

NIGEL ROBERTS' MUSINGS ON MONGOLIA

WHY DID I GO TO MONGOLIA?

At very short notice, I was asked by International IDEA (that is, the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) if I could go to Ulaanbattar to advise the Mongolian Parliament about aspects of its proposed new electoral law.



By cancelling (or, more rather I hope, by postponing) a rock-climbing holiday at Mt Arapiles in Australia, I was able to do so and less than two weeks after receiving International IDEA's invitation I arrived in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia.

WHAT DID THE WORK INVOLVE?

Before I got to Mongolia I'd read the proposed new law and a host of related documents. As a result, I hit the ground running when I landed in Ulaanbaatar on Sunday afternoon, November 13 (literally: I went for an hour-long run that afternoon). The next morning I was taken to the Mongolian Parliament (which is known as the "State Great Hural") to talk to the Parliamentary staff who'd drafted the law; and in the afternoon — in a huge committee room (which could have seated almost every member of the 76-strong Parliament) — I had a three-and-a-half hour session with the Members of Parliament who were on the Parliamentary committee examining the law. A young woman who had previously been the President of Mongolia's interpreter translated what the officials and MPs said to me, and then translated my comments and recommendations back to them.

This was the pattern for rest of the week. Each day I met officials and Members of Parliament, and we discussed aspects of the proposed law — at times we focused on the law's broad principles, at other times we paid particular attention to tiny details.



The Mongolian Parliament

In the middle of the week, another consultant — an anti-corruption expert — joined me, and by late Friday afternoon we'd finished a report summarising our main recommendations. It was translated early the following week (after I'd left Mongolia) and presented to the chairman of the Parliamentary committee. I suspect that it may not have a great deal of influence. Shortly after I arrived in Ulaanbaatar, I realised that the members of the Parliamentary committee examining the law were split four ways over its proposed reforms, and I suspect that, as a result, the status quo may ultimately prove to be the most feasible option! (I won't bore with you with details of the electoral system options under consideration, but — if requested — would be happy to provide any budding and/or committed psephologists amongst you with further details.)

MONGOLIA

Mongolia is a large country — it is more than 1.5 million square-kilometres in area (that makes it about three times the size of France or more than twice the size of Texas). It is landlocked (which made my use of the term "overseas voters" especially silly!) and is entirely surrounded by two countries: Russia to the north, while China encircles the rest of the country. The population is only about 2.5 million people, which means that as a country Mongolia has the lowest population density in the world.

Mongolia also holds another world record: Ulaanbaatar is officially listed as the world's coldest capital city. For the week that I was there, the daily temperature range was consistently from a high of -5 degrees C to a low of -25 degrees C (i.e., from 23 degrees F to -13 degrees F). However, because it was always still and (during the day) sunny, the temperatures were easy to bear. I took two coats with me — my standard Gore-Tex jacket and a Gore-Tex-covered down jacket. I didn't use the latter once.

MONGOLIA'S LANGUAGE

During the chaos and upheavals caused by the Russian revolution, Mongolia was occupied by the Chinese, by anti-communist White Russians, and — in 1921 — by Bolshevik troops. For the next 69 years, Mongolia was in effect a Soviet satellite state. Stalin ruthlessly suppressed any praise for Mongolia's best-known historical figure, Genghis Khan (on the grounds that Khan represented anti-Soviet nationalism) and the Mongolian script. As a result, the Mongolian language is now written using a version of Russia's Cyrillic script. This made things additionally confusing for me. Having learnt some of the Cyrillic alphabet, when I went to Russia in 1994 I found I could read and understand a few Russian words — especially those with Latin or Romantic roots. When I picked up a Mongolian book or newspaper, however, I was initially bemused by the fact that I couldn't understand a thing — not a single word. Then it dawned on me, of course, that although the Cyrillic alphabet was slightly familiar to me, not one word of Mongolian was. The language is part of the Ural-Altaic group of languages, which includes Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish and Korean, none of which I have ever learnt before.

I am attaching a PDF file containing a letter about my trip that I had to present to customs officials on my arrival in Ulaanbaatar in order to get a visa. See if you can find my name in it. I'll give you two clues: the letter uses my full name (including my middle name), and gives it several times ...

Despite Mongolia's proximity to China, spoken Mongolian doesn't have the tonal quality of Chinese (or, say, Vietnamese). Indeed, hearing Mongolian was like listening to an Afrikaaner saying "gaan goie glad" over and over again (with the especially guttural "ghl"-sound Afrikaans speakers use for the letter "g"). The explorer Tim Severin has given an amusing description of the Mongolian language: it is "like two cats coughing and spitting at each other until one finally throws up." I have to admit that I thought of Tim Severin's description of the language several times while looking at and listening intently to Mongolian Parliamentarians speaking to me before the interpreter began to enlighten me as to what their concerns were.

CHINGGIS KHAAN

Chinggis Khaan is how Genghis Khan's name is spelt in the Romanised version of Mongolia's Cyrillic script. Since the collapse of communism in Mongolia in 1990, he's once again a very visible person. There's a statue of him in the President's residence and a bust of him in the Mongolian Parliament; he features on many of the country's bank notes; and a well-known beer's named after him, as are numerous bars and restaurants.



A Mongolian 500 Togrog banknote



A toast to Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan is also one of the more amazing figures in world history. For example, the Mongol armies led by him subjugated more lands and people in twenty-five years than the Romans did in four hundred. I am currently reading a fascinating recent book about Khan, and can highly recommend it to anyone who wants to know more him and his achievements. It is Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004). For those of you from Minnesota, you'll be pleased to know that Jack Weatherford teaches at Macalester College. For those of you not from Minnesota, Macalester is the university that Kofi Annan went to.

