*Back to the Past:*

*A Visit to North Korea in October**2011*

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This is no scholarly paper but rather a rambling account, with reflections, of a visit to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK – North Korea) in October 2011, my first visit as a tourist. Before coming to that, I should recount something of my previous experience there, as the first official British representative.

I left North Korea in October 2002, having lived there for 18 months. It had been an exciting time and an unexpected end to my diplomatic service career. I had never expected to be a British diplomat. Although born in England, I come of Catholic Irish stock, with a fair amount of rather vague republicanism in the background on both sides of the family, at least in the telling. But five years into a PhD on Japan, and having failed to land an academic post, in 1969 I applied to join what was then the Research Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. “RD” as it was known was the equivalent of the U S State Department’s INR Bureau, an information gathering and assessment department, supporting the political work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and its overseas’ posts. Despite occasional attempts to break away, I remained a member of what later became “Research Analysts” until January 2003. In the interim, I spent almost four years in Seoul, where I served on the council of the RAS and even became President for one year, and roughly the same amount of time in Beijing. Then, following the unexpected decision to establish diplomatic relations with the DPRK (North Korea) late in 2000, I was asked would I go to Pyongyang as the first British representative. It was no contest. Although the work I was doing was varied, often interesting and sometimes exciting, there was little progress – I had been doing much the same thing for years. So the chance of a new role was one that I could not miss.

No doubt I was somewhat starry-eyed, though I suspect that since I was nearly 58 when I was appointed, the stars were pretty dim. I had worked on the DPRK for many years and visited in 1998. Susan, my wife, who came with me, had also worked in the FCO on East Asia and had served in China during the last two years of the Cultural Revolution. Our time in Beijing coincided with the demonstrations and the savage crackdown of June 1989. We had seen a Communist state in action and our expectations of the DPRK were relatively low. Yet even if few now seem to remember it, 2001 was a time of hope in Korean affairs. Kim Dae-jung’s “sunshine policy” was very much in place and the Clinton administration had moved from being on the edge of bombing the North over the its nuclear programme to a strong expectation of a presidential visit. The light water reactor (LWR) project, agreed in 1994, was well under way. The North Koreans were pleased that Western European countries were establishing diplomatic relations, even if disappointed to find that most had no intention of opening permanent missions in Pyongyang.[[1]](#footnote-1) The fact that the British decided to open on the spot was seen as a very positive gesture, which not even a major dispute over our communications could entirely undermine.

The fact that I was asked to establish a British Embassy where no embassy had been before was also an exciting prospect. I had first become interested in embassies as organizations when doing research for my PhD on nineteenth century Japan. Living and working in Seoul led to a small book on the British Embassy, published to mark the centenary of diplomatic relations. In Beijing, I carried out a similar exercise, and after my return to London in 1991, the Embassy in Tokyo asked me to write up an account of their history. The end result was a full-length book that appeared in 1999, telling the story of the three embassies.[[2]](#footnote-2) If only I had waited! Setting up the Pyongyang Embassy produced experiences more akin to those of nineteenth century diplomats than I would have thought possible. We too were a long way from home, in a very different society, with poor communications and reporting to colleagues who were far too busy to take account of our concerns. It also taught me new skills, including how to tie up a diplomatic bag, that I have never needed since.

An account of my time in Pyongyang exists in various forms and I will not repeat it here.[[3]](#footnote-3) It had good and bad points, but in general, North Korean officials were helpful, our diplomatic colleagues were friendly, we had enough visitors to keep us active, and we had regular trips to Beijing. Within the country, we could travel much more than I had expected and certainly far more than had been the case in China in the 1970s. We were free to walk or drive about the greater Pyongyang area, and could drive to Nampo and to Mount Myohyang, technically part of the Pyongyang area. Just before I left, we were told that we no longer needed to give notice to go to Wonsan and need not be accompanied by a Korean official. Since the UK was a contributor to UN and European Union-funded aid projects, we could go on monitoring visits to such projects. So we went to farms, food processing factories, hospitals, orphanages and schools. Our ability to talk to people was limited and our hosts controlled what we saw. But one learns by keeping one’s eyes open and by reading between the lines of official statements. It makes a difference when your evening walk is in Pyongyang rather than London.

