Executive summary

In January 2017, Free Tibet worked with the polling company ComRes to ask the general public in four countries a series of questions about Tibet. The questions were designed to help the work of Free Tibet and other Tibet organisations by investigating public knowledge and perceptions of Tibet.

The main focus of the poll was in the UK, where 1,000 adults were surveyed, and the US, where 1,001 adults were surveyed. Both were asked seven questions, some of them to test their factual knowledge on Tibet and others to find out their opinions. To generate a broader spread of answers, we also asked three questions in Australia and Canada, where 1,000 and 1,001 adults were surveyed respectively. The results that we received are captured in this report.

The results show that Tibet groups have significant work to do to increase public knowledge of Tibet. There is some basic knowledge in these four countries, but people who are concerned about human rights or social justice and who might be interested in joining the Tibet movement first need to hear more about Tibet and learn what problems its people face, and why they should be concerned.

There are some key clues in the data which suggest how to achieve this. Results on media coverage suggest that people, especially young people, do not know about Tibet because they do not read or hear stories about it. Those who did see at least one story about Tibet were far more likely to know that Tibetans lived under a military occupation, the key to understanding the problems that they face. Furthermore, those who knew that Tibetans lived under military occupation were more likely to say that they were concerned. Turning this concern, much of it coming from young people, into action is vital to the future of the Tibet movement.
The survey

The questions that we asked in the UK and USA were:

1. What is Tibet?
   1. A city in Asia
   2. A country in Asia
   3. A fictional place in Asia
   4. A mountain in Asia
   5. A region of a country in Asia
   6. Don’t know

2. And as far as you know, is Tibet currently controlled by:
   1. The Chinese government
   2. The Indian government
   3. An independent Tibetan government
   4. Don’t know

3. And what kind of system do Tibetans live under?
   1. A fully functioning democracy
   2. A religious dictatorship
   3. Foreign military occupation
   4. A military dictatorship
   5. A democracy that does not function effectively
   6. A monarchy
   7. Don’t know

4. Thinking about your answer to the last question, how concerned, if at all, are you about the situation in Tibet?
   1. Very concerned
   2. Fairly concerned
   3. Not very concerned
   4. Not concerned at all
   5. Not applicable - I do not have enough knowledge about the situation in Tibet
   6. Don’t know

5. Thinking generally, which, if any, of the following issues do you think would be the most serious concern if a country? Please pick up to four options.
   1. Living in a country that is under foreign military occupation
   2. Restrictions that prevent people leaving the country or travelling freely inside the country
   3. Police using violence against protesters
   4. Damage to the environment, such as rivers being polluted and deforestation
   5. People being sent to prison for criticising the government
   6. People being unable to elect their own leaders
   7. People being tortured in prison
   8. A country’s language being eradicated
   9. People being unable to freely practice their religion
   10. People being arrested and held in prison without being accused of a crime
   11. A country’s traditional customs and way of life being eradicated
   12. People having no control over their natural resources and economy
   13. The government and security forces carrying out mass surveillance on the population
   14. None of these
   15. Don’t know

6. Roughly speaking, how many news stories would you say that you have seen or heard about on Tibet in the last 12 months in newspapers, on television and in online news?
   1. Fifteen stories or more
   2. Between ten and fourteen stories
   3. Between five and nine stories
   4. Between one and four stories
   5. None
7. In the past, the Chinese government has responded negatively towards other countries whose governments have spoken about human rights in Tibet. Thinking about this...
   a) which of the following comes closest to your view?
      1. It is more important for [COUNTRY] to help protect human rights in Tibet even if this risks damaging good trade relations with China
      2. It is more important for [COUNTRY] to maintain good trade relations with China even if this risks the protection human rights in Tibet
      3. Don’t know

   b) Which of the following comes closest to your view?
      1. When [COUNTRY] gets involved in other countries’ domestic affairs it tends to make things worse.
      2. When [COUNTRY] gets involved in other countries’ domestic affairs it tends to make things better.
      3. Don’t know

   c) Which of the following comes closest to your view?
      1. Action taken by the [COUNTRY] government can really help the position of human rights in foreign countries around the world.
      2. Action taken by the [COUNTRY] government cannot really help the position of human rights in foreign countries around the world.
      3. Don’t know

The questions we asked in Australia and Canada were:

1. What is Tibet?
   1. A country in Asia that is currently independent
   2. A country in Asia that is currently occupied
   3. A region of a country in Asia
   4. A fictional place in Asia
   5. Don’t know

2. And as far as you know, how good or bad do you think the current human rights situation is in Tibet? If you are unsure, please select don’t know.
   1. The human rights situation is very good
   2. The human rights situation is fairly good
   3. The human rights situation is fairly bad
   4. The human rights situation is very bad
   5. Don’t know

