

# Without Parallel

**He has visited North Korea four times.**

**He is a critic of the country's human rights record. He is an Honorary Professor of Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. With Kim Jong Un talking up war, crossbench peer DAVID ALTON talks to Nigel**

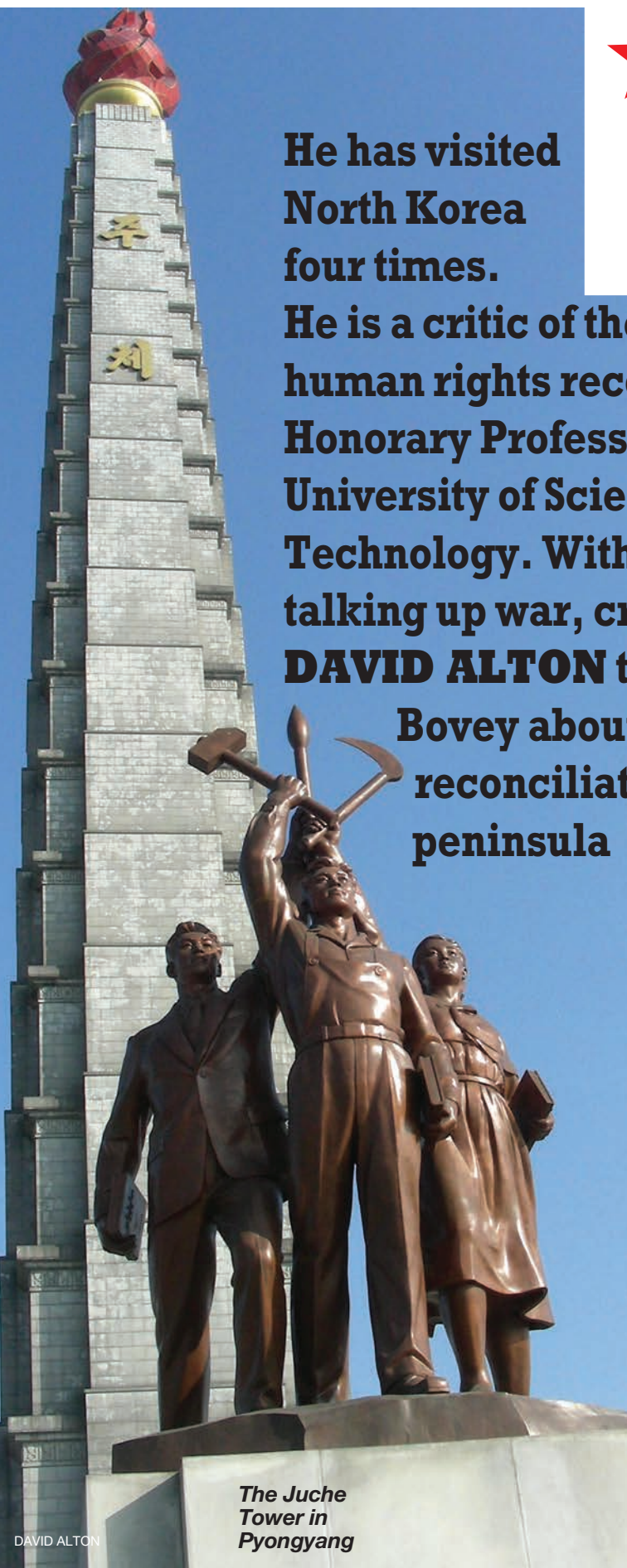
**Bovey about peace, faith and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula**

**Lord Alton, how did you become interested in North Korea?**

It was by chance, really. In 2003, I received a phone call saying that a North Korean defector had arrived to see a colleague. She was unavailable, so I agreed to see him.

He told me how his wife and two children had died during the famine of the 1990s, which claimed the lives of an estimated two million people in North Korea. While they were escaping across the River Yalu into China, he lost his other son. This man had been a secret Christian in North Korea. He wanted to get out of the country to be able to practise his faith in freedom.