We left in the usual welter of farewell parties just as the storm broke in October 2002 over the issue of highly enriched uranium. By then, the positive atmosphere of 2001 was replaced by a sourer mood. Relations with the United States plunged as the Bush administration unpicked the advances of the Clinton years. The North Koreans were also disappointed that diplomatic relations with European countries produced little in the way of assistance or political support. The EU closely followed the US position and proved just as inclined as the US to lecture them on the shortcomings of their country. My successors found the relationship harder than I had done.

We returned in 2004 for a brief visit with a University of Cambridge delegation, whose main purpose was to sound out the possibility of academic exchanges at all levels from undergraduate to faculty members. It was jointly hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. No longer a diplomat, it came as something of a shock to have to pay for our visas but once back in Pyongyang, we were treated as before. No restrictions were placed on our movements around Pyongyang, and so we wandered about freely in the bright May evenings. I was able to contact former colleagues and the Embassy without any difficulty. We could photograph as much as we wished except in the Tongil market where the sight of a camera got one of our party into a long harangue. We had been warned that we should not take photographs there so it was something of an own goal.

Pyongyang was much as it had been when we left. Although there were some changes since 2002, they were not extensive. More stalls were visible on the streets, and there were some new restaurants available. The stamp shop had become smarter, with a philatelic-themed restaurant attached. Some construction work which I remembered as under way in 1998 remained incomplete. People still avoided a foreigner’s gaze if at all possible and certainly evaded any attempt at conversation. Our interpreter was friendly and informative, our somewhat junior MFA mentor less so, though he apparently eased up during late night karaoke sessions.

It would be seven years before we returned. In spring 2011, Nicholas Wood approached me, asking if I would be interested in leading a tour to the DPRK. He was a former journalist who now ran Political Tours, a company, to quote their website, with, ‘…the aim of giving people practical and first-hand insight into some of the most critical regions in the world’. [[4]](#footnote-4) The hope was to go beyond the usual tourist sites and to learn something of the politics of the country to be visited. Political Tours had run successful visits to the Balkans, Wood’s own special field as a journalist, and to Northern Ireland, where they had been able to meet senior figures from both sides. While I was interested, I was a little cautious since I had never led a tour before and was also due to have a pacemaker fitted. But all proceeded smoothly. The DPRK Embassy in London said that they were pleased that I was leading such a tour. There was good publicity, including even a piece in the (North) Korean Central News Agency bulletin, based, curiously enough, on a Voice of America Broadcast.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The ROK Embassy was noticeably less enthusiastic. I was invited to lunch by a senior member of staff, who advised me against leading such a tour. No explanation was given, but soon I found Koreans that I scarcely knew approaching me and suggesting that it would be better not to go. No doubt they thought there was something special in *Political* Tours. They may also have thought that being a tour guide to North Korea was not how a senior diplomat should behave – ROK diplomats seem to work on the principle that once you have worked for government, you continue to represent government. Some seemed nonplussed when I told them of former colleagues leading tours all over the place.

A more pressing concern was whether there would be enough people to make the tour economically worthwhile for Political Tours. While people do visit the DPRK as tourists, it is not a huge market and however enticing the publicity, was clearly not one to get involved in easily. But although numbers were small, Wood decided to go ahead. So in October 2011, Susan and I flew first to Seoul, to take part in a conference on the Chongdong area, and then on to Beijing to meet our fellow travelers. All along the route I clutched my paper saying ‘pacemaker’ in numerous languages, which seemed to work.

We were eight in all, including Nicholas, Susan and me. Only Susan and I had visited the North before, but all the others were well-traveled. Two days of useful briefing in Beijing included sensible advice from Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing to Envy*, about not getting hung up over restrictions on movements. Instead she recommended always being alert for what was happening around you and staying awake on bus journeys.

And so the great adventure began. One auspicious start was the brand new Russian TU200 4-100 aeroplane that would take us to Pyongyang, a distinct improvement on the ancient Russian planes we had flown in the past. It was a surprise to find that, like Aeroflot, on which it is clearly modeled, Air Koryo flights are now dry – so no more trays of champagne being taken into the cockpit and no beer for breakfast, long a staple of expatriate departures’ from Pyongyang. Food had not improved. The air hostesses were as beautiful as ever and just as anxious to get you into your seat. The flight was uneventful as was our arrival. Rather than being bussed a short distance, we were allowed to walk across the tarmac. Had we but realized it, this would be our last unescorted walk for a week.

