

## **Assembly 29 October 2007**

### **Beijing**

The other evening, I opened the windows of my apartment and enjoyed the sight of a full moon. The moon appeared to be particularly bright helped by the fact that there were no clouds in the sky and a crisp dry atmosphere.

Last week, I was in Beijing for five days attending a conference and various meetings. Sadly, I did not see the moon during any of the evenings of my visit and missed the opportunity of watching it approach its full moon status. Even more unfortunate, however, was that I did not see the sun either during those five days in Beijing. For the 120 hours that I spent in the nation's capital, I saw neither the sun nor the moon.

The reason for this was the smog. The weather conditions deteriorated during the time of my visit reaching a peak last Friday when the pollution index soared to 184. The smog was so heavy that air traffic was shut down at Beijing international airport after visibility was reduced to only a few hundred metres. This caused major delays the next day when airlines were trying hard to catch up with the backlog created by so many cancelled flights. Out on the roads, the visibility was less than one kilometre and certain expressways and ring roads were closed because of the danger of accidents occurring in the poor conditions.

Beijing is now in the autumn period when fog is common place. Indeed, one can expect there to be fog in Beijing at this time of the year, rather like one can expect typhoons in Hong Kong over the summer months. What was more difficult to explain, however, was that the Beijing fog of last week lasted five days, twenty four hours a day, and was forecast to continue over this weekend. I must state, however, that I could not smell or taste the pollutants in the air which is no doubt why the authorities issued only a yellow alert and described conditions as "moderate". One can only imagine what it must be like when the warning is "extreme". Back in Hong Kong, as I stood in my apartment gazing at the moon, I did appreciate the relatively clean air and clear night sky that we experience. One can only imagine, however, how wonderful it must be in other parts of the world where the air is not tarnished by the wastes of industry and motor vehicles.

The Beijing fog (or smog) did not impact significantly on the performance of our footballers although it was a little difficult at times to see the players on the pitch. Members of our football team were in Beijing to play in the 1<sup>st</sup> Championship of the World's Leading Schools association. St. Paul's College joined 7 other teams in the finals of this competition including teams from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and China. The English schools were represented in the finals by Eton College and Dulwich College, two schools I am sure you have heard mentioned previously. It was a wonderful opportunity for our boys to not only compete against these fine schools but also to meet the other boys on an informal basis and forge friendships. Apart from playing football, various activities and visits were organised for the teams. On the football field, our team experienced mixed success. It would be correct to say that the European players were older and larger in build to our boys. Similarly, the mainland Chinese boys were incredibly talented.

The two teams in the final both came from Beijing and showcased the depth of talent that can be found in Chinese sport. Indeed, the first school team was the youth team of a local first division club and one of their players was a professional in the National League. All the players in the second school team in the final were members of a special football academy run by the school and attracting talented footballers from across China. I think that you can understand from this description the high quality of the football that was displayed in the final match.

Our boys learned a great deal from this competition and will bring this experience back to the local scene here in Hong Kong. What was equally important for me, however, was the high regard that the other schools held for our boys. All the principals, football coaches and team members that I spoke to commented that our boys were friendly, outgoing and approachable. In the word of the teachers and coaches of Eaton College and Dulwich College, our boys are a credit to St. Paul's College. I congratulate the boys on their performance on the football pitch and thank them for exemplary behaviour and conduct. I also extend my personal thanks to their coach and the teacher responsible for the tour, Mr. Tang.

I was also in Beijing to visit the High School Affiliated to the Renmin University of China. You might recall that earlier this year we signed a Twin-School link with the High School Affiliated to Jiao Tong University in Shanghai. The aim of my visit last week was to explore the possibility of a

similar twin-school relationship in Beijing. The High School Affiliated to Renmin University has over 4000 boys and girls on its main campus located close to the city centre. The school also has a number of branch schools located across China and offers scholarships to students living in remote areas to come to Beijing for their high school education. These students are accommodated in dormitories (boarding houses) on the main campus. As I experienced at Jiao Tong High School in Shanghai, the size of the school grounds and the number of buildings leaves you with a sense of awe. Try to imagine a school that has four times the number of students as we have at St. Paul's College; that has an Olympic size indoor heated swimming pool; and has at the centre of the campus its own park with grass, trees, fountains and benches.

What we have in common with Renmin High School, however, are academically capable students who have a driving ambition to attend university and secure a well respected job in the future. The Renmin students have a particular interest in English Language, Mathematics and Science and are very keen to know more about life at schools in Hong Kong. The Renmin students are eager to forge friendships with students at SPC and the Renmin teachers are keen to learn about our curriculum and education system. I can see many benefits from a close relationship with Renmin high school and the other schools that I met at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Forum of World Leading Schools.

Although the weather in Beijing was a serious cause for concern, the outcome of the meetings I attended last week suggests that the future is bright.