I raised his story in a Lord's debate on human rights and security questions in North Korea. The North Koreans had just reactivated their nuclear reactor and my debate received quite a bit of media coverage. The next day, I received an angry phone call from the North Korean ambassador. He told me I had been speaking to too many Americans. I told him I had spoken only to one North Korean (I declined



*The Juche Tower in Pyongyang*



*David Alton with Dr James Kim*

**Below: David Alton at the River Tumin border with China**



to tell him who) but that I would be willing to meet him.

At that meeting, I said I'd be willing to visit North Korea at my own expense to find out whether the man's allegations were true. I said I'd want to take a companion with me, that we'd go with an open mind and that we'd need to be free to raise human rights issues.

Two days later, he rang to say that I'd be a welcomed visitor. Three of us, Baroness Cox, Burma campaigner James Mawdsley and I, made the trip. On our return, Lady Cox and I set up the North Korea All-Party Parliamentary Group.

#### **When did you last visit North Korea?**

Two years ago. Last year, I visited the Chinese province of Jilin that borders North Korea. I went to the River Yalu to see where people are shot trying to cross the river into China. Many have escaped and now live in Jilin.

#### **And all your visits have been legitimate?**

Yes, they have all been with the agreement of the North Korean Government.

#### **A BBC journalist made an undercover visit to North Korea posing as a professor travelling with**

**You don't confront an ideology based on lies by using lies yourselves**

**real London School of Economics students. Was that legitimate investigative journalism or a threat to the lives of foreign workers and visitors to the country?**

I have raised this issue with Lord Patten, the Chairman of the BBC Trust. It was irresponsible to use students as a human shield. At the very least, the BBC should have discussed its intentions with the LSE, the students and their families.

My other objection is that North Korea spends a lot of its time and energy issuing propaganda to its own people. You don't confront an ideology based on lies by using lies yourselves.

We must not hold back from saying that things are wrong in North Korea. There are flagrant human rights violations. The UN calculates there are more than 200,000 people in Gulag-style camps. There is widespread poverty, stunted growth and malnutrition. There are reports of cannibalism. But it is better to be upfront and truthful rather than to go behind people's backs.

My relationship with the North Koreans is not easy but my underlying proposition is that you should never be frightened of dialogue. I want to see change in North Korea. We should be building bridges not erecting walls.

It would have been better if the BBC had tried to negotiate the right to make a film about the country. The LSE visit was so tightly controlled that the BBC didn't come back with anything new.

The BBC is widely respected throughout the world as being authoritative and balanced. Its World Service has been a lifeline, inspiration and encouragement for many living under oppressive regimes in countries such as the former Soviet Union and in Burma under military dictatorship. If the BBC were to broadcast its World Service to North Korea, its programmes would have far more impact than this piece of irresponsible adventurism. To do so would also honour Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which says that all people should have the freedom to receive information regardless of frontiers.

#### **What is the situation like for Christians in North Korea?**

I have visited the country's four permitted churches. Two are Protestant (one of them is where the mother of the

**Turn to page 10**



From page 9

founding president Kim Il Sung was an elder; the other has a small seminary attached to it). There is also a Roman Catholic church but for 60 years no priest has been officially allowed into the country to celebrate Mass.

In the past four or five years, a Russian Orthodox Church has been built and its North Korean priest was trained and ordained in Russia. The church came about after a request from Russia that its diplomats could have somewhere to worship.

Unofficially, in Anju people gather to worship in the ruins of a Catholic church which was destroyed during the Korean War.

There are also some underground house churches, but anybody who is found meeting in those unofficial situations can be arrested and imprisoned. Even within families people are encouraged to spy on one another. This makes it very dangerous for people to observe their Christian faith. It is a capital offence to take Bibles into North Korea. Some South Korean pastors have been arrested and disappeared for doing so.

As an official visitor and vice-president of Bible Society, I was able to take 40 Bibles with me on one trip and give them out at official meetings. In each copy, I wrote: This is the holy book which is used every day at the beginning of proceedings in the British Parliament. We give this to you as a sign of our respect and our hope that it will enable us to build bridges rather than to erect walls.

On my next visit, one government official asked me for another Bible. I hope people are beginning to see that there is nothing to fear from Christianity.

**And there is also a university that was founded by a Christian.**

The University of Science and Technology, situated in the capital Pyongyang, opened a few years ago. It was the brainchild of a Christian called Dr James Kim.