The main terminal was undergoing refurbishment, no doubt as part of the sprucing up for Kim Il Sung’s centenary. The temporary substitute was barnlike but it was somewhat more high tech than we had been used to. There were now electronic announcement boards and the process of checking passports and visas was also more up to date. The young man who checked mine looked at his screen and then smiled as he said ‘To my country welcome back’. Then we moved to the care of the Korean National Tourist Corporation (KNTC).

I had very little contact with KNTC while living in Pyongyang. They seemed to have no interest in developing contacts with the embassy and tried hard to prevent their charges from doing so. When one British tour leader contacted me in some agitation, we easily circumvented KNTC obstructions by me stopping by the Yanggakdo Hotel for a drink just as she and her party was returning. The KNTC officials were not very happy but could not prevent us meeting. Our own travels never involved KNTC. My guests were my responsibility, whether they were officials, family or friends. We had no difficulty in arranging programs or travel for them with the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At some places we came up against restrictions such as not being able to leave the hotel grounds, but at others, including Kaesong, nobody tried to stop us wandering about or taking photographs. We were about to enter a different world.

How different was soon obvious. Political Tours had booked into the Koryo Hotel from the very beginning of the tour, on the basis that it was much better to be downtown than in the island ghetto of the Yanggakdo. (There was a certain sentimental value for us, since we had lived in the Koryo for six months after we arrived.). Now we were told that the Koryo was fully booked and we would be based at the Yanggakdo. Protests that we had already informed family and other contacts that we would be in the Koryo fell on very deaf ears and it was a somewhat disgruntled group that set off for the city. Our KNTC guides, while polite and friendly, showed no sign whatsoever that our tour was in any way different from the others that they handled, even if sometimes they acted as though we posed a particular threat.

A measure of nervousness was obvious from the start. We had been late leaving the airport, partly because of the debate over where we were staying, and so we were rather rushed through our first planned visits, to the area around Mansudae hill. The grand statue was off limits as work proceeded to prepare it for the 2012 celebrations. We were also given clear instructions. No photographs of people, construction work or things military. We should ‘avoid defacing brochures’ with the leaders’ pictures. We should also not walk about except with our guides since people would not know who we were and might become concerned. I was pointedly ignored when I said that I had walked about the city for nearly two years without anybody showing much concern. As darkness fell, we scrabbled about taking pictures of people and construction works before being taken to the Yanggakdo. Driving through the streets, it was obvious that more electricity was available than when we had last been there, and many buildings were floodlit. Indeed, one of the most striking contrasts with the past in Pyongyang was the relative brightness of some parts of the city at night, confirmed by the views from hotel windows. More people and more vehicles were also evident.

The Yanggakdo was its usual gloomy self, with a trapped turtle still swimming beside the bar. Over a rather dreary meal, we were told that there would be various changes to our itinery – something I had expected would happen – but that we would do most of what had originally been included. Spared a visit to the Mansudae Hill statue since it was being refurbished, we would also have to miss the juche tower, since the lantern was being replaced. There was no discussion of what people with Political Tours might be expecting that would be different from a standard tour. But there was one new element in that I was to have lunch with Mr Ri Yong Ho of the MFA (ex-ambassador to London and now Vice Foreign Minister) the next day – the guides professed to have no idea of who he was and showed no interest in why I might be having lunch with him. The next morning, they told us Susan was invited as well. After dinner, most of the party retired but we went to the bar – the call of the draught beer was still strong. There we ran into the APTN representative[[6]](#footnote-6), who had been living in Pyongyang when we did, and who now managed their recently established office from Hong Kong. Two Red Cross workers were also there. One was an ex-journalist with the BBC who had once interviewed me on ‘Asia Today’ a now defunct TV program. Nicholas joined us and we eventually left them to talk journalism together.

