



## ONE WORLD, ONE DREAM?

In recent days Australian athletes have been leaving our shores to compete at the Beijing Olympics. They will have a tough slog ahead of them, striving against world class athletes in world class facilities, but also battling the dangers of pollution and unexpected sporting hazards.

They will also have to ask themselves some deep questions about the nature of the host of the games, the Communist Party of China.

China is a place of extreme contrasts. It has amazing wealth, desperate poverty, terrible pollution and astounding beauty. It is also seen, by many, as a threat to the 21st century. China has experienced much over the last 150 years: once an Imperial Giant, then a trading post for European Empires, then bloody civil war and invasion leading to the dominance of communism and, today, the awakening of vast opportunity.

It is difficult, here in Australia, to understand the violent forces that have shaped modern China.

In recent weeks, I have received a number of letters expressing concern about China's growing strength. I think such fears are missing the mark. China's military is powerful, true, but it is certainly no match for America's. China's economy is huge, yet its citizens are poor. Strategically, China is surrounded by uneasy neighbours.

But domestic insecurities preoccupy the Chinese government more than its international relationships. China is in the middle of a rushing river of change. More and more of its citizens move from rural villages to booming cities, yet competitive capitalism has forced the Chinese government to shed many of the sureties, or payoffs, that it had used to keep the population under control.

Suddenly, there are millions of itinerant workers being underpaid, millions of newly middle class citizens wanting political representation, millions of parents wanting futures for their children, millions of individuals wanting freedom to pursue their dreams.

In 2004, there were over 74,000 protests in China – over 74,000 separate protests – across the length and breadth of China. Many of those protesters had specific local grievances, but the Chinese Communist Party is worried that these protests will unite and that the Communist Party itself will become the target of attack. We should always remember a fundamental truth: the Chinese Government is scared of its people.

For the moment, I have no doubt that the games will be organised with military precision, that China will win many gold medals (though not as many as Australia) and that the opening and closing ceremonies will be amazing spectacles. A lot of people will come away impressed by what they have seen.

But I hope that that the Chinese people will be able to take something extra from the games – I hope they have a chance to meet and talk with some of their guests, and learn something about freedom and about democracy – about those things that the Chinese Government does not allow. Such an achievement would be worth its weight in medals.



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