

## Ann Clwyd MP's Speech for Lord Eric Avebury's Memorial 30.06.16

I am honoured to be addressing the assembled audience of family, friends and colleagues today - to remember and pay tribute to the late Lord Eric Avebury - for his dedication to human rights, including his commitment to the work of the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group – one of the most long-standing and active Parliamentary Groups, set up by Eric in 1976 – and the many other Parliamentary groups of which he was a member.

I knew Eric Avebury for over thirty years – both as a colleague and a friend – and greatly admired his unwavering commitment to human rights and his bravery.

Eric was first and foremost a human rights champion - with a distinguished record of campaigning tirelessly on a wide range of human rights causes.

Eric truly believed that the human rights of each and every person is important - and was particularly keen to defend the rights of victims who were not receiving the attention they deserved, and causes that were often not very popular, and even considered controversial. And his devotion was steadfast - through the ups and downs, the triumphs and the set-backs, over many, many years.

As a fellow human rights campaigner, I know how persistent and determined you have to be – you have to be it in for the long haul, things just don't change overnight, no matter how much you want them to. You have to keep repeating your messages over and over again – sometimes it can feel you are beating your head against a brick wall; you talk to victims, community leaders, NGOs, Government officials, Parliamentarians and international organisations – anyone who will listen and those who don't want to listen.

Take East Timor. It took years for things to change – with over twenty years of brutal occupation by the Indonesians – and really, at times, it seemed nothing was ever going to make a difference. But finally, in 1999, a referendum was held, and in May 2002 East Timor became the first new sovereign state of the twenty-first century. Following independence, the East Timorese still needs the help of its friends. Eric was there from the beginning, and stayed the course. He founded Parliamentarians for East Timor in 1988 and, like many of us, worked with TAPOL on independence for East Timor. After independence he continued to support the East Timorese through his work

with the Alola Foundation, which aims to empower women and children in that country. Both Jeremy and I were in East Timor for the first elections.

The number of speakers involved in his memorial today is a testament to the support he provided to so many from the UK and across the world. I am sure many others have recollections they too want to share.

Just last week the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (the PHRG) met with a group from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, and an NGO representative working on behalf of tribal peoples. They both expressed their gratitude for Eric's enduring and tireless commitment to raising the plight of victims of serious and systematic human rights violations, about which many people remain ignorant or indifferent. They greatly lamented his loss.

In addition to these international issues, Eric campaigned for the Kurds in Turkey, the Acehnese in Indonesia, the Karen in Burma/Myanmar, the Dalits in India, the Falun Gong in China, the Baha'is in Iran, the displaced Chagos Islanders battling against the British Government to return to their homeland, religious minorities in Pakistan – I could go on and on – and many other campaigns are

detailed in the lovely book of remembrance prepared for this Memorial event.

Over the years, Eric became a well-known and very valued Parliamentary port of call. He met with hundreds, probably thousands, of people who have feared for their lives, their communities, their religious beliefs, their ethnic background, and/or their political views. He then raised – and championed - many of their cases on the floor of the House of Lords and with Government officials, as well as the media.

He also had the foresight to bring like-minded Parliamentarians together, to ensure that people facing injustice, persecution and discrimination had others to whom they could turn.

Eric realised that the more Parliamentarians use the Parliamentary platform for the greater good – to give a voice to those who have none – the better. And as Parliamentarians in the UK, able to express our views without the fear of persecution, harassment, torture or death, Eric believed, as I do, that we have a duty to stand up for those who do not enjoy that privilege.

Therefore on behalf of the Officers and members of the PHRG – past and present - I would like to applaud Eric’s vision for founding and continuing to support, right up until his death, the PHRG. He chaired many meetings, panel events and activities, and wrote/commissioned and edited a number of informative and compelling reports, including on Mexico, Burma, Bahrain, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Peru, capital punishment in the USA, and armed conflict in the world today, under the auspices of the PHRG. Forty years later, his vision continues to inspire us, and the PHRG is still going strong. I am pleased that the PHRG was able to convey its gratitude to him in person - and to celebrate his work – in 2012, at a reception we gave in his honour in the Speaker’s House, in the presence of his many friends and colleagues.

Though he can never be replaced, I believe that the best way to ensure his legacy lives on, is to ensure we take on his mantle – and continue working together to make fundamental human rights a reality for many more across the world.