The morning sunrise saw Pyongyang in an autumnal mist, with the newly-glass clad Ryugyong Hotel catching the light. As always, the city was amazingly active in the early hours, in contrast to its sleepy atmosphere for most of the day. Only in the later afternoon and early evening would it again become animated. Before breakfast, we tried the television. Apart from the Korean stations, it would receive Chinese Central Television, the Japanese NHK, Italian Radio and Television, and BBC World Television. In our room, alas, the last appeared to be suffering from a terminal defect and proved impossible to hear. But it was an improvement on the days when we had been reduced to watching children’s television on winter weekends.

And then our program began. First was Mangyongdae, the ‘native home’ of Kim Il Sung.[[7]](#footnote-7) The sunshine helped but it was clear that our party was soon becoming bored. The Mansudae Art Studio, which followed, aroused more interest but there was widespread disappointment that no revolutionary posters seemed to be available. They were to prove unavailable everywhere; perhaps the North Koreans have come to realize that they could sell them more profitably internationally. To complete the morning, we had the Party Foundation Museum. The DPRK approach to museums and art galleries is old-fashioned and didactic. Where leaders are concerned, it is also highly reverential. Diplomats have to put up with a lot of this and not just in the DPRK. One becomes used to it and goes with the flow. One can learn a little even if it is not very exciting or profound knowledge. But it was clearly not what most of our party was expecting or hoping for. It was not a very happy group that we left to go to lunch.

Lunch was a great success. Not only was the Vice Minister there but so were others we had known and the ambassador-designate to London. Reminiscences about times past – the MFA were still using a little book on Korean Customs and Etiquette I had given them both for information on Korean behavior (!) and for English practice[[8]](#footnote-8) - were accompanied by comments on times present. Libya was much in the news, and there was laughter when the Vice Minister pointed out that his successor would not be bothered as he had been by constant requests from the FCO to follow the Libyan example.[[9]](#footnote-9) News of talks with the US had just been made public and Mr Ri talked about the likely difficulties with elections in both the US and the ROK. They expressed pleasure that at last some DPRK students were going to the UK on government scholarships.

And then they raised the question of why we were in the Yanggakdo Hotel. When they had tried to make contact, the Koryo knew nothing of us. We recounted what we had been told. We were also asked whether we were seeing the British Embassy and said that we had asked to but it did not seem to feature on our program.

Lunch being over, Susan and I went to the hotel shop for old times’ sake. It was better stocked than in the past; the aging wines that had once been a feature had gone, replaced by Latin American ones. On emerging, we saw one of our lunch partners deep in conversation with one of our two guides. When we joined them, we were told that after our visit to the East Coast, we would probably be moved to the Koryo …

So we rejoined the others and set off with a lighter heart for Wonsan. Once under way, everybody fell asleep except me, a pattern that would repeat itself during the coming days. This was a pity for the sleepers really did miss much information about the country. It was noticeable, for example, that around Pyongyang, many more tractors were operating in the fields than had been the case 10 years before. Further out, oxen were still common but these were fatter oxen than in 2001. Bicycles were much more in evidence than in the past. At times, around the towns and villages, the numbers approached China in the 1970s. And bicycles were not only being used to carry people but they were also carrying what was clearly farm or private plot produce, often in large amounts. Another addition to the transport scene was motorcycles. These were formerly only associated with the police or the military but now there were some that appeared to be owned by non-uniformed people. Saigon or Hanoi it was not but it was a further sign that the DPRK is – literally – not static. One or two even had young lady pillion passengers, while others were adapted for carrying heavy loads.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Another sign of change was the presence of heavy machinery for road building and similar tasks. There was not much of it; two units seen in four days’ travelling but that was a higher rate than I had ever seen in 2001-2. The bulk of the work is clearly still done by hand – we saw some underway between Wonsan and Hamhung. But more modern equipment is coming into use and not just in the Pyongyang area.

Both Wonsan and Hamhung, and most of the towns and villages in between were a good deal smarter in the past. Indeed, the Vice Minister had said we might well find Hamhung smarter than Pyongyang. It did not quite reach that standard, but both cities showed signs of new building and a general sprucing up. Wonsan had a new museum, a pastiche of the railway station, hotel, locomotive and carriages that were supposedly used by Kim Il Sung on his arrival there in autumn 1945. The very seat on which he had sat in the train was known and marked, a truly remarkable survival given what happened to Wonsan and to the railways in the north during the Korean War. I fear the hard bitten realists of Political Tours were not wholly convinced but we all took many photographs.