3. Thinking generally about a possible situation within a country, which, if any, of the following issues do you think are of most serious concern? Please pick up to four options.
   1. Living in a country that is under foreign military occupation
   2. Restrictions that prevent people leaving the country or travelling freely inside the country
   3. Police using violence against protesters
   4. Damage to the environment, such as rivers being polluted and deforestation
   5. People being sent to prison for criticising the government
   6. People being unable to elect their own leaders
   7. People being tortured in prison
   8. A country’s language being eradicated
   9. People being unable to freely practice their religion
   10. People being arrested and held in prison without being accused of a crime
   11. A country’s traditional customs and way of life being eradicated
   12. People having no control over their natural resources and economy
   13. The government and security forces carrying out mass surveillance on the population
   14. None of these
   15. Don’t know
Basic knowledge

We decided to start with some very basic questions of increasing complexity to gauge just how much the public knew about Tibet. These questions, all multiple choice, asked those taking part: 1) what they thought Tibet was; 2) under whose jurisdiction Tibetans lived; and 3) what kind of political system Tibetans lived under.

The first two questions established a reasonable basic knowledge of Tibet among the public. A majority of people had a good idea of what Tibet was, with between 82% (in the UK) and 69% (in the US) believing Tibet either to be a country or a region of a country. The first position is the one held by Tibetans and many of those familiar with Tibetan history, the second is the position currently held by every government around the world. Given that Tibet receives far less media coverage today than 20 years ago, and has to compete with other crises in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, these are reassuring numbers.

People between 18 and 34, the youngest group surveyed, were most likely to say that they did not know what Tibet was. There was also an interesting relationship between the age of those surveyed and their view of what Tibet was politically – as respondents increased in age they were more likely to say that Tibet was a country rather than a region. 71% of those who were 55 or older in the UK and 52% of those who were 55 or older in the US said that Tibet is a country.

As far as you are aware, what is Tibet?

Overall, around half of people in the UK (54%), Australia (51%) and Canada (45%) think that Tibet is a country in Asia. Americans are split, with similar numbers thinking it is a country (37%) as think it is a region of a country (32%).

In the next graph, the blue and red sections of the graphs correspond with answers that correctly identified Tibet as a unit of territory that exists in some form in the world today.

1 The data we received allowed us to break down the results by demographic, such as age and gender. It also allowed us to cross reference answers between two questions, allowing us to see, for example, how many people who answered that Tibet was a country, thought that Tibet was controlled by an independent Tibetan government. Due to their large size, we have not included these detailed breakdowns in the results, but we do refer to several of the findings contained in them throughout the report.
As far as you are aware, what is Tibet?

[Image of bar chart showing percentage of people who know what Tibet is in different countries.]

In other words, a large proportion of people have the right idea of what Tibet is.

% of people who know what Tibet is...

[Image of bar chart showing the percentage of people who know what Tibet is in different countries.]

The second question asked about the internal politics of Tibet. It asked those taking the survey who they thought currently exercised control over Tibet. In line with the split in answers to the previous question, in which some respondents thought Tibet was a region, and others thought it was a country, the responses here were divided between rule by China and rule by a Tibetan government.

Almost exactly half of the respondents in both the UK and the US answered that China currently exercises jurisdiction over Tibet. Around one fifth of respondents in the UK and US believed that Tibet was controlled by an independent Tibetan government, which would suggest that they did not know there was an occupation or that they thought the problems in Tibet had been resolved. Either of these beliefs would discourage people from joining the campaign to free Tibet.

As far as you know, is Tibet currently under the jurisdiction of...
The answers to this question also introduced another trend. Roughly a quarter of respondents in both the US and the UK said that they did not know which government exercised jurisdiction over Tibet. Throughout the poll it is clear that a large percentage of the public feel that they do not know enough about Tibet to answer fact-based questions or assess the current political situation.

This was demonstrated by the answers to third question, which asked what political system Tibetans lived under. The responses show that awareness of the current political situation in Tibet appears to be low among the UK and US public. Around two in five (37% UK and 40% US) people said that they don’t know what best describes the system of governance used in Tibet. Among those who did feel confident enough to name a system of government, most did choose the correct answer of “foreign military occupation”, but this was a comparatively small proportion of those surveyed, with 21% and 16% in the UK and US respectively giving this answer.

