

We know that between 1997 and 2010,
under a Labour government,
as our community rapidly expanded,
we made considerable progress
as a society of tolerance
that celebrated and valued diversity.

But these hard-won victories
have to be continually defended and fought for.
We have seen how quickly tolerance evaporates.
How the zeitgeist can become ugly,
divisive
and a danger to difference.

It can be quite easy to be overwhelmed
and become paralysed
by merely existing in today's reality,
as events and the dynamics shaping the world
swirl around us.
The very nature of how we live is changing.

And the very destructive changes
to the nature we have taken for granted
threaten our lives –
and our children's lives.

It is a world and future of duality:
full of challenge
and yet ripe with opportunity.

The greatest danger to success in this vortex –
as an individual,
as a society
and as a community –
is inaction.

Paralysis.

That feeling that we can't do anything
in the face of the huge, rapid forces
changing the world.

And yet we must not become paralysed,
we must not surrender to despair.

This is a moment
for the Chinese community to stand up and be
counted.

If we are honest,
the Chinese community has been,
probably not paralysed,
but at the very least disengaged
from the national debate.

Our voice has certainly not been heard.

Whatever the short- and medium-term future of
this country is,
we must strive to be a part of it,
and to influence it.

We have a high level of entrepreneurship in our
community.

Innovative and fleet-footed entrepreneurs
can often deliver solutions
more rapidly and effectively than governments.

We also have some examples of remarkable high achieving individuals from the Chinese British community with us this evening.

Raymond Siu, Stanley Tse, Lucy Mitchell, Christine Lee, Rosa Hui, Jen Lim and the wonderful BEA actors, Dr Stephen Chan, Lady Katy Blair and our wonderful Goh Wan (who was awarded the MBE in the New Year's Honours List)

I have always been so passionate about Chinese for Labour because we do not just give a greater voice to people of Chinese origin in politics, but we can also help the Labour Party, and through them, the country, to hear another perspective, to gain another asset and to become richer and more diverse.

We have not always made the most of the power of our voice.

We are the third largest
and the fastest growing community in the UK,
but with very little to show for it –
under the radar –
seen but not heard.

Indeed, the British Chinese community
did not have a single elected representative
in the House of Commons until 2015.

So Sarah's arrival on the green benches is long
overdue.

Her experience will be invaluable.

Her voice must be heard,
amplified
and heeded.

And there is no shortage of tremendous challenges
facing us in this century – climate breakdown
and unprecedented environmental damage,
population growth and increasing migration,
huge shifts in international economic power,
increasingly sophisticated technology and artificial
intelligence,
mass communications
changing how and who we talk to
at an accelerating pace.

And, central to all of it,
the rising tide of autocratic regimes

We must not leave our future up to those
who pursue dystopia and division –
the golden rats
in Downing Street and in the White House.

Twenty years after our founding,
and now with our first MP,
Chinese for Labour's mission
to amplify the voice and power of the UK's Chinese
community
in the pursuit of a more just,
tolerant
and prosperous society for all,
has never been more important.

We have a number of leadership candidates in the
room tonight.

- Lisa Nandy, Jess Phillips,
- Keir Starmer & Emily Thornberry
- Dawn Butler & Angela Rayner

First –
whatever the outcome –
I want to say thank you
for stepping forward to lead.

That takes courage,
especially at this moment.

The challenge I have outlined tonight
is your challenge.

Not to have the magic solution all by yourself,
but to allow all of us to contribute
to rebuilding the bonds between us.

So let me finish with one simple statement –
both to our leadership candidates
and every single person here;
let us re-dedicate ourselves
at this moment in time
to the essential truth
that has too often been forgotten in recent years:
“that by the strength of our common endeavour
we achieve more than we achieve alone”.

Thank you.