But if both cities were smart and clean, they lacked any sign of industrial activity. Most of Wonsan’s fishing boats seemed to be permanently tied up, although since we were kept well away from the dock area, despite a walk through the docks featuring on our program, it was not possible to be absolutely sure. Lots of people fished with rod and line. Some of what they caught was consumed on the spot with much singing and dancing and some may have been for sale or exchange. We were invited to join in but this clearly concerned our guides so we let it pass. No doubt this was also wise from a hygiene point of view, if not from a social one. Wonsan seemed to have an electricity problem, with several blackouts in the course of the evening.

A visit to Wonsan Agricultural University proved to be largely concerned with the visits by members of the Kim family and a view of the outside of a large greenhouse. We were told that there were no students present, though we could hear some practicing music and saw others playing football. We were warned that there had been a ‘serious incident’ recently when some visitors had burst in on the orchestra, an action that had badly upset the students. We promised not to take similar action. A visit to the Songdowon international children’s holiday camp was more agreeable if not more informative. Again, the leaders’ visits were stressed and boredom spread among our number. But the children, who ranged from c. 11 to about 16 and were all Korean – foreign children were said to come in the summer – seemed very self-assured and not at all fazed by a bunch of foreigners. The facilities seemed in good order and the children were clean and well-dressed, unlike children I had had seen along the East Coast in the past. Of course, these were privileged children; one does not go to such places if you have the wrong class background.

Then it was on to Hamhung, taking in a model collective farm on the way. There could be little doubt that this was a favored place. It had 20 tractors, flatbed trucks and much else besides, while Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un had been there three days previously – we were able to verify this on our departure, for the glossy magazine *Korea Pictorial* available on Air Koryo featured the visit, complete with pictures. That said, its statistics, clearly newly painted for the previous visit, did not add up and the farm leader admitted that they were unlikely to meet their targets this year. He also declined to answer a question about mortality in the famine years of the 1990s; 10 years before, I would have been given some sort of answer. To complete our visit, we were shown what the leader claimed was his house. It was certainly well equipped, even if the hi-fi set was somewhat dated, but it lacked any feeling of being lived in. There was no smell of cooking and no clothes about. Cheerful children burst out of the school, seizing on the visitors as a major distraction and handling their presence with much confidence. We were clearly not their first experience of foreigners.

Hamhung, which I first visited in 1998, was certainly smarter. But none of the factories appeared to be working. Our promised visit to the fertilizer factory was cancelled. When we drove past, the tall chimney which on other occasions had pumped out bright yellow smoke - spectacular if rather worrying - was doing nothing. Even the wagons packed high with scrap metal destined for China, a notable feature in earlier years, had gone. We spent the night at the Majon Guesthouse. This was largely unchanged since my last visit in 2002, although the water heating arrangements had improved somewhat and posed less threat to life and limb. An EU delegation was also staying but old habits die hard and we were carefully segregated. Although we were the only two groups staying in the guesthouse, they ate in one dining room, we in another, and our departure next day was carefully timed so that we would not meet.

Next day confirmed a general lack of economic activity except for some building works, accompanied by many exhortatory posters, near the Hamhung Hotel where we had lunch. This hotel was a bit smarter and brighter than on previous visits but there was no water to flush the toilets or to wash one’s hands. Our guides confirmed that Hamhung had a major water problem.

A visit to Yi Taejo’s house, restored in the 18th century, which I had been to in 2002 when it was rarely shown to foreigners, was a pleasant interlude and perhaps the one sign that Hamhung was now a tourist destination. A walk around the main square followed, to see the largest theatre in the country. Unfortunately – we were now becoming familiar with the phrase – it was closed for refurbishment, so the outside was as far as we got. Some of our party detected hostility in the stares thrown in our direction but I think it was more likely curiosity. Relatively few foreigners visited the city until recently, so tourists are still rare birds. Nobody actually fell off a bicycle looking at us but it came pretty close at times.

