

QUESTION ON NOTICE

QON 001 – Inquiry into the issues facing diaspora communities in Australia – 15 October 2020
Topic: National Foundation for Australia-China Relations

Senator Fierravanti-Wells

Question

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Can I ask a question on the National Foundation for Australia-China Relations. I note it has quite a turbulent history. I understand that there has been some adverse media in relation to it. Do you want to comment on that?

Mr Marcelo: I'll ask Ken Gordon, from the foundation, to comment.

Mr Gordon: We're aware of some of the commentary that's been appearing in the media about the foundation, but the foundation is very much focused on getting on with its job of developing and supporting practical cooperation in key sectors, supporting Australian business and community engagement in China and engaging with the Chinese Australian community. We're working very hard to develop and support constructive and practical engagement to maximise mutual cooperation to the benefit of both countries.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Would you like to tell us a little bit more? Some of the comments were pretty negative. Do you meet? What has happened? Can you tell me that sort of stuff? I really would like you to address some of the criticisms that have been levelled against it. Quite frankly, I'm not sure what it's actually doing at the moment. If you want to take that on notice, I would be very happy to receive any further information. I do want you to address the specific criticisms that have been made in the media. The people on it seem to be very much pro Beijing, if I can put it that way. I don't see too many people on there who bring a diverse range of views. At the moment it is a relationship that is fraught with diverse views. I would have thought that it would be good to have those sorts of views reflected in this foundation.

Mr Gordon: Thank you so much for that question. We're actually quite proud of the diversity of the independent advisory board. We think that it reflects a breadth of perspectives and interests across the Australian community. The board brings together quite a broad range of eminent Australians who have demonstrated expertise in business, academia, government, media, the arts and science. They're doing a great job to advise the foundation on ways to deepen cooperation with China. It's the expectation that the board will bring diverse views to the government on developing foundation activities. We very much welcome that. Every board member has committed to the foundation's role to promote engagement with China in Australia's national interests. With regard to criticism of the board, is that the main criticism you want a response to or are there other criticisms?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: No. What you've read about it is not what I've read about it. I'm also interested in looking at the members of that committee. For example, how many of them have expertise or are across the detail, particularly about human rights or other issues, and across some of the concerns that we are expressing? It just seems to be packed with the usual people who don't want discussion around human rights and don't want discussion about the negative part or the concerns we have with this relationship. They seem happy to push the

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line: 'Tut-tut. We shouldn't be criticising the communist regime.' That has very much been a feature. I'm really concerned that this is just a group of people who are basically taking a very rosy view of the relationship between Australia and China and are not prepared to tackle the difficult issues. The composition of the board, the advisory council or whatever it's called does not reflect those challenging voices, if I can put it that way.

Mr Gordon: There are challenging voices, to use your phrase, on the board. As I said, I can assure you that the discussions by board members within board meetings are quite robust. There are a variety of views expressed on different topics. At the moment we are undertaking a comprehensive competitive grants round. We've received over 500 applications. That was broad ranging across a whole range of activities. As we have been shortlisting there has been a lot of commentary about the value and merit of the applications. We do have a broad range of representation on the board, including from business, culture, science and other fields. We have native Mandarin speakers on the board as well, so there is that depth of knowledge in terms of engagement with China. Of course, drawing back to the fact that the whole point of the foundation is to strengthen engagement with China, so—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: You don't want people on there who are going to be critical—is that what you're saying?

Mr Gordon: No, the board members can speak their own views; but, in terms of the foundation's position, that position is arrived at through discussion. Those discussions are internal to the board meetings themselves.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: I'd like you to provide to us on notice the list of board members—I've got the current board appointments in front of me. I'd really like you to identify, amongst those, those people who have been active, if I can put it that way, in their providing of views publicly in relation to matters such as human rights and other issues. I'd be very interested to have your take and to understand why they're on that board and the various categories. You've got business people, you've got bureaucrats, you've got academics, you've got the odd person who's a China security expert. Do we have on there people who have had the lived experience of having to deal with this communist regime and what that actually means? I'd like you to take that on notice and come back to us, because what's the point of having this sort of foundation if it's only going to be one way?

Mr Marcelo: We can take that on notice, Senator.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Thank you.

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Answer

Information on the Foundation for Australia-China Relations, including its Advisory Board, is available on the Foundation website: www.australiachinafoundation.org.au.