



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reception**

**Tuesday, December 11, 2018**

**3:30 – 5:30 p.m.**

**The Gold Room – 2168 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon and welcome to everyone. On behalf of myself and my colleague and co-chairman Randy Hultgren, thank you for joining us to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

We want to extend an especially warm welcome to Frank Wolf and Joe Pitts, former members of Congress and co-chairs of the Commission, and to Katrina Lantos Swett, daughter of the late congressman Tom Lantos, the Commission's namesake. We are happy they are here to celebrate with us.

For those who may not know the Commission's history, it has its origins in the bipartisan Congressional Human Rights Caucus founded in 1983 by Tom Lantos and former Republican congressman John Porter – like Randy, also from Illinois. The Caucus was dedicated to the defense of all human rights codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary we also celebrate this week.

When Congressman Porter retired from Congress, Frank Wolf assumed his responsibilities as Republican co-chair of the Caucus. Together, he and Tom Lantos led the Caucus during four congresses, until Tom Lantos' death in February 2008.

Later that year Nancy Pelosi, then the Speaker of the House and a fellow Californian, took the initiative to transform the Caucus into a permanent human rights commission in memory of Tom Lantos. She had the support of Minority Leader John Boehner, and House Resolution 1451, the “Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Establishment Resolution,” passed unanimously on September 24, 2008.

In the ten years since, this Commission has consistently stood up for human rights in American foreign policy, in keeping with the best of the values and ideals that have always guided this country: freedom, democracy and human dignity.

We have met with victims of human rights abuses from all over the world – from countries that are our adversaries, and others that are allies.

We have met with those who witness and document abuses – journalists, human rights defenders, medical personnel.

We have met with courageous individuals who put themselves at risk by challenging so-called “leaders” who thrive on abuses and perpetuate them.

People come to the Commission because they believe we can make a difference – they believe that the United States will stand with them and support their efforts to transform human rights from a pretty idea on paper into something real that will improve their everyday lives. Our question to them is always “What can we in the U.S. Congress do to help?”

Some of the people who come to us have been imprisoned for their efforts. Others have later been killed. They are the inspiration for the Commission’s successes.

The Russia and Global Magnitsky Accountability bills started with the terrible story of Sergei Magnitsky’s death in Russian custody.

The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, passed by the House in September and under consideration in the Senate, was inspired by innumerable stories of repression of Tibetans at the hands of the Chinese government.

Many prisoners of conscience have been released because members of this Commission were moved to advocate for them after hearing of their unjust suffering.

Today, when many of us feel that the current Administration is not leading on human rights as strongly as it should, this bipartisan Commission is more important and more necessary than ever.

In spite of the progress we've seen during the last 70 years, we face tremendous human rights challenges now: a dramatic rise in authoritarianism, a widespread disregard for justice and rule of law, growing sectarianism, hatred and scapegoating of minorities, and tremendous brutality unleashed against civilian populations. More people are displaced today than at any time since the Second World War.

Now is not the time to step back – now is the time to step up.

We promise to continue to do just that. We will continue to speak out and find creative ways to insist that governments, including our own, prioritize human rights at home and abroad. We will continue to be a point of reference and a source of hope.

And it looks like we may have help. Yesterday Chris Coons announced that he and Thom Tillis, Co-Chairs of the Senate Human Rights Caucus, have introduced a resolution to establish the John S. McCain III Human Rights Commission – the Senate counterpart to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Their announcement is both a fitting tribute to Sen. McCain's human rights legacy, and further evidence that the work we have done on this side of the Capitol has made a difference.

I cannot close without recognizing one more group of people: the fellows and interns who kept the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission running for years in the absence of a budget for staff. The House Foreign Affairs Committee has been generous in providing office space, computers and supplies, but without graduate students, staff detailed from other agencies and volunteers who literally worked for free, we would not be here today. We thank you and deeply appreciate your service.

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