*Which of the following do you think best describes Tibet? Tibet has a ...*

![Bar chart showing responses to the question.](chart.png)

This question seemed to show where the limits of people’s knowledge of the political situation in Tibet was. Almost half of respondents could identify China as the government that has control over Tibet, but fewer than half of these people could identify the form that this control takes. It is fair to infer that if the public are unaware that Tibetans are living under a foreign military occupation, they will not understand the problems that its people face and it will not have occurred to them to get involved in the Tibet movement.
Which of the following do you think best describes Tibet? Tibet has a ...

![Pie charts showing attitudes and concerns](chart)

**Attitudes and concerns**

While question 3 drew some limits on the public’s factual knowledge of Tibet, question 4 showed how their lack of knowledge about Tibet prevented them from knowing the extent to which the situation in Tibet worried them. The question asked respondents, based on their answer to question 3, how concerned they were about the situation in Tibet.

A net 41% in the US said they were either very or fairly concerned about Tibet, while a net 49% in the UK said that they were concerned.

The highest numbers of those concerned were those who knew that Tibetans lived under a foreign military occupation. When we looked at the question 4 responses from the group of people who had answered question 3 in this way, 66% of people in the US and 62% of people in the UK said that they were concerned.

By comparison, when we looked at the data for people whose question 3 response was that Tibetans lived under a religious dictatorship, only 41% in the US and 18% in the UK said they were concerned about the situation in Tibet.
Thinking about your view that Tibet lives under a [...], how concerned, if at all, are you about the situation in Tibet?

These figures indicate that people do express concern about the situation in Tibet if they know that Tibetans are living in the oppressive conditions that come with a military occupation. This is a simple but important point. Like the previous question, a sizeable proportion of those surveyed, when asked how concerned they were about Tibet, simply said that they did not know enough about Tibet to make this judgement.

We asked a slightly different question in Australia and Canada: as far as you know, how good or bad do you think the current human rights situation in Tibet is? A net 64% in Australia and 57% in Canada believed that the situation was bad or fairly bad, with very small numbers of people believing that the human rights situation was good in Tibet.
As far as you know, how good or bad do you think the current human rights situation is in Tibet?
The human rights situation is...

Again, a quarter of people in Australia and nearly a third of those surveyed in Canada said they did not know enough about Tibet to make an assessment.

We did not just want to assess the public’s knowledge of Tibet, but also how we could better reach the public, including which campaigns to prioritise to bring in new supporters. For the next question, we gave people in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada a list of human rights issues and asked them to prioritise which they thought would be the worst to live under.

The clear majority of people in each of the four countries felt that being arrested and held in prison without having committed a crime was the worst of these problems, with 54% in the UK, 53% in the USA, 57% in Australia and 59% in Canada choosing this option. There was a greater diversity of opinions after this but, nevertheless, the data showed clear and widespread concern about freedom of expression, with 37% in the UK, 41% in the USA, 35% in Australia and 41% in Canada saying they would be concerned about people being sent to prison for criticising the government.
Thinking generally, which, of the following conditions do you think it would be worst to live under in a country? Please pick up to four options.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worst</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Canada</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People being arrested and held in prison without being accused of a crime</td>
<td>People being arrested and held in prison without being accused of a crime</td>
<td>People being arrested and held in prison without being accused of a crime</td>
<td>People being arrested and held in prison without being accused of a crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Worst</td>
<td>People being sent to prison for criticising the government</td>
<td>People being sent to prison for criticising the government</td>
<td>Living in a country that is under foreign military occupation</td>
<td>People being sent to prison for criticising the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Worst</td>
<td>People being tortured in prison</td>
<td>People being unable to freely practice their religion</td>
<td>People being sent to prison for criticising the government</td>
<td>People being tortured in prison</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issues that fewer people picked included “police using violence against protesters” (15% in the UK, 14% in the USA, 11% in Australia and 16% in Canada), “people having no control over their natural resources and economy” (14% in the UK, 15% in the USA, 14% in Australia and 15% in Canada) and “a country’s language being eradicated” (7% in the UK, 9% in the USA and Australia and 11% in Canada).

Concerns about “police using violence against protesters” and “damage to the environment, such as rivers being polluted and deforestation” decreased with age in all four countries. Despite the lower numbers, there are still many people who are concerned by these issues, since they were among the four options that people picked from a list of 15.

The next question assessed how many people actually read or heard about Tibet through the media and to what extent. We asked people in the UK and US how many stories they had heard about Tibet in the past year, with options ranging from zero to 15 or more.

It was unsurprising that very few had heard 15 or more stories, but the proportion of people who had not heard a single story from Tibet in the past year was overwhelming. Approximately a quarter (27% in the UK and 26% in the USA) had heard between one and four stories during this period.