AN UN-ASIAN COUNTRY?

The Mongolians that I met in Ulaanbaatar did not conform to a single racial or ethnic stereotype. Some were very big: the man who drove for the NGO I was based with looked, appropriately, very much like the large Korean who played the role of Odd Job — the chauffeur — in the film of *Goldfinger*. Other people were small and dainty, rather like the Vietnamese. Some Mongolians had the high-cheekbones one associates with Inuit. Others looked Polynesian or even European. All this almost certainly reflects the fact that the Mongolian Empire once stretched from the Pacific to the Mediterranean.

In the capital city, many people were dressed in the latest western fashions (I was certainly pleased I took my new Television New Zealand suit with me to Mongolia, and that I, too, looked reasonably smart when I met Mongolian Parliamentarians and officials). At the same time, it was not unusual to see men and especially women on the streets of Ulaanbaatar wearing a *del*, a traditional coat, accompanied sometimes by thick felt boots and even on occasion by stiletto-heeled leather boots!

On my fourth day in Mongolia, some Parliamentary officials asked me what I thought of the country (i.e., the Mongolian equivalent of "How do you like New Zealand?!"), and I replied — truthfully — that of all the Asian countries I had ever visited, Mongolia was the least Asian country I'd been to. I immediately began to think, "Well, that was a tactless answer", when I noticed they were all beaming with satisfaction. It was the answer they wanted to hear. As I later read in the Lonely Planet's *Mongolia*, "Mongolians call themselves Asian by ethnicity but Western by culture."

ULAANBAATAR

This was also reflected in Ulaanbaatar. Roughly a million people live in the capital city, and more often than not I felt as though I was in a central or eastern European city rather than an Asian one. Indeed, coming in from the airport, my initial impression of Ulaanbaatar was that it reminded me of Moscow. UB has a large number of high-rise apartment blocks, and the city is also fringed by massive coal-burning, pollution-inducing power-stations. Later on in my stay, heading for the State Department Store, I walked along Peace Avenue (Ulaanbaatar's main east-west highway). Observing its well-regulated traffic — including, as a Wellingtonian I could not help but note, trolley buses — I felt more than a million miles from the chaos and confusion of, say, Hanoi.



Street scene in Ulaanbaatar

At the same time, however, Mongolia's nomadic traditions are surprisingly visible even in Ulaanbaatar. Thousands of *gers* — round felt-tents used by Mongol herders on the steppes — dot the outskirts of the city; and some can even be found near the city-centre. For example, two *gers* had been erected on a building site next to the office I worked in, and doubtless served as homes for itinerant labourers.



Urban gers

MONGOLIAN FOOD AND DRINK

I gave up drinking tea in December 1959. The Lonely Planet's *Mongolia* had warned me that "Mongolians are big tea drinkers." Nevertheless, I was still a bit surprised when, half-an-hour into my first meeting in the Mongolian Parliament, saucer-less cups of black (i.e., not white and also not Chinese green) tea were brought into the room and put down beside us. Well, as they say, when in Ulaanbaatar ... and I dutifully downed my *tsai*. By the end of the week, I had almost got used to drinking tea again.

Since my return to New Zealand, people have been very keen to know what Mongolian food is like (they're far more interested in that than in details of the Mongolian electoral system!). Well, I went to a range of restaurants in Ulaanbaatar — to a French restaurant (in which I was delighted to see my favourite Russian word, "PECTOPAH"), to a Bavarian restaurant, to an Italian restaurant, and to an Irish pub.

I was getting desperate: would I sample any Mongolian food whatsoever before I left the country? Thankfully, on Saturday, November 19 — on my last full day in the country — Quentin Reed (the other consultant) and I were taken out to the countryside (as everyone in Ulaanbaatar refers to any part of Mongolia that's outside the capital city), and — sitting round a stove in a *ger* — we had some real Mongolian food. I had beef-and-noodles soup, Quentin had a goulash type of hot-pot, and we both had meat-slices coated in batter (which, we were assured, were Mongolia's favourite form of fast food). I was also very brave: not only did I have a cup of *süütei tsai*, traditional Mongolian milk tea with salt and butter, but I even went back for a second cup!



At last, some genuine Mongolian food!

CHINESE AFTERMATH

Airline timetables meant I had to have at least one night in Beijing on the way home. I decided to make it two, and thus become an expert on China as well ... This gave me the opportunity to have a quick trot through the Forbidden City, a squint at Tiananmen Square (sealed off while George Bush was in a meeting next door), and a day-trip to one of the Ming Tombs and to the Great Wall of China at Badaling. These were all magnificent. I also came away from China hugely impressed by the speed of the progress and modernisation there. Beijing is no longer a haven for bicycles. It's now a city replete with freeways and commuter railway lines. At the same time, however, it is home to the worst air-pollution I have ever seen. Flying to China from Mongolia, a cloud of smog sadly showed us when

we were near Beijing. I have no doubts at all that the facilities will be ready well in time for the 2008 Olympic Games, but I dread to think what it will be like competing there.



Beijing freeway and commuter rail-line



Beijing's gold medal smog

CONCLUSION

I was away for only eleven days, but they were among the most amazing and interesting eleven days of my life. Going to Mongolia must seem, to many people, to be the equivalent of going to one of the ends of the earth (the country is, after all, often still referred to as "Outer Mongolia"). The invitation I received to go to Ulaanbaatar to work with some of Mongolia's Members of Parliament and Parliamentary staff will probably have been literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me. I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of my time there, and coming back via Beijing capped off an utterly unforgettable experience. I hope you have enjoyed this account of some aspects of it.

With very best wishes

Nigel
28 November 2005