On the way back to Pyongyang, we passed one smoking chimney; we were told that it was a cement works, which makes sense given the amount of construction under way. Also very visible were the cell phone masts. This of course was a big change from the past, with our guides using them all the time. They said that the system worked all over the country, apart from the deep mountain areas. They certainly seemed to be able to make contact with Pyongyang and other cities with no difficulty.

There was a subdued air about our party on the drive back to Pyongyang. Whatever had been expected, it was clearly not what we were getting. For a time, there were some rather hostile suggestions about what was wrong with the DPRK and what should be done to improve things. Unsurprisingly, such remarks did not go down well with the guides. For Susan and me, however, the main impression was one of change and possibly even some improvement.

We duly checked in at the Koryo, which was indeed crowded with people in their best clothes and with many medals. We were told that they had come from the East Coast area and were there because Kim Jong Il had praised their efforts during his visit just ahead of ours. It was also made clear that moving to the Koryo would not mean an increase in mobility. We were firmly told not to leave the hotel unaccompanied under any circumstances – something of a trial too since we had lived there for six months and come and gone as we wished.

Not that there would have been much time to wander about. In the well-known tradition, we now found ourselves swept up in a massive sightseeing program just like every other tour group. Only the order varied. Some things went well – the USS *Pueblo* and the Korean War Museum, for example. In the latter place, we had a young and bright female officer as a guide, who was not at all thrown by being questioned about her account of how the Korean War started and seemed well aware that there were many other views. It was not always so. Other experiences were less satisfactory. The Three Revolutions Museum, which appeared to have been opened for us – or at least we were the only people there – did not go down too well, especially when we were solemnly shown pictures of DPRK rockets and satellites in space.

The relentless pace continued the next day. Some parts worked, some did not. There was much disappointment that dramatic revolutionary posters were no longer on sale even in the Foreign Languages Bookstore, which had been our most reliable source. A trip to the Golden Lanes Bowling Alley allowed us to see the privileged young of Pyongyang at play – and also on their mobile phones. The MFA turned up trumps again since we were then swept off to the British Embassy for a briefing. This was probably the most ‘political’ activity of all; I asked the chargé d’affaires when they had heard of our visit, He said the MFA had contacted them two hours before … no change there! Dinner produced another surprise. The once dowdy and run-down older of the two diplomatic clubs had undergone a major facelift and was now very swish indeed, with a vast swimming pool. The menu was less exciting but many toasts seemed to improve relations with our guides.

This did not last. The next day was Panmunjom and Kaesong. The later was looking distinctly seedy with none of the sprucing up of the East Coast. Panmunjom proved another disappointment in that we could not go into the conference room for reasons that remained unexplained. An ROK military party with wives was visiting from the other side and the DPRK guards all wore steel helmets, so perhaps it was a little tenser than usual. But no explanation was forthcoming. On the DPRK side, the only changes that I noticed from previous visits was that the UN flag at the table where the armistice had been signed in 1953 had at last been renewed, and that commerce had taken off in a big way at the souvenir shop. In the past, it was very much take it or leave it, but now a series of ladies pushed hard to sell mementoes of Panmunjom, souvenirs of Kaesong and drinks and snacks. There were even hints at haggling over prices. A similar atmosphere prevailed at the museum shop, which had originally been built for ROK tourists – it did not exist when I had last been to Kaesong in 2002. An excellent lunch ran late so there was not time to visit the statue. Some audible rejoicing did not please the guides. Chatting with one of them on the way back, I was told that Kim Il Sung had drawn on Confucian philosophy in constructing *juche*. Hitherto the default mode in the DPRK has been that Confucianism was a superstitious hangover from the past and nothing to do with the present.

Our last stop, on our return to Pyongyang, was the Grand People’s Study House. Like the airport, this had gone much more electronic, with large notice boards announcing meetings and classes. The language teaching rooms were also full of Dell computers. Not the most up-to-date models, but far in advance of anything that there had been in the past. Groups of earnest students struggled with the same old rote teaching methods, however, but perhaps they were later allowed to play games on the computers. One more echo of the past was an approach by a member of the staff whom I had known before for help in updating the English corner, which since I had left, he said, had received no new books. I said I would raise it in London. I did but heard no more and suspect that nuclear matters make it unlikely that anything will be done.