Although most people were not hearing about Tibet, one clear sign of hope was that hearing even one to four stories about Tibet was enough for many to appreciate the circumstances that Tibetans were living in. In the UK, 271 people out of 1,000 said they had seen 1-4 stories on Tibet in the past year, and of this 271, 41% knew that Tibetans lived under a foreign military occupation. Meanwhile, of the 68 people in the UK that believed Tibet was a fully functioning democracy, 55% said that they had not read a single story on Tibet in the past year.
Roughly speaking, how many news stories would you say that you have seen or heard about on Tibet in the last 12 months in newspapers, on television and in online news?

Finally, we asked a series of questions that were not directly related to Tibet, but which assessed how much the public prioritised human rights and the extent to which their government should promote them. For each question they needed to indicate which of the two opposing statements best represents their view.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is more important for the UK/USA to help protect human rights in other countries, even if this damages the UK/USA economy</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is more important for the UK/USA to maintain its own economy than help protect human rights in other countries</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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We asked people in the UK and USA whether their governments’ interventions in other countries’ domestic affairs could have a positive effect or just made things worse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>USA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When the UK/USA gets involved in other countries’ domestic affairs, it tends to just make things worse</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the UK/USA gets involved in other countries’ domestic affairs, it tends to make things better</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>23%</td>
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Finally, we inverted this question to see whether the public felt that pressure from their governments on other governments, such as China, could be a productive force for change.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Statement</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>USA</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action taken by the British/American government can really help the position of human rights in foreign countries around the world</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action taken by the British/American government cannot really help the position of human rights in foreign countries around the world</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was a marked difference between the UK and USA over how effective efforts by their government to promote human rights abroad could be, with more Americans feeling that these efforts could be productive than British people. In the USA, young people appeared to be the most idealistic, with 53% of 18-34 year olds saying that action taken by their government could help human rights in other countries, as opposed to 27% who said it made things worse, while 46% of people aged 55 or older said their government could help human rights in other countries and 37% said that their actions made things worse.
Nevertheless, in both countries the number of people who believed that their government could help effect change for good was less than 50%. There can be numerous explanations for this, perhaps including a wariness of putting pressure of foreign governments a decade after the war in Iraq, or a reluctance by the public for their government to concentrate on issues abroad when there are problems at home to deal with, but there is some cause for concern in these figures. Due to the lack of vocal opposition among Chinese people to their government’s policies in Tibet, the onus is on China’s international peers and trading partners to raise human rights and push for them to be respected. Many of the campaigns by Tibet groups rely on them and their supporters urging their own governments to push for this change.

Conclusions

The questions in this poll have broadly assessed two principal areas - public knowledge of Tibet and public concern about Tibet. Public knowledge leads to concern; throughout the poll it is clear that the public, especially young people, need to be seeing and hearing more about Tibet in order to gain the level of knowledge required to generate interest in, and ultimately support for, Tibet.

The findings on basic knowledge about Tibet are encouraging. At the most basic level, 82% in the UK and 69% in the US knew something about Tibet, in that they could identify it was a geographical area. This nevertheless means that almost one in five people in the UK and just under one third in the US did not even have this level of knowledge. Furthermore, within that 82% and 69%, a sizeable proportion of those who answered thought that Tibet was run by an independent government, meaning that they did not know Tibetans were under a military occupation. Work needs to be done to reach the people who have not heard about Tibet and those who do not know about the occupation.

The positive news for the Tibet movement is that, according to these findings, there is an appetite among those who understand the gravity of the human rights abuses in Tibet to get involved. The data suggests that only a few news stories are enough to communicate to people that Tibetans live under occupation, and that people who understand that Tibetans live under occupation are far more likely to be concerned about Tibet. Tibet is a cause that can seem complicated to the uninitiated due to its long history, unique and complex culture and the fact that it is closed off from the world and does not feature very often in the news. Nevertheless, the polling shows that real struggles that Tibetans face, including detention without charge and people being imprisoned for dissent, are easily understood by the public. What needs to happen first is for the public to be reached in a simple and relatable way. We have used news stories as a way of measuring how much the public hears about Tibet, but it could just as easily be web content or outreach at festivals and other public places. The key is to make it simple and to explain the situation in Tibet to these potential audiences, who may not even have seen the Tibetan flag or heard of the Dalai Lama, at the most basic level.

There are many issues to work on when campaigning on Tibet and we in the Tibet movement often work with little resources. This can make it difficult to know where best to dedicate time and energy. The results of this survey suggest that entry-level communication to cold audiences is among the most valuable things that we can be doing. It can be easy to overlook, but is every bit as valuable as getting existing supporters to carry out campaigns. The basic outreach will bring new people into the movement and keep the Tibetan cause strong for the future.