As a teenager, James fought in the Korean War. On the battlefield, he read John's Gospel and prayed to God that if he saved him, then one day he would do something for peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.

**David Alton with Baroness Cox in Pyongyang's Changchung Cathedral**

After the war, he found his way to England to study. Later, he made a fortune in the States, moved to South Korea and opened a Christian college. He then went to Jilin province in China and created the first public-private university.

He travelled to North Korea and met Kim Jong Il, offering to create a new university there. He was arrested, imprisoned and sentenced to death for being an American spy. In his last will and testament he wrote that he wanted to donate his body to North Korea for experimental purposes, on the basis that he'd gone to the country to give it everything, so it might as well make use of his body. He also wrote: 'I don't believe in capitalism. I don't believe in Communism. I believe in love-ism and I came here out of love.'

Instead of executing him, the North Koreans deported him. A year later, Kim Jong Il sent agents to invite Dr Kim back to build his university. Unknown to him at the time, the land

# They tortured the denied them food

that James chose was the very spot where a church, destroyed during the Communist revolution, was built in memory of the Victorian missionary Robert Thomas, who was killed for distributing Bibles.

**What evidence do you have that Christians are persecuted in North Korea?**

The All-Party Parliamentary Group has held a number of public hearings where we have heard testimonies from escapees – including accounts of death camps, executions, torture, beatings and forced labour. One woman described conditions in the Pyeong-an detention camp, saying: 'They tortured the Christians the most. They denied them food and sleep. They forced them to stick out their tongues and hot iron was pushed into it.'

**In February this year, North Korea confirmed it had undertaken an underground nuclear test. In April,**



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# Christians the most. They and sleep



DAVID ALTON

*Worshippers at the Changchung Cathedral*

it warned that war could break out at any moment. There has been sabre-rattling and rhetoric before. President Obama speaks of America exercising 'strategic patience'. How seriously should the West take Kim Jong Un?

Very seriously. A Sarajevo moment – a stray shot or unintended event – could draw a response from South Korea, and other countries will be sucked into a conflict.

At the moment, everyone is urging North Korea to reform and end this form of mutually assured destruction.

The West has to find, as Margaret Thatcher did with the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, a man in North Korea with whom it can do business. From my visits, I know there are North Koreans who, without being disloyal to their state, know that the time is coming for reform. They see the huge achievements China has made since the reforms of the 1970s.

North Korea is an underdeveloped country with malnutrition and famine. Its infrastructure is dangerous. It lacks

proper healthcare. There are many reasons why the West should engage with North Korea.

If the West doesn't do better than 'strategic patience' – if we refuse to talk with them – then it will merely drive North Korea into the hands of other rogue states who are developing nuclear capability, such as Iran.

### What can the West do?

The cold-shoulder approach of the past 60 years has failed. We need to build bridges. Through the British Council, we have had English teachers in North Korea for more than ten years. English is the country's second official language. This is a validation of engaging with the regime.

Now is the time for constructive-but-critical engagement with North Korea. Reform without bloody revolution is possible. We should be encouraging more visits to the UK, especially

by students, as we did during the Soviet period, exposing people to the realities of life in free societies and building friendships.

The Korean War ended in an armistice. A demilitarised zone separates North and South on the 39th Parallel. The United States has never declared that the war is over. If President Obama wants to do one thing to change the terms of engagement, he should unilaterally announce without condition and without negotiation that as far as America is concerned – just as Tony Blair did for the UK – the war is over.

**North Korea appears to close itself off from the rest of the world. Can other countries influence it towards change?**

China can help North Korea see that there's nothing to fear from reform. Burma is a traditional ally. It is moving from military dictatorship towards democracy.

The UN already has an excellent rapporteur on human rights in North Korea. If it could create a special rapporteur to lead negotiations – to act as a broker between North and South – with the intention of them leading up to a peace conference and a formal ending of hostilities, then, I believe, change would come more rapidly.

Churchill once said that it is better to jaw-jaw than to war-war. If the day ever came, then Britain would stand shoulder to shoulder with its South Korean allies. It is also our responsibility to do all we possibly can to prevent that eventuality.

● **Building Bridges: Is There Hope for North Korea?** by David Alton and Rob Chidley is published by Lion Hudson