We were nearly done. A last dinner together was jolly enough and our departure the next day went smoothly. Despite all the dire warnings that cameras would be checked at the airport, nothing at all happened. We took off on time and landed safely at Beijing. All agreed that we had plenty to think about, even if I doubt that we would have agreed on what we had learned.

REFLECTIONS

A. THE TOUR

Looking back, one can see why there were problems. It was the first time that Political Tours had gone to the DPRK. If funds had been available, it might have been better if there had been a dry run to see how we would be treated and what difficulties might arise. I was aware of some likely pitfalls but my earlier experiences were not a guide to how tourist groups can be treated. Being handled by the MFA and by the Tourist Corporation are very different experiences. A dry run might also have reassured KNTC that we did not have horns and hoofs – though I suspect that suspicions would have remained. There well have been doubts about what our real purpose was. If the ROK embassy in London was suspicious about what I, a former diplomat, was doing leading a tour to the DPRK, it is hard to imagine that there were not some doubts in the DPRK as well. Then, two of our party had been journalists, and the DPRK has a great nervousness about journalists. The way they posed questions and the type of question they asked reflected this background, and may have aroused concerns.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We were perhaps also victims of our own publicity. There is no doubt that all activities in the DPRK are intensely political, so in a sense all tours are political tours. But rather than looking for the politics in what people did and what was displayed, our group hoped to learn as they would in other countries by direct contact with people and by the response to probing questions. Such high expectations were perhaps bound to be disappointed, especially on the first tour. With time, and providing there are no negative incidents, there might be an acceptance that Political Tours’ participants are not hostile but genuinely interested in developments in the DPRK.

This will of course require a change of attitude on the part of KNTC, which will not come easily – the present approach has been honed for nearly 30 years, and no doubt suits them well. But there is clearly an attempt currently underway to attract more tourists. Tourists were not uncommon in 2001 but there seemed an increase in numbers last autumn. Many of these were from China but there were also other westerners. Perhaps eventually, the guides will stop treating grown adults as though they were five years old. From our experience, it seems that even their colleagues in the MFA have doubts about the way they treat their guests.[[12]](#footnote-12)

B. THE DPRK.

A week may be a long time in politics, but it is a short time in the DPRK! At least on the surface, there were noticeable changes, some of which are described above. New buildings were very obvious in Pyongyang, as was the sprucing up of existing ones. There was less new building elsewhere but Hamhung and Wonsan had certainly had a spring clean. Kaesong however, did not seem to be much changed. Pyongyang had more traffic than the other cities we visited, with some very up to date and expensive vehicles about. Outside Pyongyang, it was bicycles that were most in evidence. Commercial activity was much in evidence, with sacks of foodstuffs being transported on bicycles or lining the side of the road while people waited for lifts. When we stopped on the way back from Wonsan, a young women appeared from nowhere with fruits for sale. In the shops that we went into, which were a very limited range, although it did include the East Pyongyang Department Store, there were plenty of goods, mostly from China. As in the past, customers were few even though it was the weekend, and not many seemed to be buying anything beyond foodstuffs. Perhaps there is a limit to the number of bidets you can buy, even in Pyongyang.

Other somewhat superficial observations indicated that while the children we saw were certainly well-dressed, and most of them were probably from privileged backgrounds, all were small for their age. The effects of lack of food are still very evident even if there is no immediate crisis. As for sanctions, it would be hard to claim any obvious effect. The range and type of goods available in the shops, the vehicles on the streets and the computer equipment widely available, all much more than ten years’ before, indicated that sanctions have not made much impact. One thing that had not improved was the level of deforestation. Hillsides were as bare as in the past, and wood was still being taken while scarcely established. Susan and I watched with horror what appeared to be the systematic stripping of young trees at one point along a stretch of the Pyongyang-Wonsan highway. Large numbers of people were involved, including the military, and several vehicles in what was clearly a major exercise. It is hard to think what innocent explanation there might be for such an activity.

Then there is the Army First policy. Clearly some in the military do very well; many of the most up to date cars we saw had military number plates. The swish Kaeson fun fare in Pyongyang, with its state of the art Italian rides, is said to be reserved for military families. But Army First does not mean that all the military do well. Wood-fired trucks manned by soldiers struggled to get under way along the roads. Along the roads, not only ordinary soldiers but officers up to colonel level struggled to get lifts. It seems doubtful that the masses of soldiers working on construction sites (now joined by university students in Pyongyang at least) get much in the way of special treatment. Our military guides in Pyongyang and at Panmunjom, who would count among the privileged were very thin, and as others have remarked, the ROK soldiers on duty at the latter place are much bigger and broader than their northern brethren.

FINAL THOUGHTS.

Political Tours ran another tour during the celebrations of Kim Il Sung’s 100th anniversary, with a different leader. I do not have the details but have heard that this group was allowed more freedom than we had been. Either it was too difficult to impose tight controls in April 2012 or the group was seen as less of a problem under a different leader – perhaps I was more of a difficulty than an asset! Or maybe somebody had realized that it might be better to allow such groups a little more freedom.

The October visit has provided me with a new lease of life as a commentator on the DPRK. Being able to say I was there in October 2011 is far more important to the media than the fact that I have been studying the place since the 1970s, and it certainly proved useful when Kim Jong Il died in December 2011. But I had decided that I would probably not go back in such a role again. Then quite a different organization approached me about a possible tour in 2013… I have no commitment as yet, but cannot help being intrigued.

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1. Here and elsewhere I use the modified form of the McCune-Reischauer romanization, as used in the DPRK. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. E. Hoare, *Embassies in the East: The Story of the British and their Embassies in Chin, Japan and Korea from 1859 to the Present,* Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Chapter 9 ‘Opening the British Embassy Pyongyang 2001-02’, in J E Hoare and Susan Pares, *North Korea in the 21st Century: An Interpretative Guide*, Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2005. The account can also be found at a number of places on the web: see, for example, http://www.docstoc.com/docs/17748065/A-BRUSH-WITH-HISTORY [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See http://www.politicaltours.com/what-we-do, accessed 30 April 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pyongyang, July 27 (KCNA). VOA introduced a British travel company's Korea tourism program on July 15.The Political Tours announced that the first tourist group would enter North Korea on October 15, accompanied by UK's first charge d'affaires ad interim to Pyongyang, James Edward Hoare, the radio said, adding: During ten days of tourism, the ex-charge d'affaires plans to explain to the tourists the culture and political situation of north Korea and the experience he gained during his career as a diplomat.

   Nicolas Wood, who founded the Political Tours early this year, gave the reason why he chose North Korea as a tourist destination. His plan is to open a way of getting experience at first hand in the country drawing international interest, not only through media reports. In North Korea the tourists will make a round of Pyongyang and other major tourist attractions. They will also visit factories in Hamhung city, Songdowon International Children's Camp and University of Agriculture in Wonsan city and other places.

   The Political Tours is said to get many inquiries about North Korea tourism. Wood said he would decide whether to continue such tourism program on a regular basis after taking the tourists' opinions about their tourism mainly aimed to get a good understanding of the region's situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Associated Press Television News. They had tried to open a permanent office in Pyongyang in 2002, assisted by the embassy. We had almost got there when the *Far Eastern Economic Review* ran a spoiler story in that said that although APTN was registered in London, it was really an American company. The North Koreans then refused to go ahead with the arrangements until 2011. Journalistic dog eats dog! [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One thing that had not changed was the odd use of English. One DPRK official explained to me in 2001 that once a word or phrase had been approved for use, that was it. No matter how often Koreans with a good command of foreign languages or native speakers pointed out that a word was quaint or old-fashioned, once it was in the canon, there was no shifting it. This was especially the case with anything to do with leaders but was not confined to that sphere. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. James Hoare and Susan Pares, *Simple Guide to Korea: Customs and Etiquette*, Folkestone, Kent: Global Books, 2nd. ed., 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Our guides clearly knew about events in Libya, at least in broad outline. They expressed shock at the killing of Gaddafi. But their questions were very circumspect. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We were later to see some models at the Three Revolution Exhibition Center in Pyongyang. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I had a hard job persuading the guide at the Three Revolutions’ Exhibition that they we were not journalists. In fact, nobody appears to have published accounts of the visit apart from me. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The infantilizing of the North Koreans by the system is one of the themes of B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How the North Koreans see themselves and why in matters*, (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010); see pp. 93 et seq. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)